

# Tang-Five dynasties residences: royal, bureaucrats, literati

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**Abstract:** The residential layout of the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties period can be roughly understood from physical materials, paintings, documentary records, and literary works such as poetry of that era. Its characteristics include a preference for luxury, emphasis on decorativeness and a strong cultural atmosphere. The royal residences focused on entertainment, the residences of bureaucrats and nobility emphasized elegance, and the residences of literati emphasized leisure and comfort. The residential layout of the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties period reflected the development of material productivity, the flourishing culture of the time, and the exchange of Chinese and foreign cultures. It had a profound influence on society after the Song Dynasty and has significant reference value for modern residential layout.

**Keywords:** Tang-Five Dynasties period, residential layout, luxury, decorativeness, cultural atmosphere

## 1. Introduction

The home environment is an important part of people's living space. The powerful nations of the time had a profound influence on the world and future generations. The layout of the living space occupied an important position and was closely related to the production level and cultural background of a certain society. The layout of the living space had a significant impact on later generations. Although the Five Dynasties period was a chaotic era, there were different situations and characteristics in the layout of the living spaces of the royal family, bureaucrats, and literati. The Tang Dynasty was the richest and most powerful country in the world at that time, inheriting and developing Tang culture. The layout of the living space during the Tang and Five Dynasties period further developed on the basis of the previous generation and underwent significant changes. It had a profound background of the times and culture, not only being the result of material productivity and the development of traditional Chinese culture but also being deeply influenced by the cultures of surrounding ethnic groups. It reflected the flourishing culture of that period. There is a lack of academic research on the layout of the living space during the Tang and Five Dynasties period. The design art of its living space layout is worth learning from today. This paper discusses the layout and design artistic characteristics of the living space during the Tang and Five Dynasties period, seeking advice from the academic community.

## 2. Overview of residential layout

Regarding the residential layout of the Tang and Five Dynasties period, we cannot see the actual scene materials from that time, and there are very few surviving furniture artifacts. This poses difficulties for our research on the design art of residential layout during the Tang and Five Dynasties period, and we can only study this issue from the limited physical materials, paintings, documentary records, and literary works such as poetry from that period.

In terms of physical materials, some furniture models or actual furniture have been unearthed from tombs of this period. These furniture models can serve as an important reference for studying physical objects. Actual furniture artifacts are rare, and among the few that have been preserved, a wooden armrest (with painted lacquer) was excavated from the Astana Tang tombs in Turpan, Xinjiang, which is so far the only existing Tang armrest artifact in China.[1] These provide important materials for the study of furniture during the Tang and Five Dynasties period.

During this period, there are also depictions of residences in some paintings. These pictorial materials can provide us with a more intuitive understanding of the architectural and residential layout of the Tang and Five Dynasties period. For example, the Dunhuang murals depict furniture, showing the multi-courtyard residences of the nobility, mostly surrounded by corridors with hip-and-gable roofs and dian-style roof houses. Additionally, character paintings from the Five Dynasties period such as Zhou Wen Ju's "Double Screen Meeting Chess" (Figure 1), Gu Hong Zhong's "Night Banquet of Han Xi Zai" (Figure 2), and Wang Qi Han's "Collation of Books" (Figure 3) depict the living scenes of emperors, bureaucrats, and literati in their residences. Wei Xian's "Gao Shi Tu" depicts the quadrangular courtyards and wooden-fenced residences in the rural areas of the Five Dynasties, built amidst landscapes, which belonged to the rural villas of literati and scholars; and so on.

Furthermore, documentary records and literary works such as poetry from the Tang and Five Dynasties period also contain numerous descriptions of furniture and residential layout, providing us with important reference materials for understanding the residential layout of this era.

