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# The Changing Landscape of Medieval Chinese Customs: Focusing on Sitting Positions

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## Abstract

From the Wei-Jin through Tang-Song periods, social structures and customs in China underwent great change. In the case of sitting positions, these periods saw a shift from the “floor-sitting era” prior to the Qin to the “era of raised sitting” following the Tang and Song dynasties. In the interim, there was a period where the seated squat (*juzuo* 踞坐) made an appearance. This position is depicted in the “Man seated on foreign stool” detail of the scroll painting, *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* 北齊校書圖. During the Liu Song dynasty, monks at the Qihuan Temple ate in a seated squat and were vehemently lambasted by scholar-officials led by Fan Tai, instigating political debate around the sitting position. From a Confucian point of view, sitting positions are divided into two categories based on whether the calves or the bottoms of one’s feet touch the ground: the first includes kneeling, the sitting kneel, and the lotus positions, while the second includes squatting, sitting with legs outstretched, and the seated squat positions. Shifts in sitting positions reflect not only subtle changes taking place across various aspects of Chinese social customs and daily life, but also structural change on a systemic level. On the ideological front, obscure learning of the Wei and Jin dynasties exposed abuses of Confucian ethics. Compounded with the onslaught of foreign cultural influences such as Buddhism, it is no wonder, in this context of great historical upheaval, that efforts to preserve Confucianism would end in failure.

## Keywords

Medieval China – changing customs – floor-sitting era – seated squat (*juzuo*) – foreign stools (*huchuang*) – anti-Confucianism

The study of historical shifts in social customs must begin with a close look at the daily lives of ancient people. Both because we cannot access those times and because historians tend to document change rather than the norm, the value of extant visual materials from historical periods is immeasurable. The Song (960–1279) dynasty reproduction of the *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* 北齊校書圖 (Northern Qi Scholars Collating Classic Texts) housed in the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, US) is one of the finest examples of such materials for understanding the daily life of literati in Medieval China.

### 1 Beginnings: The Sitting Positions of Five People in the *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu*

The scene depicted in the *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* corresponds to an event recorded in the “Wenyuan liezhuan” 文苑列傳 section of the *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書. During the seventh year of the Tianbao 天保 era (556), Emperor Wenxuan 文宣帝 (r. 550–559) issued a decree to collate books. At the time, twelve men, Fan Xun 樊遜, Gao Qianhe 高乾和, Ma Jingde 馬敬德, Xu Sanchou 許散愁, Han Tongbao 韓同寶, Fu Huaide 傅懷德, Gu Daozi 古道子, Li Hanzi 李漢子, Bao Changxuan 鮑長暄, Jing Sun 京孫, Wang Jiuyuan 王九元, and Zhou Zishen 周子深 were all in the Department of State Affairs revising the five classics and numerous histories. At Fan Xun’s suggestion to “request and borrow different versions from families with voluminous collections for cross-referencing,” over 3,000 *juan* were collected.<sup>1</sup> It was quite a grand affair.

The version of the *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* seen by the Northern Song (960–1127) calligrapher Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) was said to include twelve scholar-officials. In the preface and postscript, he notes that four of these men are “seated on a raised sitting platform (*ta* 榻)” and “one sits upon a foreign stool (*huchuang* 胡床).” This description is consistent with that in the copy held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Only a final comment – “two raised sitting platforms face one another, seven men sit upon it [...]” – is not present

1 Li Baiyao 李白藥, *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 614.

in the extant copy, which only mentions five scholar-officials.<sup>2</sup> In a postscript in the extant copy, Fan Chengda 范成大 (1126–1193) writes, “for the seven men on the opposite-side raised sitting platform to be missing must mean that half of the painting has been lost.” From Fan’s hypothesis, we know that the version he saw did not include those seven men. Jin Weinuo’s 金維諾 (1924–2018) research suggests that Fan’s explanation is inaccurate. Rather,

Fan and Huang were not looking at the same painting. Descriptions in relevant texts all say there were several copies of this painting already during the Song dynasty. [...] While differing in coloring, brush strokes, or in there being “twelve scholar-officials” versus “only five scholar-officials,” they all share the collating-books theme and depict the main subjects with similar composition and detail. Thus, the original must be the work of a single artist.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, the copies seen by Huang and Fan likely come from the same source. According to the explication of Song Minqiu 宋敏求 (1019–1079) as cited by Huang Bosi 黃伯思 (1079–1118), this source copy was drawn by the Northern Qi (550–577) artist Yang Zihua 楊子華 (fl. 561–565).<sup>4</sup>

