

# When Women Sat Down: Representation of Women and their Living Quarters in Early Modern China

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Women and their living quarters were rarely described and depicted in early modern China, with the exception of one theme, *meiren hua* 美人畫, or paintings of beautiful women.<sup>1</sup> When creating this type of work, artists situated idealized women in interior spaces with furniture and decorative elements; this material culture presenting idealized women was full of symbolic meaning and metaphorical implications.<sup>2</sup> Hence, this genre reveals invaluable information about perceptions of women's lives and the spaces they inhabited, albeit in imaginary contexts. In narrative illustrations from the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911), interior settings functioned as the stage for visualizing daily activities of the beauty on display. Such narrative illustrations appeared both in woodblock book illustrations and motifs on porcelain.<sup>3</sup>

Through observing visual sources containing this trope or motif, it becomes apparent that the beautiful women in compositions across media are mostly seated and they occupy the central focal point of the image. Whether they are sitting upright or reclining, they are often depicted frontally, or in three-quarter frontal views to either side. The form in which women's bodies were often displayed, framed or emphasized by their seats and surrounding furniture, indicate that eyes were attuned to the particular display of women's beauty. Therefore, the way in which women are seated, and on what kinds of furniture, all contribute to visual codes for deciphering pictures of idealized beauty. Furthermore, extant pieces of furniture and other visual records suggest that the representation of objects was largely based on the contemporary furniture found in domestic settings, though rendered more simplified and generic. Visual media could thus become a vital source for a concentrated study of furniture for female spaces. Interestingly, the forms, decor and even the nomenclature of some furniture might be construed as containing 'feminine qualities.' That is, the type of furniture that men and women used was distinct and differentiated in pictorial evidence for material culture revealing gender as well as class distinctions in domestic society. Meanwhile, the rich imagery of the interior environments occupied by female figures

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive look at Chinese paintings of beautiful women of the Qing dynasty, see the catalogue, James Cahill, *Beauty Revealed: Images of Women in Qing Dynasty Chinese Painting* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2013). *Meiren hua* 美人畫, or "paintings of beautiful women" as pointed out by James Cahill, were not of individual people. Further, the vernacular themes were diverse and for everyday, domestic use. See James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> For rich information about interior objects surrounding beautiful women, especially skilled courtesans, visible in beautiful-women paintings, see Sarah Handler, *Alluring Settings for Accomplished Beauties*, chap. in *Beauty Revealed*, ed., Cahill, 35-47.

<sup>3</sup> Wen-chin Hsu, "Illustrations of 'Romance of the Western Chamber' on Chinese Porcelains: Iconography, Style, and Development," *Ars Orientalis* 40 (2011): 39.

offers an opportunity to imagine the social and historical aspects of the lives of women from the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

## Furniture for Sitting

One type of furniture that ladies commonly used for sitting was the bench. A scene often found on porcelain plates is one of a woman sitting and teaching two children, as depicted in a plate from the Dresden State Collection (**fig. 4.1**). This porcelain piece hosts a popular form of polychrome enameled decoration. It was presumably produced for export during the eighteenth century when the demand for the fine polychrome decoration from China increased in Europe. The design is clearly divided into two parts, while the outer section is a generic floral pattern, framing the central imagery. The center is a daily interior scene with a seated woman painted in polychrome on the pure surface. On the left side a female figure is shown seated on a bench with a fan. The fan is depicted upside down, slightly touching her knee. Her gaze is directed toward two little children standing in front of her one of whom is holding a book in his hand. It appears that she is the mother of the boys and is teaching them. The multiple layers of her skirt obscures her crossed legs, and her body language indicates a relaxed moment.