Through these materials, we can understand that the furniture of the Tang and Five Dynasties period was still divided into seven major categories: seating, sleeping, supporting, leaning, leather, screen, and shelf furniture. Each category of furniture has rich content, and many new varieties have emerged. Seating furniture, the Tang and Five Dynasties was an era where sitting on the ground and sitting with feet dangling coexisted, and the continued development of seating furniture and the emergence of new seating furniture were mainly to adapt to sitting with feet dangling, such as stool types, xingtí, hu chuàng, ta, and chair types, etc. Sleeping furniture, still mainly beds and kang. Supporting furniture, such as cases, a few, tables, etc., were in the Tang period a period of high and low type coexistence. Leaning furniture, the Tang Dynasty followed the two Han Dynasties and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, with straight leaning on a few, arc-shaped leaning on a few, and hidden bags. Leather furniture, the south mostly uses bamboo materials, such as si, chu, box, cage; the north mostly uses wood, such as box, cabinet, box, du, due to different materials, the shape and processing technology also have differences. For example, the Tang Dynasty box has three kinds of essence, bamboo, and leather, and there are rectangular and square Ying ding differences. The eight-layer treasure box (silver box) unearthed in Fu feng Famen Temple in Shan Xi, the outer few layers are all Ying ding style. Screen furniture, there are curtains, screens, and sleeping tents. Shelf furniture, the Tang and Five Dynasties period has clothes racks and bookshelves. [1] The commonly used furniture in the Tang and Five Dynasties was beds, stools, a few cases, cabinets, screens, etc., especially high-legged furniture gradually increased. In the documentary records and Dunhuang murals, tomb murals and other materials, the situation of high-legged furniture in the Tang and Five Dynasties period can be seen. The most important indoor furnishings of this period include curtains, curtains, tents, screens, etc., and important furnishings include cushions, mats, beds, a few cases, cabinets, etc., which are the main furniture, and other such as candle fixtures, incense burners, etc., are also important tools. [2]

The paintings that have been preserved mainly reflect the residential layout of emperors, bureaucrats, and literati, and lack representation of ordinary residential buildings. However, the residential layout of the upper class of this society reflects the level of residential layout at the time. Through the painting materials, the design of the residential layout of the Tang and Five Dynasties can be understood, including the spatial relationship, the relationship between people and space, the owner's taste, etc. Although the materials of this period are mostly indirect, we can see the situation of the residential layout of the Tang and Five Dynasties and its design artistic characteristics from it.

### 3. Feature one: Luxuriousness

In ancient times, people lived in harmony with nature, but later on, they began to emphasize the decoration of their living spaces, gradually deviating from the traditional culture that valued simplicity. The architecture and residential layout of the Tang and Five Dynasties period reflected the development of extravagant and unhealthy trends, which also had adverse effects on social development. From the perspective of design art, ancient Chinese architecture was based on wood structure, and its individual image, components, structure, decoration, and color were different from the European and Islamic architectural systems based on brick structure, possessing distinct national characteristics of architectural culture. Its residential layout also had its unique features, forming a residential culture that complemented

each other. The palaces, residences of nobles and bureaucrats, and the furnishings of the Tang and Five Dynasties architecture tended to be luxurious, with distinct characteristics of the times.

### 3.1. Architectural splendor

The residential layout of the Tang and Five Dynasties period was luxurious, not only in the interior but also in the decorative splendor of the buildings themselves. At the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, the famous prime minister Wei Zheng advocated simplicity, and his residence was humble. Emperor Tai Zong wanted to build a new residence for him, but Wei Zheng modestly declined. However, such examples were rare during the Tang and Five Dynasties period. More common were the constructions of luxurious mansions by high-ranking officials and the wealthy. The residences of the Tang and Five Dynasties period tended towards opulence.

Wu Ze tian's favorite, Zhang Yi Zhi, "initially built a very magnificent hall, costing millions" [3]. Later, when Zhang Yi Zhi fell from favor, his property was confiscated, and his new residence was taken over by the government. Yang Guo Zhong and the Yang sisters, along with An Lushan and other powerful and corrupt officials, indulged in extravagant lifestyles, constructing grand residences in Chang 'an. Despite the regulations on rank differences in the "Ying Shang Ling" (Regulations on Construction and Repair), they could not be restrained [4]. In the spring of the first month of the tenth year of the Tian bao era (751 AD), Emperor Xuanzong of Tang built a guest residence for An Lushan in the Qin ren Square of Chang 'an, "ordering to be as magnificent as possible, without limiting the financial resources" [5]. The tall and magnificent mansion reflected the emperor's favor and honor towards An Lushan.