It is reasonable to assume the five men seated in the extant *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* to be among the twelve that received the imperial decree to collate texts. Occupying the center of the painting are four men sharing a raised sitting platform, upon which are placed various accoutrements. This is a depiction of the daily life of the literati of that time (Figure 1). One man poised to leave sits with his legs dangling off the side of the platform while a servant puts on his shoes. This tells us it is customary to remove one’s shoes when taking one’s seat and to sit on the platform barefoot. Another man playing the zither

2 Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅, *Shangu tiba* 山谷題跋, annot. Tu Youxiang 屠友祥 (Shanghai: Shanghai yuandong chubanshe, 1999), 3.67.

3 Jin Weinuo 金維諾, “*Daolian tu yu Bei Qi jiaoshu tu*: Oumei fangwen sanji zhi er” 《搗練圖》與《北齊校書圖》—歐美訪問散記之二, in *Zhongguo meishushi lunji* 中國美術史論集, ed. Jin Weinuo 金維諾 (Harbin: Heilongjiang meishu chubanshe, 2004), 1: 290.

4 Huang Bosi writes in “*Ba Bei Qi kan shu tu hou*” 跋北齊勘書圖後: “In recent years, I saw a different version of this painting. Though no artist’s name is visible, from the way the depicted figures are dressed and the mix of Han and non-Han people, I surmise it to be the work of person in the latter Wei or Northern Qi period. It was when I saw at Luoyang the Wang copy, which was titled *Bei Qi kan shu tu*, and also the tattered religious texts of Master Song, that I first learned it was painted by Yang Zihua. [...] Looking at this copy now, the figures are quite obviously native northerners. I recognize without a doubt the mark of Zihua.” Huang Bosi 黃伯思, *Dongguan yulun* 東觀餘論, ed. Li Ping 李萍 (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2010), 158.



FIGURE 1 Detail from *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* by Yang Zihua, Northern Qi, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

turns with his hand extended to keep the man from leaving. His hand holds the leaving man's waist-tie, unwittingly revealing the partially bare leg beneath his robes. This brings attention to the likelihood that the four men had all been sitting cross-legged on the platform with layered skirts bunched between their knees. That they do not sit in the knelt position common during the pre-Han era is apparent from the wrinkled state of the skirts between the knees of the figure elegantly holding a brush. Instead, they likely sit with legs crossed so as to be able to rest papers upon the skirts gathered between his knees. The sitting platform, which easily accommodates four people, is also much more spacious than the one-person seat documented in previous historical records. The facing platform observed by Huang Tingjian must be even larger since it can seat seven people. In fact, sitting platforms at this time seemed no different than beds for sleeping. As Yang Sen 楊森 notes, "Sitting platforms of the Song period were extremely wide. They were essentially beds. There was no difference between the two."<sup>5</sup>

Another focal point in this painting is the man seated on a foreign stool. Dressed in red robes, he is attended by six servants, one hunching over as he stands before him, holding open a scroll for his viewing (Figure 2). The foreign stool he sits on is rather low to the ground with a sparse design; only horizontal wooden rods on each side support its legs. The way the legs cross diagonally

5 Yang Sen 楊森, *Dunhuang bishua jiaju tuxiang yanjiu* 敦煌壁畫家具圖像研究 (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2010), 65–67.



FIGURE 2  
“Man seated on foreign stool.” Detail from  
*Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* by Yang Zihua



FIGURE 3  
“Man seated on foreign stool.”  
Line drawing by Jin Yue 金龠

recalls the folding stools of today. It reads as a lightweight piece of furniture designed for portability and convenience (Figure 3). Shang Binghe 尚秉和 (1870–1950) closely examined this piece of furniture.