A bench with a broad seat, as depicted in this object, was typical interior furniture for sitting casually, which might have derived from the Chinese couch (*ta* 榻). An object depicted in *The Record of Qing Customs* 清俗記聞, is a typical “ta,” or couch, with a screen in the back (**fig. 4.2**). The bamboo motif on the surface is an indication of the owner’s taste. Prior to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), many paintings and literati writings hint that the couch was used predominantly by men.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when women gained access to it. Some visual evidence from the eighteenth century, however, shows women sitting and reclining on couches.<sup>5</sup> A woman assumes a seductive pose on a couch, extending her lower body to the right (**fig. 4.3**). Her body language suggests that she waits in a room. Similar to the bamboo motif, the pine tree on the back screen points to male literati taste, indicating that viewers of the painting were primarily male intellectuals, who could appreciate the multiple symbolic references of the plants. The elaborate *shou* 壽 pattern covering the surface signifies longevity of life, suggesting that the object could be a permanent one within the domestic dwelling, and expressing the wishes of the household’s chief members. The wide seat provides enough space for the lady to stretch out her body, in effect, reinforcing the male expectation for feminine posture.

Apart from couches, women were also depicted with various other types of symbolic objects and furniture. In a set of twelve images called the Twelve Beauties, presumably made during the early eighteenth century, twelve women from the imperial family are depicted with precious accessories in interior settings, or in the garden. Six pieces, or half of the full set of twelve, display women sitting on stools. The frequent appearance of stools might either indicate the intended preference for rendering seated court ladies, or reveal the popularity of this casual type of furniture. Although they were varied in form and decoration, the design of the stools was often strengthened with rounded lines that supported the seating area and fine coverings. The seat bases on stools were low to the ground. The feet of the seated women in the images remain hidden, while their long skirts extend to the ground. Their garments are depicted with elaborate flowing lines, stressing the softness and the elegance of the textiles and their female wearers.

<sup>4</sup> For pictorial evidence one may look at a masterpiece “Han Xizai’s Evening Banquet 韓熙載夜宴圖,” dated to the tenth century, in which the main male figure is depicted seated on a large couch with a broad sitting area surrounded by landscape pictorial details.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Clunas, *Chinese Furniture* (London: Bamboo, 1988), 29-31.

As representational practice, it was rare to portray women sitting on chairs, as this furniture was regarded as more formal and valuable, but there are two images that represent exceptions to this rule. One of them is set in the formal, non-private space of the home. A scene from a woodblock printed book entitled, the *Selected Example of Songs and Lyrics* 歌林拾翠 presents an older woman sitting on a chair, while her son stands at her side (fig. 4.4). The close view shows the respected status that the woman holds in her family, as she is the only seated figure who exerts control. The arrangement of the furnishings also suggests that the scene takes place in a formal reception hall. Because chairs appeared primarily in public spaces rather than in private rooms such as bedrooms--the chances for women to use them were limited. Only the most important, mature or socially powerful woman could make use of such a chair.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, regarding the height of the seat, high furniture symbolized the higher status of its users, in contrast to low furniture such as benches and stools.

The furniture women used not only fit their more petite physical features, but also was considered to reflect their gender, character and social hierarchy. In contrast to benches used for leisure, there are few known chairs used by women for actual (formal) seating. It was mostly for formal occasions that chairs appeared; several types of chairs, including folded-chairs (*jiaoyi* 交椅), or armchairs with a high back, were only in use in the main room of the house, and played a central role especially when the man--the host--received his guests. The round-backed armchair, also called grand master's chair--(太師椅 *taishi yi*), indicating the sitters' identity, and excluded females, as they could never earn a title such as "grand master."

Another exception is the "rose chair" (玫瑰椅 *meigui yi*) (fig. 4.5).<sup>7</sup> The chair's form is designed with a much lower back than typical men's arm-chairs, and also requires a different seated posture from that of men. In a very similar form, there are also chairs made of bamboo, a material that appeared mainly in casual situations. Unlike the chairs in the reception hall, which demanded strict rules for their placement and symmetrical arrangement, women's chairs were portable, and their placement was flexible.