### 3.2. Exquisite furniture

The quality of a living space's environment is most directly influenced by furniture, including its style, material, color, arrangement, and the cultural atmosphere it creates. The Tang and Five Dynasties period was a significant transformative era in the history of Chinese furniture. Furniture manufacturing further developed based on the foundation of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, inheriting the traditions since the Qin and Han dynasties while boldly absorbing various ethnic and foreign cultures. This led to the creation of many new types of furniture, greatly enriching the content of Chinese classical furniture. During the Tang and Five Dynasties, the level of furniture craftsmanship had reached a high standard, with meticulous workmanship. In paintings, brick carvings, and murals from tombs of this period, we can see that everyday furniture such as beds, tables, chairs, stools, desks, cabinets, and screens were made with exquisite materials like rosewood, nanmu, huali, and walnut. The surfaces were oiled rather than lacquered, some were inlaid with marble, and others were made from rattan, bamboo, and tree roots. For example, Hou Junji, a senior minister during the reign of Emperor Taizong of Tang, was later punished for rebellion and his home was raided. "When Junji conquered Gaochang, he obtained two very fine gold bamboo mats, which were not in the imperial treasury, and he also concealed them without offering them, and they were all obtained at that time" [3]. "Gold bamboo mat" is a type of bamboo mat inlaid with gold, very exquisite. Also, the Tang Dynasty's curtains were numerous and exquisite in materials. Wu Zetian's favorite, Zhang Yizhi, made a seven-treasure curtain for his mother, "Azhang," which was "a gathering of all kinds of gold, silver, pearls, jade, and treasures, unprecedented since ancient times" [3], extremely luxurious. As for floor coverings, mainly referring to carpets, also known as floor clothes, Bai Juyi's poem described that during the reign of Emperor Dezong of Tang in the Zhenyuan era, a kind of red thread carpet was tributed from Xuanzhou every October for court display. This red thread carpet was very precious and consumed a lot of the people's blood and sweat, "Does the governor of Xuancheng know or not? One zhang of carpet, a thousand liang of silk. The ground does not know the cold, people want to be warm, less take people's clothes to make floor clothes!" [6]. This carpet was laid on the palace floor, and the beauties danced, their silk socks and embroidered shoes sinking into the carpet with every step, showing that this carpet was warm, soft, and comfortable. Historical records show that the most luxurious home furnishings were Emperor Xuanzong's rewards to An Lushan. An Lushan built a luxury mansion in Qinren Square, Chang'an, and Emperor Xuanzong's rewards were extremely luxurious, "with tents, curtains, utensils, and objects filling it" [5]. An Lushan's exquisite furniture was representative of the decoration of bureaucratic residences. At that time, furniture decoration included categories such as wood exposure, lacquer, and inlay,

which were also very particular, with two different orientations: elegant and magnificent. Wood exposure refers to furniture with a wood surface coated with tung oil, or simply left natural and plain, which was more commonly used by the common people; Tang Dynasty furniture lacquer was an inheritance and development of the lacquer culture since the Two Han Dynasties, and also absorbed the cultures of various ethnic groups and foreign regions, cheerful, bold, and magnificent, with techniques including colored painting, mother-of-pearl inlay, flat removal, and mitox monk painting, and newly created lacquer carving technology, which has been widely used through the ages. The Tang and Five Dynasties also inherited the colored painting techniques of the previous dynasties, making the furniture magnificent. Overall, during the Tang and Five Dynasties, furniture made significant progress in form, materials, and decoration, enhancing its artistic quality. Mr. Xiao Mo believes that "Sui and Tang Dynasty furniture paid attention to the symmetry and balance of the composition, the elegant and generous shape, and the rich and free color" [1].

