

# A Probe into the Cavity Cabinet in *Treatise on Superfluous Things*

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## Abstract:

With satisfying practical functions, cavity cabinet, a kind of common furniture, has been passed down to nowadays. However, in *Treatise on Superfluous Things* of the Ming Dynasty of ancient China, cavity cabinet was described somewhere to be forbidden, but elsewhere to be admired, which were inconsistent. Through the study and analysis of historical materials, it can be seen that the descriptions in *Treatise on Superfluous Things* might be untrue, and that the setting of cavity cabinets widely spread nowadays is somehow limited.

## Keywords:

Treatise on Superfluous Things, Cavity Cabinet, Store

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## 1. On Cavity Cabinet

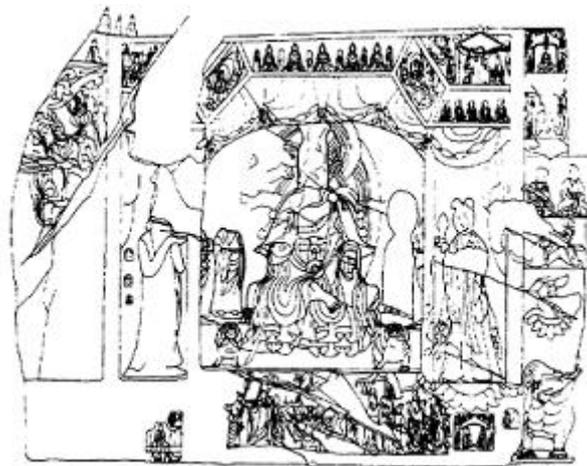
As an “encyclopedia” on life of the scholar-officials in the late Ming Dynasty of ancient China, *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, taking “clothing, food, housing and transportation” as basic categories, made a panoramic description of life of ancient literati from twelve perspectives. In the book, the setting of cavity cabinet inside housing was covered. e.g. “it is unwise to dig cabinets in walls” [1], i.e., it is forbidden to dig walls to make cabinets, and “furthermore, if there is any hole in back wall, it will not be able to hold a picture” [1], i.e., moreover, when back wall is dug through, there will be no place to hang a picture. From the seemingly contradictory records on cavity cabinet in the book, can it be concluded that the content of *Treatise on Superfluous Things* is not rigorous? Is it because there are requisites for the use of cavity cabinet?

As to the meaning of *Chu*, the Chinese equivalent of “cabinet”, there are various versions in ancient books in China, such as “casket”, “*kuichu*” and “name of wooden furniture”. The “cabinet” described in the book has its connotation closer to the modern interpretation, which is the furniture for storing and placing daily necessities. In “cavity is hollow...”, cavity means hole or cave. Therefore, cavity cabinet is the hole dug in walls for placing objects.

## 2. Tracing Back to the Origin

### Religious niche:

Cavity cabinet, also known as “niche”, originated from religion. It is actually a certain space cut in the walls of religious buildings. “Niche” varies between Buddhism and Islam. In Buddhism, the gods are enshrined inside the space of the niche. In the Northern Wei Dynasty of ancient China, the pattern of three walls and three niches was designed for the Huangfugong Cave, which now is a part of Longmen Grottoes. The Buddhist statues in the niches were carefully arranged and decorated in detail [2]. By contrast, in Islam “niche” is regarded as one of the basic facilities of the worship hall of mosque. It is located in the small arch in the middle of the back wall of the worship hall, facing the direction of Kaaba in Mecca, an Islamic holy place, to express the yearning for and worship to the place. To cite an example, the main worship hall and the niches inside it in mosques in our country must face the west, so that worshippers could worship the holy place Mecca in the west. (Figure 1, Figure 2)