All these types of seat furniture typically used by women--such as benches, stools and rose-chairs--had low seating surfaces. Furniture obviously corresponded to gender hierarchy and social status in the home. In addition to furniture, there were also many other kinds of objects--decorative and social--that marked the exclusive place and role of women in their dwellings. Both textual and visual sources indicate that the boundary between men's and women's objects associated with domestic space was especially during the Ming-Qing period.<sup>8</sup> Material culture not only reveals the relationships between those making use of the objects, but also has a profound impact on social spaces in which beautiful women are artfully depicted and constructed.

## A gaze into women's living quarters

Whether a woman was sitting on a bench, stool, or chair, such images all served as moments from a woman's domestic life, which could be idealized. The fact that women did not appear alone in portraits at this time, but were always accompanied by various props suggesting domestic locations, reflects the practice, expectation, or longing of gazing into women's living quarters. At the same time, we need to bear in mind that the distinct spheres of women and men in a dwelling were still strictly separated in

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 55.

<sup>7</sup> It remains unclear when the term came into use and the confusion might be at work with the words "beautiful lady chairs" (*meiren yi* 美人椅), see Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 54-56.

the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). The entry to the women's quarters was locked or covered with curtains during the day.<sup>9</sup> Women's domestic life was thus by no means something on display to the public. Entering a female space was a sensual experience for men, heightened by a sense of mystery and of violating taboos.<sup>10</sup>

An extant and, what appears to be a, documentary depiction with elements connected to the quotidian experiences in women's spaces is from quite late; it is dated to the turn of the nineteenth century from the illustrated book, *Record of Qing Customs*. It was first published in 1799 in Japan, under the Japanese title *Shinzoku kibun* 清俗記聞 and its sources for images and annotations made available by Chinese merchants who traveled to Nagasaki; they came from China's east coast cities. One leaf shows a lady's sitting room (*neifang* 內房), located just outside her sleeping quarters, and her actual bedroom (*shuifang* 睡房), which were presumably part of a typical elite residence in the lower Yangzi River area (fig. 4.6). A folding screen divides the two rooms. This spatial separation stresses the private character of the inner chamber or bedroom. It is highly possible that the screen was closed during the day, while the lady stayed within her outer sitting room. Regarding the plan of a typical house, the *neifang*, or small bedroom, corresponds to the mid-right section of the ground plan (fig. 4.7). The diagram depicts the two-part living quarters of the woman separated from the main hall at the center of the house by a corridor and a door. This arrangement, in which the women's living quarters were set to the side, resembles the social hierarchy and limited access to their space.

## Visualizing the Seated Female in Daily Life

The representations of interiors in painting and porcelain displayed a mixture of reality with a careful interspersing of imaginary elements. For example, illustrations of inner furnishings from the Records of Qing Customs illuminate contemporary customs (fig. 4.6). At the same time, the movable stool and a table with books and pots, resemble the imagery depicted in the porcelain plate in (fig. 4.1). That is, the material culture displayed in the print contains similar elements to other art forms, rather than necessarily presenting the quotidian objects that were actually in use. The items depicted in the porcelain's decoration, however, are more selective and simplified. Despite the limited size of the porcelain's pictorial surface, the painters crowd the scenes with props surrounding the figures in the transformation from three-dimensional to two-dimensional space. The elaborate objects might be an indication of the prosperity of an upper-class household, and—as the porcelain object was made for pleasure—displaying a variety of items also made it possible to convey many symbolic meanings, which attracted more buyers in the market. Therefore, in general, the appearance of objects in the pictures of beautiful women was a result of a carefully orchestrated synthesis, produced with a clear aim to satisfy the audience. The elaborate objects in the background surrounding the woman made the scene more vivid and rich, while, at the same time, they contributed to shaping the audience's imagination regarding women's leisure activities.