#### **4. Feature two: Decorativeness**

When designing interiors, the residential layout during the Tang and Five Dynasties period emphasized not only practicality but also the decorativeness of cultural and artistic elements.

##### **4.1. Emphasis on ornamenting buildings**

The decorativeness of the residential layout during the Tang and Five Dynasties period was evident not only inside the rooms but also in the ornate decoration of the buildings themselves. Wu Ze tian's favorite, Zhang Yi Zhi, constructed a magnificent hall, "with walls plastered with red powder, columns clad with patterned cypress, and adorned with glass and aloeswood" [5]. The residence of the prime minister Yuan Zai featured a "Yun hui Hall," which was extremely luxurious. It is said that Yun hui was a kind of fragrant grass from the Kingdom of Yu tian, as white as jade, not prone to decay, and with a strong fragrance. Yuan Zai's Yun hui Hall was plastered with this fragrant grass, filling the air with its scent, "and constructed with sandalwood and aloeswood as beams and rafters, decorated with gold and silver for doors and windows, and furnished with suspension Li screens and purple gauze curtains" [7]. During the reign of Emperor Zhongzong of Tang, Zong Chu Ke built a new residence, "all with patterned cypress as beams, walls plastered with aloeswood and red powder, so that when the doors were opened, a burst of fragrance filled the air. He polished patterned stones for steps and floors, and those wearing Jimo boots would slip and fall when walking" [3]. Later, when Empress Wei failed, Zong Chu Ke was killed, and his new residence was confiscated. The documents depict the luxury of Zong Chu Ke's new residence, with its beams, walls, steps, and other elements all made of precious materials. From Princess Taiping's exclamation during her visit to his new residence, "Seeing how he lives, we have lived in vain" [3], one can imagine the opulence of its architecture and interior decoration.

##### **4.2. Furniture with decorative features**

Furniture during the Tang and Five Dynasties period was not merely functional; it typically featured decorative elements, with significant variations in design, and was often carved, painted, and colored to appear elegant and exquisite. When arranging furniture, attention was paid to the coordination of the room's layout, creating a well-balanced and visually pleasing arrangement. Taking screens as an example, they included curtains, screens, and bed canopies, which, in addition to their concealing function, also had strong decorative appeal.

Screens were an important piece of furniture in ancient times and remained so during the Tang and Five Dynasties period. They were divided into floor-to-ceiling screens and bed screens. Besides their practical uses such as blocking drafts and providing privacy, they also served to divide rooms and decorate living spaces. In terms of decoration, screens were divided into plain screens and those with paintings or calligraphy. Plain screens were often found in the residences of literati, as described in Bai Ju Yi's poem "Ode to the Plain Screen," where he mentions setting up plain screens in his thatched hall at Mount Lu: "I have set up a thatched hall at the foot of the Incense Burner Peak, with two screens leaning against the eastern and western walls" [8]. The screens he referred to were made with a wooden frame and paper surface, white in color, and stood as movable floor screens against the walls. The plain white screens symbolized the

author's simple and unsophisticated character, becoming a symbol of the poet's persona. However, during this period, plain screens were the exception, and screens with paintings or calligraphy were the norm.

For instance, when Bai Ju Yi was about six or seven months old, there was a screen with writing in his home. His nurse held him in front of the screen and pointed to the characters "Zhi" and "Wu" on the screen to teach him to recognize them. Although he could not speak, he already knew them in his heart [9]. Such a book screen set off the scholarly atmosphere of the room. In the living spaces of literati and royal noble bureaucrats, screens often depicted landscapes or figure paintings, and some had both landscape and figure paintings. For example, in Wang Qi Han's "Collation of Books," a three-fold screen is placed in the center of the painting, with the screen painted with green and blue landscape colors, allowing one to enjoy beautiful scenery without leaving home. In "Double Screen Meeting Chess," the screens feature both landscape and figure paintings. It is said that the Xian Li screen that decorated Yuan Zai's room, originally belonging to Yang Guo zhong, "carved the figures of beauties and entertainers from previous generations" [7], which was a type of figure painting screen.