The foreign stool, known today as the tripod, is also called a hemp press (*mazha* 麻榨). As they are held together by hemp rope and can fold and expand, the Hu people often carry them about .... A piece of string lays over the center connector of the foreign stool. It expands during use and folds when not. One can use it to tie the stool to a horse's harness or to hang it from the shaft of a cart, or on a wall.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, we can see in images of the *Shinü tu* 侍女圖 fresco from Sun Ji's 孫機 (1929–2023) excavation of early Tang (618–907) Prince Li Shou's 李壽 (557–630) tomb in Shaanxi's Sanyuan 三原 county Jiaocun 焦村 village that a certain apparatus dangles from the arm of the female attendants. This apparatus is a foreign stool that has been folded for portability.<sup>7</sup> Ji Yuanzhi 暨遠志, who collected many foreign stools as depicted in such images, further confirms the many uses of it. He notes, in particular, its mobility, a characteristic not native to Chinese furniture, but which “originates in ancient Egypt and Western Asia”; this explains the “hu” 胡 (foreign) designation.<sup>8</sup> From this description, we can see the distinction between a daybed (*tachuang* 榻床) and a foreign stool (*huchuang*), though both terms contain the word “bed” (*chuang* 床). Daybeds can only be placed indoors and are considered proper sitting furniture; they can also be referred to simply with either of the characters in the word (*ta* or *chuang*). Foreign seats were created more spontaneously, with their primary function being their portability.

Ji goes on to write, “Though light and convenient, from the Sui (581–618) through Tang dynasties (particularly before the Middle and Late Tang periods), foreign stools never graced the great halls of learning. Tang people still preferred heavier-set interior seating meant for sitting in a fixed position. They also maintained the custom of floor-sitting.”<sup>9</sup> This explanation overlooks evidence in the *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* from which we see that scholars of the Northern Dynasties (439–581) clearly had two ways of sitting: sitting upon

6 Shang Binghe 尚秉和, *Lidai shehui fengsu shiwu kao* 歷代社會風俗事物考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shudian, 2001), 279.

7 Sun Ji 孫機, *Zhongguo shenghuo: Zhongguo guwenwu yu dongxi wenhua jiaoliuzhong de ruogan wenti* 中國聖火：中國古文物與東西文化交流中的若干問題 (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 200–1, 211.

8 Ji Yuanzhi 暨遠志, “Huchuang zakao: dunhuang bihua jiaju yanjiu zhi san” 胡床雜考—敦煌壁畫家具研究之三, *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, no. 4 (2004): 79.

9 *Ibid.*, 77.

raised platforms and sitting on foreign stools. Both differ greatly from pre-Han floor-sitting. When sitting on a raised platform, one removes one's shoes and sits cross-legged. When sitting on a foreign stool, "one's legs dangle and one's feet are set on the floor" in a seated squat position.<sup>10</sup> The foreign stool depicted in the *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu* is lower to the ground, so the dangling calves of the red-robed scholar-official are angled slightly forward and his upper body leans slightly forward. His posture is very similar to how we today sit on small stools.

Given all of this, we can conclude that, by 556, the scholar-officials of the Northern Qi had adopted two new manners of sitting – sitting cross-legged and sitting in a seated squat – which departed from the floor-sitting customs that had preceded. However, prior to this, in 426, the seated squat had served as a catalyst for a major political incident.

## 2 Squatted Eating: How One Sitting Position Instigated a Political Quarrel

Squatted eating (*jushi* 踞食) refers to eating in a seated squat position. During a historical period when Buddhist religious practices were taking root in China, this sitting position once generated intense debate. At the famous Qihuan (Jetavana) Temple 祇洹寺 located in the Southern Dynasties (420–589) capital Jiankang 建康 (modern-day Nanjing), the escalation of the debate over squatted eating into a political quarrel was inseparable from the political context of the Liu Song dynasty (420–479).<sup>11</sup> The person responsible for this incident was Fan Tai 范泰 (355–428), who was also responsible for the construction of Qihuan Temple.

As a scholar-official of the Eastern Jin (317–420) through the Southern Dynasties period, Fan Tai exemplified literati who believed in both Buddhism and Confucianism. Born of the Fan clan of Nanyang, he entered scholarly learning through the study of the classics and histories. He became an Erudite of the Imperial Academy 太學博士, then, the Minister of Ceremonies 太常. During the Liu Song dynasty, he was appointed Grand Master of the Palace with Golden Seal and Purple Ribbon 金紫光祿大夫, then the Chancellor of Education 國子祭酒. In his youth, Fan became deeply interested in the wave of Buddhist thought spreading through China. In the first year of the Yongchu 永初 era (420), he sponsored the building of Qihuan Temple and invited Huiyi

10 Yang Hong 楊泓, "Hu chuang" 胡床, in *Wenwu congtan* 文物叢談, ed. Sun Ji 孫機 and Yang Hong 楊泓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991), 255.