In these works, female figures—both in terms of their facial features and gestures—are idealized and artificially constructed. Furthermore, the representation of women clearly reflects the impact of the male gaze, as both the producers, and the audience, of the images were male. Many such pictures were

<sup>9</sup> Francesca Bray, *The Inner Quarters: Oppression or Freedom?*, chap. in *House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese*, ed. Ronald G. Knapp and Kai-Yin Lo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 260-261.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-133.

appreciated in public or semi-public spaces.<sup>11</sup> The simplification of facial features made the figures indistinguishable by means of individual characteristics, especially in export porcelain. Such generic images of beautiful women, designed to be “standard-looking” Chinese women, were disseminated throughout European markets during the eighteenth century. More than the faces, the seated bodies, relaxed and twisted at the waist when seated, became a stereotyped icon of female beauty in Chinese export porcelain.

After the images of idealized beautiful women in their living spaces were transferred abroad via export porcelain—to the Saxony Court in the eighteenth century, for example—European audiences’ interest in appreciating non-European females and their living spaces increased. To gaze at beautiful figures satisfied a taste for the exotic, and firmly compounded the image of Chinese women into a stereotype. Some images of “Chinese women” in the Saxony Court made by artisans to imitate narrative scenes from exported porcelain indicate their lack of concern and scant knowledge of Chinese women or female types in art. Only the posture and the clothing roughly followed form, while facial features were merely random. Meanwhile various decorative elements, such as those appearing on a wooden bench or on the clothes of the woman, which attracted attention due to curiosity about form, shape or style alone, had all but lost their symbolic significance.

Bearing in mind these standardized images of beautiful women, nineteenth century foreign and local pioneer photographers began to portray Chinese women in seated positions in the studio. As interior settings adopted the Art Nouveau or Victorian style introduced by foreigners, modern chairs with much higher but smaller seat boards replaced antique chairs, couches, and stools. By such photographic examples the display of seated woman’s bodies became varied.

Another major shift in the representation of women may be seen in a photograph of a female figure reclining on a sofa (fig. 4.8). Such types of imported furniture came into fashion and became essential features in modern houses in the east coast cities of Shanghai and Guangzhou.<sup>12</sup> This new type of furniture brought new ways of sitting and reclining for women (as well as for men), and shifted interior settings to cohere with expectations implied by the furniture itself and material culture of the treaty port. In some ways, in this new medium, and in these new settings, women began to consciously present their own bodies and to portray themselves as beautiful and modern ladies reclining on fashionable sofas. Yet, male demands for the perfect staging of beauty still needed to be met in such photographs. The fact that the women in these images appear to have gained some agency in presenting their own bodies in front of the lens, without anxiety or fear, signals a shift had occurred in the centuries-long trend of representation through men’s eyes.

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<sup>11</sup> Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 152-154.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Vance Yeh, *Modeling the Modern: Courtesan Fashion, Furniture, and Manners in Late Nineteenth-Century Shanghai*, chap. in *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006), 34-35.

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**Fig. 4.1** Plate, porcelain with overglaze enamels (*famille rose*), Jingdezhen, China, Yongzheng period (1723-1735), Qing dynasty, h.: 2.9 cm, d.: 21.5 cm, d. footring: 10.6 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 6164 © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.