Curtains and canopies played a role in concealment within the home, with some curtains made of gauze and embroidered with flowers and birds, which were very beautiful. As described in the poem "Ode to the Curtain" by Wan Chu: "Tortoiseshell was once called splendid, exquisite and thin red gauze. The hook holds the door's curved posture, the joints are chaotic like the water's slanting patterns. The sun plays with the long flying birds, the wind shakes and does not roll the flowers. It naturally divides the inside and outside, not for arrogance and luxury" [10]. Tortoiseshell, with its crystal-clear scale patterns, is noble and elegant, often used for crafts, and has been widely used as an accessory since the Warring States period. In the Tang Dynasty, it was also used to make coins and was embroidered on curtains and canopies, gorgeous, serving as an exquisite decorative item. This poem depicts the pattern of the curtain, with tortoiseshell decorations on thin red gauze, hooks on the door making the curtain meandering, like the rippling water patterns, beautiful and touching.

## 5. Feature three: Strong cultural atmosphere

The residential layout during the Tang and Five Dynasties period not only met functional needs but also took into account the personality and status of the owner, focusing on creating an atmosphere and emphasizing a sense of humanity. The living room, in particular, was primarily a space for the owner to entertain guests and engage in leisure activities. Judging from paintings, the residential layout of the Tang and Five Dynasties period mainly depicted the arrangement of the living room. The layout of the residences of royal nobles and literati placed greater emphasis on cultural atmosphere. The placement of various pieces of furniture served specific purposes, and the spatial design focused on the functionality of the room and the relationship between the owner and the space. Depending on the different statuses of the owners, the cultural atmosphere varied, reflecting the cultural background of the era and ensuring that the residence was in line with the owner's status, showcasing the spirit of the times.

### 5.1. The entertainment nature of royal residences

The layout of royal residences not only catered to daily living but also paid attention to the design of leisure spaces to accommodate recreational activities. Zhou Wen Ju, a court painter of the Southern Tang Dynasty, was adept at painting figures of Taoist and Buddhist deities as well as ladies of the court. His work "Double Screen Meeting Chess" depicts the scene of the Southern Tang ruler Li Jing and his brother playing chess. It is a narrative figure painting that shows the interior layout with screens, benches, and three tables of varying sizes, reflecting the living scene of the emperor, as shown in Figure 1. The spatial relationship in "Double Screen Meeting Chess" is skillfully handled. Behind the main characters is a large screen and a long table with jug-throwing game equipment, in front of which is a long table surrounded by Emperor Li Jing and his three brothers, watching and playing chess. Li Jing is in the center, with two brothers watching the game and two playing. Next to the wall, there is a long table with an attendant standing by. The room is simply and elegantly arranged, and the chess game depicted in the painting is a reflection of the noble and interesting life, showing the harmonious relationship among Li Jing's brothers. The large screen also features a painting within a painting that captures the essence of Bai Ju Yi's poem "Occasional Sleep", "Thus, the painting within the screen extends the space layer by layer, and the painting within the painting perfectly

matches the artistic conception of the painting, showing the artist's extremely clever conception" [11]. However, this painting must also be a reflection of reality, reflecting the layout of the royal residence and cultural life.