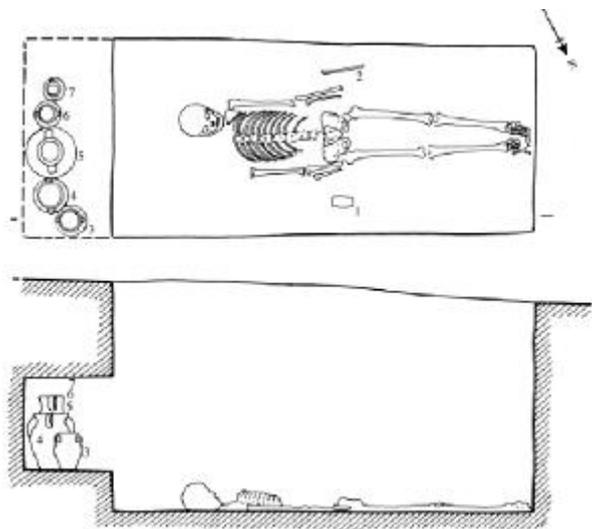
**Figure 1.** South wall of the Huangfugong Cave (Source: *A Probe to the Buddhist Statues Enshrined in the Niches in Three Walls and the Buddhist Worship Pictures of the Huangfugong Cave* by Gu Yanfang).



**Figure 2.** North wall of the Huangfugong Cave (Source: *A Probe to the Buddhist Statues Enshrined in the Niches in Three Walls and the Buddhist Worship Pictures of the Huangfugong Cave* by Gu Yanfang).

### 3. Burial Custom

“Niches” exist not only in religious buildings, but also in ancient tombs with special shapes and structures, where niches were dug on the walls for various burial objects to be placed. Such tombs are called niche tombs. According to literature records, niche tombs not only appeared in Guanzhong area of Shaanxi Province of China, but also in some areas of Gansu, Shanxi, Henan and Shandong provinces. For example, in the Early Western Zhou Cemetery of the Shigushan Site, many burial objects were found by scholars in the niches, most of which are bronze ritual vessels, totaling 14 kinds and 31 pieces [3]. To cite another example, among the four niche tombs found in the Zhanqi Site in Minxian County, in the single-head niche tomb M49 pottery was placed as burial objects [4]. By investigating the burial objects, scholars can infer the identity of the owner of the tomb, which is of great research significance for understanding the life of the owner and the customs and culture of the dynasty in which he or she lived. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3.** The planar graph and cutaway drawing of the Zhanqi Site in Minxian County (Source: *A Study on the Grave Niche of Siwa Culture* by Fu Wenxin).

The appearance of “niche” in religions and tombs has not only confirmed the time-honored history of cavity cabinet, but also illustrated its close connection with people's daily life. This is thought-provoking. Why did Wen Zhenheng write the aphorism “it is unwise to dig cabinets in walls”?

### 4. The Limitations of Cavity Cabinet

#### 4.1. Climate Variance

China has a vast territory and rich natural resources. It can be divided into six temperature zones from north to south. The corresponding climate variance among different regions has not only caused the great difference of cultural customs between northern and southern China, but also exerted much great impact on the setting of cavity cabinets.

According to *Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling* by Li Yu, walls can be used for storage, as was expressed in “the space reserved in walls can replace a cabinet” [5]. That means in walls, a certain space was reserved to be a cabinet. “It was a fantastic hole with supporting plate and without door leaf, which looked like a bookshelf. Not

occupying interior space, it played its role and it was as solid and steady as rocks.” [5] This design is much clever in that it occupies no interior space and it is solid and durable. However, this method is not applicable to all regions, as was explained as follows: “Climate varies among eastern, southern, western and northern China. This method is suitable for western and northern China, but the same is not true with eastern and southern China. In western and northern China, the land is high and the wind is strong. Indeed, through digging the earth several dozen feet, well water could be seen. But since moisture comes from water, which cannot be obtained directly on the ground, how can moisture come into being on the ground? Even if there are extremely humid places, they will turn dry with no exception under much strong wind. Therefore, storing books in walls is exclusively feasible in places such as Yan, Zhao, Qin and Jin of ancient China. For other places of China, it is inadvisable.” In eastern and southern China, it is humid, so the items in cavity cabinet are vulnerable to moisture, which makes it hard to store them. By contrast, in western and northern China, it rains less and the climate is dry, and the inhabitants are not disturbed by moisture. Yan, Zhao and Qin of ancient China nowadays cover Hebei, Beijing, Tianjin, Liaoning, Jilin, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Gansu, Sichuan, Chongqing, etc. On the one hand, most of these areas have a dry climate; on the other hand, in these areas there happened to be the discovery sites of some niche tombs, which further confirms the regional nature of cavity cabinets.