11 Wang Lei 王磊, "Jushi lunzheng yu Liu Song chuqi de zhengju" 踞食論爭與劉宋初期的政局, *Zhongshan daxue xuebao* 中山大學學報, no. 5 (2015).

慧義 (372–444) to be its abbot. Qihuan Temple held a place of utmost importance to Fan Tai. As Yoshikawa Tadao has written, “As the benefactor of Qihuan Temple, he lovingly oversaw the progress of its grounds’ development as if it were his own growing child.”<sup>12</sup>

In the third year of the Yuanjia 元嘉 era (426), Fan Tai noticed two sitting postures emerging from the temple. The first was sitting fully cross-legged (*jiejiafu zuo* 結跏趺坐, also *jiazuo* 跏坐) in a lotus position. This is just like sitting cross-legged, but with the bottoms of one’s feet facing upward. It was a common position for monks to practice meditation.<sup>13</sup> The second was the slanted squat (*pianju* 偏踞) or squatted eating, a seated squat position with feet planted on the ground. To the latter, he was vehemently opposed, and he sought to put an end to it. The *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 records that, following the building of Qihuan Temple, “Many renowned monks from the western regions stopped at the temple to transmit Buddhist scriptures or teachings.”<sup>14</sup> It is likely that squatted eating was an old custom from India brought to China via the political heart of the Southern Dynasties, Jiankang. Between 420 and 426, the trend arrived at Qihuan Temple along with renowned monks from the western regions. Fan Tai was openly unwilling to accept this newly introduced trend at the temple whose construction he had so zealously supported. He offered, instead, for the resident monks to carry on the other traditional custom of sitting in the lotus position. However, Fan Tai’s suggestion was met with opposition led by fifty monks including the abbot Huiyi. They insisted that both the lotus position and squatted eating position should be allowed since they were expressly stipulated in Buddhist discipline. They could not accept the reasoning of a lay Buddhist such as Fan Tai.

Yoshikawa has analyzed the reasoning behind Huiyi’s opposition to Fan Tai as follows:

*Mohe sengqi lü* 摩訶僧祈律 (Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya), the Sanskrit text that Fa Xian 法顯 brought back from central India, was translated into Chinese by Buddhahadra, who was residing at Daochang Temple 道場寺 in Jiankang. Work on the translation began in the eleventh month of the twelfth year of the Yixi 義熙 era (416) and finished in the second month

12 Yoshikawa Tadao 吉川忠夫, *Liuchao jingshenshi yanjiu* 六朝精神史研究, trans. Wang Qifa 王啟發 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2012), 118–19.

13 Fan Tai 范泰, “Yu Wang situ zhuren shu lun daoren jushi” 與王司徒諸人書論道人踞食, in *Hongmingji jiaojian* 弘明集校箋, ed. Shi Sengyou 釋僧祐, annot. Li Xiaorong 李小榮 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2013), 647–48.

14 Shi Huijiao 釋慧皎, *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, annot. Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 7.266.



of its fourteenth year (418). Shortly after, this text on Buddhist discipline was accepted by Huiyi along with fifty monks residing at Qihuan Temple. The sitting customs included in this work differed from those considered *proper eating forms in China* (sitting formally or upright). Instead, they based eating posture on *crouched sitting positions from India* (such as the seated or slanted squat). One might consider Qihuan Temple, described as a place where “many renown monks from the western regions stopped” to “transmit Buddhist scriptures and teachings,” would be a worldly place that easily accepted customs from other countries.<sup>15</sup>

*Mohe sengqi lü*, the Buddhist guide to precepts, spread to China in the final years of the Eastern Jin, after the construction of Qihuan Temple. As the temple was more open to foreign influence than most institutions, its people adopted the guide to precepts early on. The sitting position they used while partaking in food – based on “crouched sitting positions from India” – substantially diverged from that of other temples. According to the early Tang text *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳 (A Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea) compiled by Yi Jing 義淨 (635–713), while Fan Tai hoped the monks would “revert to” eating in the lotus position, this custom itself was actually a misappropriation by Chinese Buddhist temples dating only to the Jin (265–420) dynasty.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Huiyi and his supporters had no qualms about retiring it as a practice.

