by Ronald G. Knapp, 1999, University of Hawai'i Press

I read all I can about Chinese Antique Furniture. The title of this book implies only a tangential relation to Chinese furniture. Actually, nothing could be farther from the truth. If forced to prune my reference library down to bare bones, this book would be among the last to go. To make myself clear, let me say that this book is absolutely fundamental to my library.

Why do I say that? It is because much Chinese furniture has highly symbolic carving. Knowing the symbolism adds so much to my appreciation of furniture. In my opinion, the appeal of Chinese country furniture lies in three areas. First is the style of the furniture. It's fun to see furniture that is sculptural art in itself. Such furniture is not hard to find. Much of the vernacular furniture retains classic lines that can be stunningly beautiful. Second is the construction. Chinese antique furniture is beautifully executed joinery. Most pieces contain not one screw or nail, but are as sturdy and strong today as the day they were made. Third are the symbols. This is where Knapp's book is so valuable.

I would love to have the honor of meeting Ronald Knapp. He is fluent in Mandarin and in Chinese written language. He is also a superb scholar who explains things in simple, easily understood terms. To the best of my knowledge, I own all his books, and each is a treasure. In "China's Living Houses," there are two parts: The first has to do with house construction and its rituals, social implications of the buildings themselves, the land and building sites commonly known as Fengshui, and the sorcery required to ward off evil spirits. This part is an interesting read, but the second part is more relevant to the symbols built into the house and its furniture.

Part II is entitled "In Pursuit of Good Fortune." This section is very helpful for identifying the symbols frequently found in furniture, and in ceiling and/or wall carvings. It describes the concept of "Good Fortune" and its five aspects, identifies narrative tales and discusses the nonsectarian status of three portentous personages who abide outside the Chinese religious traditions. The chapter on "Narrative Tales" explains and illustrates so much that it alone is worth the price of the book. This book is not just text; it is filled with illustrations which provide representational examples of that which Mr. Knapp explains in his text. The text and accompanying illustrations dovetail beautifully.

I hope you find this book as invaluable a resource as I have. My many thanks go to Mr. Knapp.
If you want to acquire a copy, you may do so at Paragon Books in Chicago.