As is known to all, Wen Zhenheng was born in the thirteenth year of the Wanli period in Ming Dynasty of China and was a native of Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. He resigned and retired after being frustrated in officialdom and then led a secluded life in Yangcheng Lake, Suzhou. Geographically, Suzhou has a north subtropical monsoon maritime climate, which is warm, humid and rainy. There, if cavity cabinet was set in a wall, the items in the cabinet would be contaminated with moisture, ranging from being damp and fragile to deterioration and destruction. Therefore, in Suzhou, where Wen Zhenheng lived for years, it was inadvisable to dig holes in walls to store items, thus the setting of cavity cabinet became a “taboo”.

#### **4.2. The Five Elements and Geomancy**

In ancient China, the site selection, construction, layout and decorations of housing was regarded as the top priority for living and working in peace and contentment and for leading a smooth and satisfactory life. As an interdisciplinary subject, housing construction not only integrates architecture, engineering and design, but also is inseparable from the Five Elements and geomancy.

Most Chinese ancient buildings are beam-column structures and mortise-tenon structures. Since ancient times, they have enjoyed the reputation that “even with fallen walls, the housing stands”, which means that even if the wall is destroyed or collapses, the structure of housing will survive. So it is not the partition wall that bears the weight of housing. However, it was recorded in *The Yellow Emperor’s Classic on Housing Geomancy*, the first book of geomancy in China, that “a residence should be compact, leaving no chance for wind to blow in through any tiny crack or fissure” [6], which means that houses where people live must have compact walls without any tiny crack or fissure so as to keep wind away. In addition, as a model of the monographs on housing geomancy in the Ming Dynasty, *Ten Chapters On Housing Geomancy with Illustrations*, i.e. *Yang Zhai Shi Shu* in Chinese Pinyin, also expounded on the walls of residences: If you want to “make a family secure and prosper” [7], you must remember that “renovation can be done only on the date of heaven virtue (*Tiande*) or

of moon virtue (*Yuede*) when there is enough vitality, so that housing could be made clean and spacious to bring prosperity to the family” [7], that is, the walls of a residence must be wide and thick for the peace and prosperity of those who live in it. Obviously, if the wall of a residence is dotted with cavity cabinets, it will affect the fortune of the owner at various aspects.

## 5. Cavity Cabinet in Living Room

However, although there are many insurmountable rules for the setting of cavity cabinet, the writer of *Treatise on Superfluous Things* still mentioned the existence of cavity cabinet in the chapter on living room: “It is not advised to hang paintings, for good paintings are easily dried in summer. Furthermore, if there is any hole in back wall, it will not be able to hold a picture.” [7]. It means that there is no need to hang pictures on the walls in summer because in summer good paintings could be easily destroyed, and if there is any hole in back wall, there will be no place to hang a picture. Here, the author affirmed the existence of cavity cabinet, but the seemingly contradictory remarks are not unreasonable.

Although climate variation and the Five Elements and geomancy put many restrictions on cavity cabinet and the author’s words that “it is unwise to dig cabinets in walls” are true, cavity cabinet still has been used in living room. (Figure 4)



**Figure 4.** Closet in living room (Source: *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, Chongqing Publishing House).

### 5.1. Living Room Exempt from the Five Elements and Geomancy

The theory of the Five Elements and geomancy on walls mainly aimed at the house where the host lives, while the living room, as the best place for the ancient Chinese people to avoid summer heat, was not used as a bedroom. In summer, desks and couches were usually placed in living room for the host to handle daily housework and public affairs. Therefore, the existence of cavity cabinet in living room did not offend the taboos of the Five Elements and geomancy. Instead, being solid and saving interior space, it has been enjoying a good reputation.

### 5.2. Living Room Unaffected by Climate

Although damp areas do no good to cavity cabinet, living room is free from moisture, which owes to its special architectural shapes and structures to a large extent. The point was expounded in detail in *Treatise on Superfluous Things*: “Living room is an ideal place for long days in summer, for which there is no window-sill.

Chinese parasols are planted in front of houses and bamboos at back to shun sunlight”; “Curtains made of speckled bamboo hang around, which reminds of cool and refreshing wonderland”. [1] For this kind of big room with only a few shelters and partition walls designed for hot summer days, Chinese parasols were planted in front and bamboos at back, and window sashes were removed and replaced by bamboo curtains hanging from above, which not only shunned the burning sun and kept the room cool, but also provided excellent ventilation. In this case, the items in the cavity cabinet could be invulnerable to moisture.