Why was Fan Tai so opposed to monks eating in a seated squat position? Fan mentioned a few reasons in his correspondence. The first pertains to Huiyi et al., arguing that if they could give up the Indian custom of eating with one’s hands then they naturally should also be able to give up squatted eating. Point two appeals to Emperor Wen of Song 宋文帝 (r. 424–453), saying that, just as foreign customs differ from native ones, foreign rules and precepts should also shift according to local customs, rather than being adopted as is. The third point brings up “old affairs of previous dynasties.” Drawing on several examples, Fan says that the seated squat is unprecedented in the history of China and, further, has not been adopted by eminent monks such as Dao’an 道安 and Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什 (Kumarajiva, 344–413) or at the Dong’an Temple 東安寺 overseen by Huiyan 慧嚴 (363–443).<sup>17</sup> From these points, it seems that Fan’s

15 Yoshikawa, *Liuchao jingshenshi yanjiu*, 120.

16 Wang Bangwei 王邦維, *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan jiaozhu* 南海寄歸內法傳校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), 138–39.

17 Fan Tai 范泰, “Da Yi Gong” 答義公, “Fan Bolun yu Sheng, Guan er fashi shu” 范伯倫與生觀二法師書, and “Lun jushi biao” 論踞食表, in *Hongmingji jiaojian*, 12.653–58.

objection to squatted eating is not based on its incompatibility with Buddhist precepts or, worse, a desire to instigate political struggle; rather, it reflects his inability to tolerate a sitting position incompatible with Chinese rituals and customs widely practiced at a temple whose construction he funded.



FIGURE 4 Diagram of sitting kneel (*guizuo*) → squat (*dun*) → seated squat (*juzuo*)

The question becomes, then, why Fan Tai considers squatted sitting to be incompatible with Chinese rituals and customs. The sitting kneel (*guizuo* 跪坐) is a seated position that was common in pre-Han China. It is characterized by one's knees and calves touching the ground with feet facing backwards and buttocks resting atop one's heels. This was the standard sitting position for floor-sitting. Squatting (*dun* 蹲) is having the bottoms of one's feet against the ground, with both knees pointed upwards and buttocks suspended rather than touching the ground. In the case that one's buttocks do touch the ground, the position is called a crouched squat (*dunju* 蹲踞). The difference between the squat and the seated squat (*juzuo*) lies in whether there is a seat beneath one's buttocks (Figure 4). "Since antiquity, Chinese people have privileged the sitting kneel, while squatted positions have been considered unseemly." Further, "none of the many varied forms of squatted positions are allowed in traditional ritual practice as they are thought to be disrespectful."<sup>18</sup> These "unseemly" and "disrespectful" qualities are what Fan finds intolerable. Yet, the monks of Qihuan Temple not only take these sitting positions to be the norm, but they also use Buddhist rules and precepts to contradict Fan. This slap in the face to Fan's revered Confucian ritual teachings is what triggered such strong counteraction on his part.

### 3 The Dividing Line between the Sitting Kneel and the Seated Squat

As a symbolically significant aspect of social life and customs, the evolution of sitting positions once captured the attention of archaeologist Li Ji 李濟

18 Chi Chih-Chang 紀志昌, "Nanchao 'jushi lunyi' suo fanying ru, fo jiaoshe de lilun siwei yu wenhua yihan" 南朝 "踞食論議" 所反映儒、佛交涉的理論思維與文化意涵, *Taida wen shi zhe xuebao* 臺大文史哲學報, no. 76 (2012): 90.

(1896–1979). In his 1953 article “Gui zuo dun ju yu jiju” 跪坐蹲居與箕踞,<sup>19</sup> Li divides human sitting positions into four stages: 1) floor-sitting; 2) crouching squat; 3) sitting kneel; and 4) raised sitting (*gaozuo* 高坐). Of these, he boldly declares the sitting kneel an epochal characteristic of early Chinese civilization. Its status underwent changes throughout the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, a period in which the sitting kneel was abandoned. Li writes:

The sitting kneel was originally part of the daily life of the specter-worshipping Shang dynasty ruling class; through practice, it developed into a part of ancestor worship, sacrificial rites to deities, and etiquette for hosting guests. As the Zhou dynasty adopted and expanded on Shang customs, it evolved into a ritual system that would serve as the foundation for China’s three-thousand years of Confucian culture. For the first half of this history, the nucleus of this ritual system – *ingrained in its very DNA* – was the sitting kneel. However, this, too, changed after the Southern and Northern Dynasties.