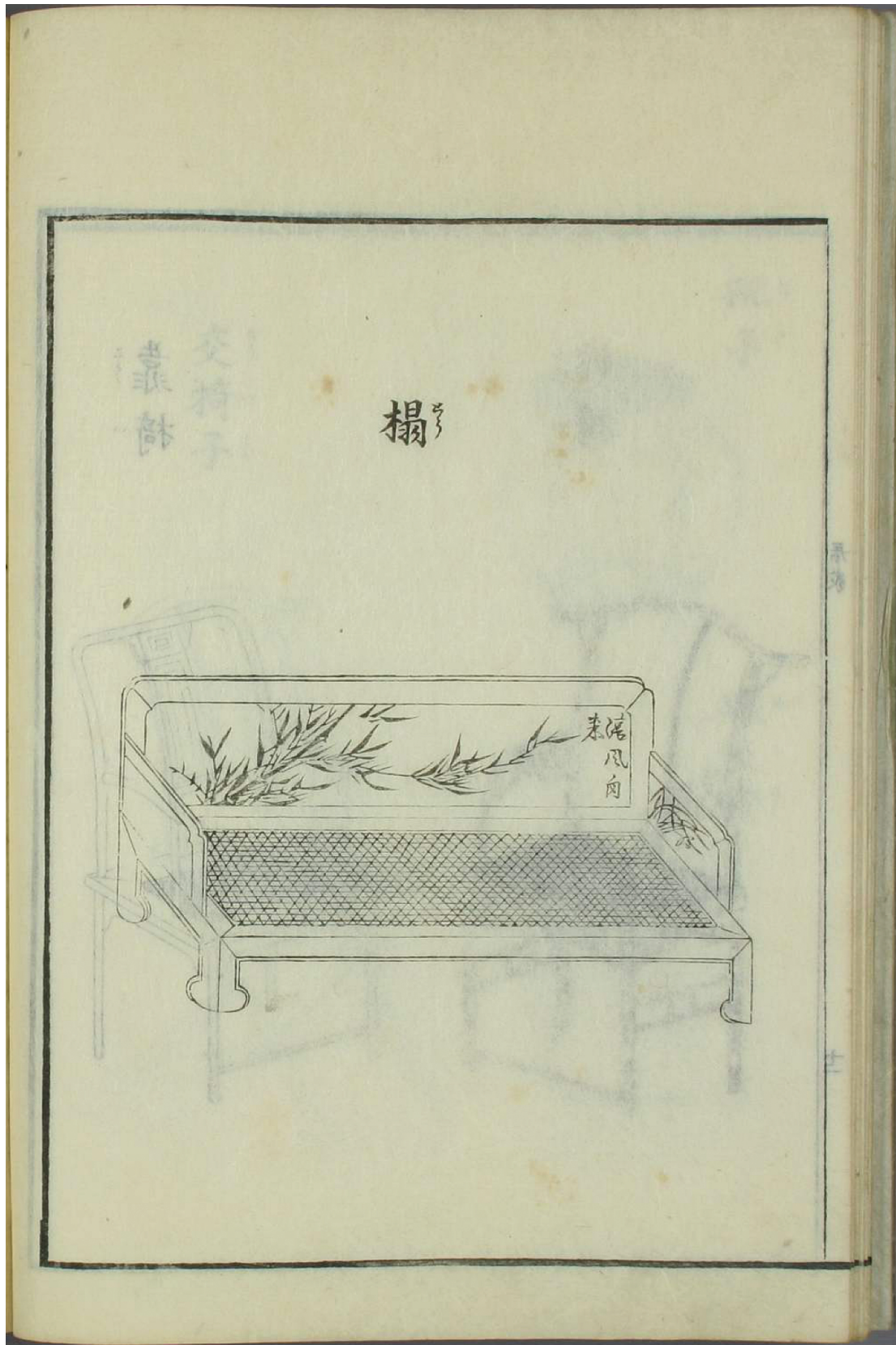


Fig. 4.2 Illustration of couch (tō 塌), woodblock print, printed in Nakagawa Tadateru 中川忠英, *Shinzoku kibun* 清俗記聞 [Record of Qing Customs], 1799, vol. 2, 12, folio right. With the permission of Waseda University Library.





**Fig. 4.3** Cui Hengxiang 崔衡湘 (act. second half, 18th c.), *Lady Reclining on a Bed*, second half of the 18th c., hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 160.02 x 892.79 cm. Royal Ontario Museum, The George Crofts Collection, 921.1.178. Seals: Cui Hengxiang 崔衡湘印, Yuelu 岳麓.  
With permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM.



**Fig. 4.4** Illustration of “Hongniang in the Dock,” printed in *Selected Example of Songs and Lyric* 歌林拾翠, 1659, Qing dynasty, woodblock print. After Wen-Chin Hsu, “Illustrations of ‘Romance of the Western Chamber’ on Chinese Porcelains: Iconography, Style, and Development,” *Ars Orientalis* 40 (2011), 48, fig. 9.



