

Reflections on the Study of *Tixi* Carved Polychrome Lacquerware in the Song and Yuan Dynasties

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Abstract

The present study organizes the documentary evidence on carved polychrome lacquerware (*tixi* 剔犀, literally “carved rhinoceros [horn]) from the Song dynasty onwards to conduct a retrospective on the research on this art form. In doing so, it focuses on the evolution of related terminology for *tixi* to understand and discuss the viewpoints in various periods on carved polychrome lacquerware and its stylistic changes. Carved polychrome lacquerware in the Song dynasty was called “*xipi* 犀皮 (rhinoceros hide),” because it emulated the appearance of hide armor and horse tack. After being painted in lacquer, abrasion of the surface naturally produced this effect. As the application of lacquer layers became thicker in carved polychrome lacquerware and the engraving deeper, it was considered in the late Song dynasty and early Yuan dynasty that *xipi* was actually a homophone for *xipi* 犀毗 or *xipi* 西皮. In the Yuan and Ming dynasties, *xipi* 犀毗 thereupon became the mainstream term along with *huadi xipi* 滑地犀毗, the *huadi* alluding to the thin yet tough nature of Song dynasty lacquer layering with shallow and less angular engraving.

With the underlying lacquer layers in Song dynasty carved polychrome lacquerware as the focus of expression, archaeologically recovered examples of such can be divided into three types. Type I features thin lacquer layers with shallow carving and mostly “fragrant grass” design, which was popular around the time of Emperor Gaozong’s reign (1127-1162). Type II centers around efforts on working the number of layers for the lacquer, which became the main style of Southern Song carved polychrome lacquerware. In this type, the lacquer surface is dark brown or black with various forms of decoration, the patterns delicate and the carved interior lacquer lines following the decoration in a parallel and even manner. This balance between decoration and lacquer layering was the aesthetic for the earlier part of the middle thirteenth century. After the mid-thirteenth century, the lacquer layers became more exaggerated and the lacquer surface further constricted and finer in a style that continued into the late Song and early Yuan dynasty. Coexisting with Type II of lacquerware, Type III mainly focused on the decoration of the

lacquer surface, which was red and featured relatively thick applications. The surface lacquer and exposed interior lacquer lines were evenly balanced in a well-knit combination that gives the pattern an even more volumetric appearance. Type III lacquerware was often decorated with ruyi cloud patterns that would finally emerge as the mainstream of carved polychrome lacquer in the Yuan dynasty.

As for the term *tixi*, it appeared in the late Yuan to early Ming dynasty and did not circulate until the late Ming to early Qing dynasty. The text *Records of Lacquering* also clearly distinguishes between *tixi* and *xipi* 犀皮. Not until the twentieth century, when this book was reprinted and became well known, did the term *tixi* come into broad acceptance.

Keywords: *Tixi*, *xipi* 犀皮, *xipi* 犀毗, carved lacquer, lacquerware

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)