*The sitting kneel lost its place within Chinese daily life* due to the import of foreign stools and the influence of the lotus sitting position brought over by Buddhist monks from the east. However, its total demise would not come about until after the popularization of the folding stool. Though the prominence of the sitting kneel had started to wane even during the Han period, it was still largely in practice then.<sup>20</sup>

Based on Li’s assessment of this cultural milestone, it is reasonable to refer to the period preceding the Qin (221–207 BCE) as the “era of floor-sitting” (*guizuo shidai* 跪坐時代) and the period proceeding the Tang through Song as the “era of raised seating” (*zhuoyi shidai* 桌椅時代). These two periods are not completely without overlap. Between them, a period of struggle spans the hundreds of years covered by the Wei, Jin, and Southern to Northern Dynasties. The sitting position at the heart of its contention was the seated squat. And the seat best suited for the seated squat position was the foreign stool.

The Qing dynasty (1616–1911) scholar Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛 (1722–1798) once pointed to the late Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and early Three Kingdoms (220–265) period as when the foreign stool first began to make an appearance

19 Li Ji 李濟, “Gui zuo dun ju yu jiju: Yinxu shike yanjiu zhiyi” 跪坐蹲居與箕踞一般墟石刻研究之一, in *Li Ji wenji* 李濟文集, ed. Zhang Guangzhi 張光直 (Shanghai: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2006).

20 *Ibid.*, 4: 484, 496.

in China.<sup>21</sup> According to Yang Hong's 楊泓 more recent studies, "The foreign stool likely entered China in the final years of the Eastern Han" and "came to be widely used during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties when traces of it can be found in every aspect of social life."<sup>22</sup> Across all of these periods, the use of foreign stools became a part of the everyday lives of imperial scholars via the imperial grounds and halls. This is clear from the extant *Bei Qi jiaoshu tu*, in which it is shown being used in the Department of State Affairs. This cements the importance of the foreign stool in helping to bring a close to the "era of floor-sitting." It, along with the seated squat, dealt a fatal blow to the "very DNA" of Chinese rituals up to that point, the sitting kneel.

From the previous discussion on the squatted eating incident, one can see that, unlike squatting, the lotus position did not evoke the same repulsion from Confucian scholar-officials like Fan Tai. While they seemed to accept the lotus sitting position, they were completely intolerant of the seated squat. Why, when both sitting positions stem from Buddhist customs, were Confucian scholar-officials able to accept the lotus position while only able to view the seated squat with deep enmity?

Let us first examine the sitting kneel, which developed out of the kneeling position. Shen Wenzhuo 沈文倬, a scholar of ritual learning who has conducted an extensive study of kneeling, including the sitting kneel, in pre-Qin texts, argues that "kneeling is a raised sitting position" and "to sit is to lower the flank to heels from a kneeling position." Thus, "kneeling is a continuation of sitting" and "can be considered a subset of sitting."<sup>23</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) has an essay devoted to the topic, "Gui zuo bai shuo" 跪坐拜說, which Li Ji draws on to offer the following explication: "In the kneeling position, from the knees up, the body is a single, straight line; in the sitting position, from the buttocks up, the body is a single, straight line. As for the what's below the knees – the buttocks – they lay flat on the ground whether one is sitting or kneeling."<sup>24</sup>

Now let us take a closer look at the Buddhist lotus sitting position. The lotus position is achieved by crossing one's legs so that one is resting the backs of one's feet against the opposite thigh. The knees touch the ground while the

21 Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛, *Shiqishi shangque* 十七史商榷 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2013), 24.262.

22 Yang Hong, "Hu chuang," 255–56.

23 Shen Wenzhuo 沈文倬, "Zuogui tongshi: cong jiauwen, jinwen de yixie xiangxing wenzi shuo guren de zuo" 坐跪通釋—從甲骨文、金文的一些象形文字說古人的坐, in *Zhongguo jingxue* 中國經學, ed. Peng Lin 彭林 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009), 4: 45–46.