**Fig. 4.5** Pair of low armchairs, 1660-1720, rosewood (*huali* 花梨), 86 x 59 x 45 cm. Yangming tang Collection. After Craig Clunas, *Chinese Furniture* (London: Bamboo, 1988), 30, fig. 16.

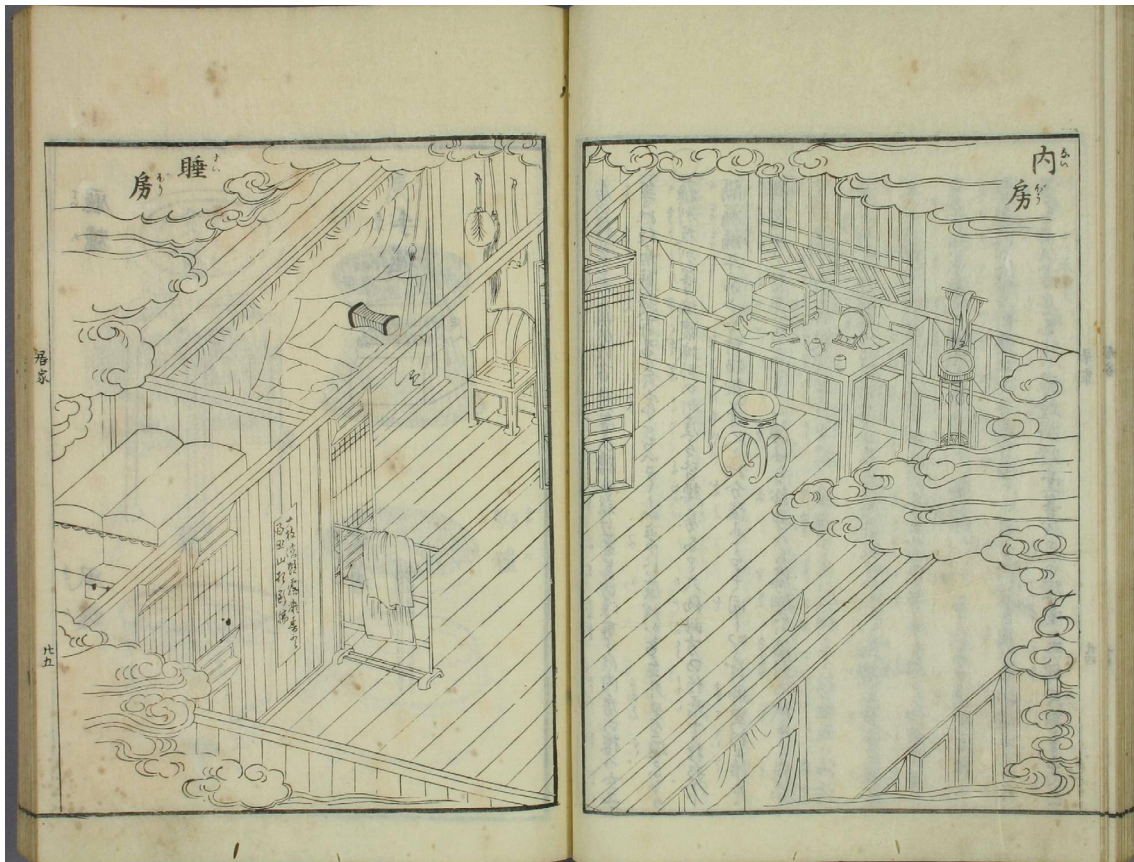


Fig. 4.6 Illustration of lady's *neifang* 内房 [sitting room] and *shuifang* 睡房 [bedroom], woodblock print, printed in Nakagawa Tadateru 中川忠英, *Shinzoku kibun* 清俗記聞 [Record of Qing Customs], 1799, vol. 2, 25. With the permission of Waseda University Library.