## 6. Multifunctional Cavity Cabinet

When designing cavity cabinets, the ingenious Chinese people of ancient time not only put into consideration the function of storing things, but also considered from the perspective of aesthetics. They were meant to be original, elegant and unconventional.

### 6.1. Useful Cavity Cabinet

As was acknowledged in *Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling*, “This wonderfully and tactfully designed ware is necessary for domestic life.” [5] There are supporting plates in cavity cabinet which separate the hollow space like in a bookshelf. Thus in cavity cabinet items can be placed and interior space is saved. In addition, it is sturdy and durable. The ingenious design is essential for daily life.

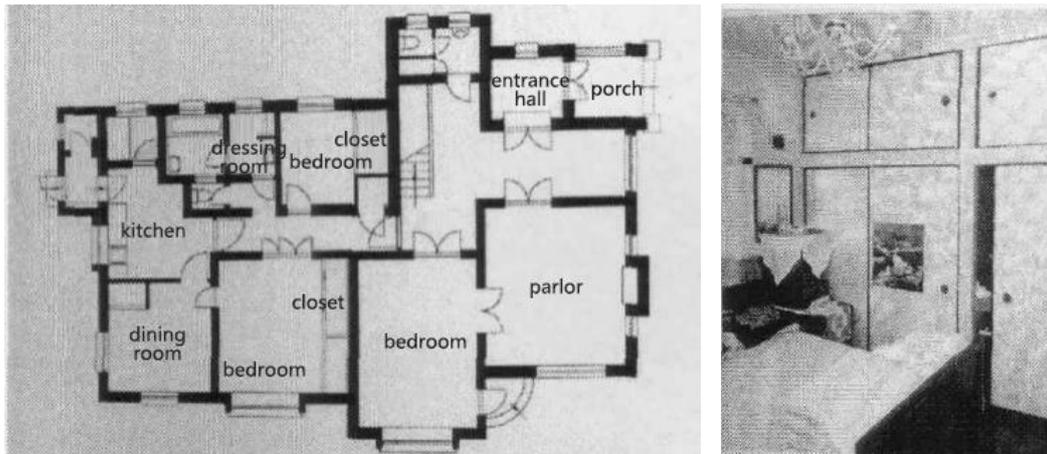
### 6.2. Elegant Cavity Cabinet

There are various kinds of items placed in cavity cabinet. If it is exposed, the entire space will inevitably appear vulgar and messy. The ingenious ancient people would install doors for cavity cabinet. Generally, they were a pair of symmetrical doors with decorative paintings on the surface. After the cabinet doors were closed, two decorative paintings would hide all the items in the cavity cabinet. Being so elegant and nice, it is the best choice for refined literati.

## 7. Conclusions

To sum up, although the description of and narration on cavity cabinet in *Treatise on Superfluous Things* were somehow contradictory or even much different all over the text, it can be concluded through analysis that cavity cabinet, which has been passed down till nowadays for storing things, poses requirements for the circumstances. Bedrooms and humid areas are not allowed for it. However, it does not mean that cavity cabinet is forbidden. Cavity cabinet can still play its role excellently in living room. As an “encyclopedia” of the life of scholar-officials in the late Ming Dynasty, *Treatise on Superfluous Things* can be regarded as a precious work offering material for people to understand the lifestyle and aesthetic taste of retired scholars in the late Ming Dynasty, and the author Wen Zhenheng has made countless effort for it, but the descriptions are not absolutely correct and are untrue occasionally. When scholars get to know and study the book, they had better adopt a macroscopic point of view, and moreover, they are advised to dig deep into details for the study.

Having witnessed generation after generation, cavity cabinet did not withdraw from the stage of history. Instead, it has merged into the life of ordinary people in the name of “closet” with a posture more in line with the trend of the times [8]. Although the times are different now and the scientific name has changed, the ancient Chinese people’s ideas of creation are still glamorous and permeated with wisdom. (Figure 5)



**Figure 5.** The closets in contemporary interior space (Source: *Modern Urban Housing in China*).

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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