## 5.2. The refinement of bureaucratic Aristocratic residences

During the Tang and Five Dynasties period, the residences of bureaucratic aristocrats were not only important venues for activities but also reflected the status and personal interests of the homeowners. The arrangement of furniture, spatial relationships, and color applications showcased the owner's personality and passion for life. These residences emphasized the combination of human emotions and ambiance, highlighting the owner's individuality and love for life, allowing them to fully enjoy a beautiful life. Gu Hong Zhong, a contemporary of Zhou Wen Ju and a scholar of the Southern Tang Dynasty's painting academy, was skilled in figure painting. His only surviving work, "Night Revels of Han Xi Zai," features the design and arrangement of indoor long tables, square tables, benches, elliptical stools, armchairs, backrest chairs, round tables, and large beds with screens, reflecting the furnishing of bureaucratic residences, as shown in Figure 2.[11]

The painting, in the form of a continuous long scroll, depicts the private night life of Han Xi Zai, a politician who was disappointed in the Southern Tang Dynasty, trying to avoid the suspicion of the later Lord Li Yu by indulging in music and color and entertaining at home. The painting is divided into five sections: listening to music, watching a dance, changing clothes and taking a break, playing wind instruments, and the finale where the guests disperse, reflecting the life of a high-ranking official's family, including residential layout and cultural life, with an emphasis on elegance and luxury.



Figure 1: Zhou Wen Ju's "Double Screen Meeting Chess" [12]



Figure 2: Gu Hong Zhong's "Night Revels of Han Xi Zai" [13]



### 5.3. The Leisurely nature of literati residences

During the Tang and Five Dynasties period, residences also served as places for reading and studying. Their layout reflected the owner's personality and cultivation, creating a clean and leisurely environment that was harmonious and unified, allowing scholars to read and think with peace of mind. Wang Qi Han was a native of Jin ling (present-day Nanjing, Jiangsu) during the Southern Tang period and served as a scholar-artist in the Southern Tang painting academy. He was known for his landscapes, figures, and Buddhist paintings, with his figure paintings being particularly distinctive. The "Xuan he Painting Catalogue" described his style as "neither Cao nor Wu, forming a unique school of his own." Wang Qi Han's only surviving figure painting, "Collation of Books," is a silk scroll with color, measuring 65.7 cm in width and 28.4 cm in height, and is housed in Nanjing University. The painting depicts an elderly scholar examining a book while picking his ear, hence it is also known as the "Ear Picking Picture." The painting includes the layout of screens, long tables, desks, and chairs, reflecting the arrangement of a scholar's reading room.

From Wang Qi Han's depiction of the scholarly reading environment in "Collation of Books," the central hall features a large screen painted with green landscapes. In front of the hall is the main activity area, with a long table in front of the screen holding ancient boxes and scrolls. A square table is placed in front of the hall, displaying writing brushes, inkstones, and books. A scholar leans against the square table reading, with a young attendant in black standing by. This scholar, with white clothes and a long beard, barefoot and bare-chested, while reading, rests his left hand on the chair, picks his ear with his right hand, slightly closes his left eye, raises his toes, and looks content and at ease. The expression of the character is exquisite. The painting showcases the living and reading environment of scholars at the time, simple and elegant, reflecting the leisurely demeanor of the scholar collating books.

This atmosphere is set off by the arrangement of such a reading environment and conditions, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Wang Qi Han's "Collation of Books" [14]

## 6. Conclusion

There is a tendency in modern residential layout design to value learning from foreign countries while neglecting to learn from traditional Chinese culture. We should correct this bias. While learning from foreign countries, modern residential layout design should also inherit the good aspects of traditional Chinese culture. The residential layout during the Tang and Five Dynasties period advocated luxury, emphasized decorativeness, and had a strong cultural atmosphere, reflecting the owner's status and personality, especially the traditional cultural atmosphere and the pursuit of cultural taste. Today's residential layout design can draw on its beneficial elements and gain inspiration from it. For example, we can draw on the furniture-making techniques of this period, absorbing its elegant craftsmanship in shape, color, and workmanship to enrich and develop contemporary furniture-making skills. In terms of residential layout design, we can absorb its spatial arrangement design techniques, and its pursuit of design concepts such as simplicity, artistic conception, elegant charm, and cultural taste are worth learning from for modern

residential layout design. This allows modern residential layout design to reveal Chinese cultural taste and showcase the charm of Chinese culture. In summary, traditional residential layout design art can enrich and develop modern residential layout design art, combining tradition with modernity, and applying the old for the use of the present.

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