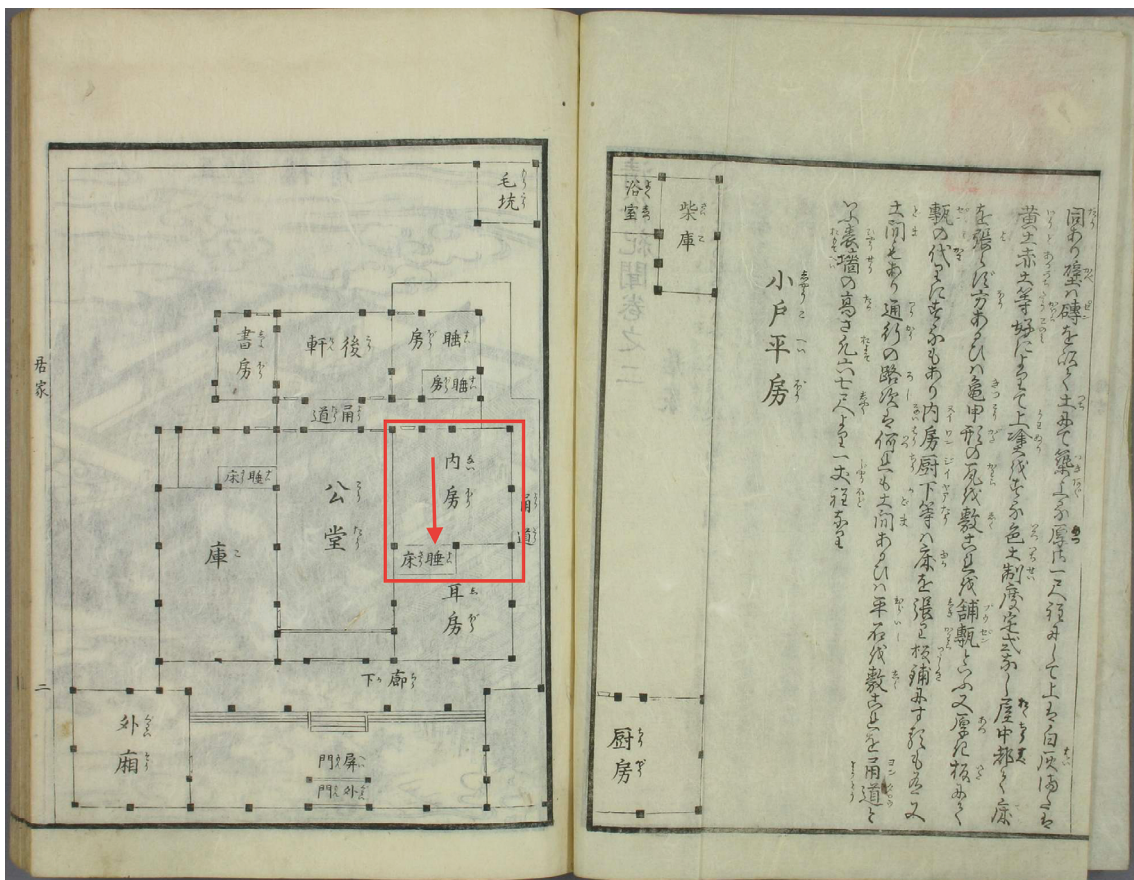


Fig. 4.7 Plan of an ordinary house, woodblock print, printed in Nakagawa Tadateru 中川忠英, *Shinzoku kibun* 清俗記聞 [Record of Qing Customs], 1799, vol. 2, 2, folio left. With the permission of Waseda University Library.



**Fig. 4.8** Unknown Photographer, [Chin. Mädchen.], 1870-1900, albumen paper print, mounted on cardboard, 6.2 x 9.5 cm, cardboard: 6.4 x 10.4 cm, carte-de-visite. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 1981-1/27.93 © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.