24 Li Ji, "Gui zuo dun ju yu jiju: Yinxu shike yanjiu zhiyi," 4: 484.

bottoms of the feet face upwards. The calves rest flat against the ground and the upper body remains upright. There are clear similarities between this and the traditional Chinese sitting kneel position. For instance, the knees touch the ground in both cases. This explains why the Buddhist lotus position is more readily acceptable to traditional Chinese scholar-officials. Yoshikawa Tadao refers to both as proper traditional Chinese sitting positions (i.e. sitting upright or formal sitting).

In the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, the terms for *dun* 蹲 (squat) and *ju* 踞 (crouch) cross-reference and are used to define one another.<sup>25</sup> This demonstrates the closeness of their meanings. They share the characteristics of upward-facing knees and bottoms of the feet that rest against the ground. They differ in whether the buttocks touch the ground. There is yet another sitting position, sitting with legs outstretched (*jiju* 箕踞) – whose distinction from the seated squat is even more particular. In the *jiju* position, the buttocks directly touch the ground whereas, with the seated squat, they rest upon a seat. The origin of the term *jiju* rests upon this distinction. Because the buttocks touch the ground, one's calves must extend outwards. In the past, this sitting position has been thus described: "Sitting with one's legs outstretched, the shape of the dangling legs resembles a dustpan (*boji* 簸箕)."<sup>26</sup> Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815) once called the *jiju* position a sign of great offense.<sup>27</sup> Li Ji explains that this "is likely due to the fact that it makes one monkey-like," referencing how monkeys and gorillas tend to sit with legs outstretched.<sup>28</sup> Considered from the perspective of Confucian ethics, this sitting position is inappropriate. If squatting is considered disrespectful, then this is even more so the case when it comes to sitting with legs outstretched. The seated squat, which closely resembles both, is cast outside the realm of proper sitting with them.

Based on the above discussion, we can take whether the knees and bottoms of feet touch the ground as a measure to divide the sitting positions discussed thus far into two categories: one which includes kneeling, the sitting kneel, and the lotus; and one which includes squatting, sitting with legs outstretched,

25 Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 399.

26 From the "Zhi le" 至樂 chapter of *Zhuangzi* 莊子: "Master Zhuang's wife died. When Master Hui 惠子 came to console him, Master Zhuang was sitting with his legs splayed like a winnowing basket (i.e., squatting informally); he was banging on a basin and singing." Paul Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 142. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 6.614.

27 Duan Yucai, *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 399.

28 Li Ji, "Gui zuo dun ju yu jiju: Yinxi shike yanjiu zhiyi," 4: 491–92.

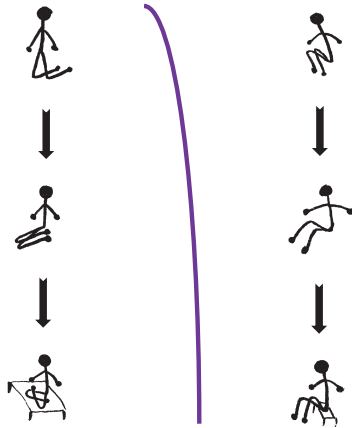


FIGURE 5

Diagram juxtaposing kneeling (*gui*) → sitting kneel (*guizuo*) → lotus position (*jiafu* 跏趺) with squatting (*dun*) → sitting with legs outstretched (*jiju*) → seated squat (*juzuo* 踞坐)

and the seated squat (Figure 5). The former is considered proper, and the latter implies disrespect. A huge gulf divides the two.

Fan Tai was not alone in his distaste for the seated squat. In fact, similar positions can be found in numerous textual examples. The “Gaozu benji” 高祖本紀 section of the *Shiji* 史記 records how, when Li Yi 酈食其 (d. ca. 204 BCE) “paid a visit to the Duke of Pei 沛公 (Liu Bang 劉邦, 256–195 BCE), he was crouched on a stool and having two women wash his feet.” When Li saw this, he became extremely angry. He pointed at Liu Bang and said, “It is improper to sit crouched upon a stool when meeting with your elders.”<sup>29</sup> It is clear from this story how offensive squatted sitting was to Han Confucian sensibilities. In the “Rendan” 任誕 section of the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, there is the story of how, after the passing of Ruan Ji’s 阮籍 (210–263) mother, Pei Kai 裴楷 (237–291) went to offer his condolences. He saw “Ruan was drunk. His hair disheveled, and he sat with this butt on the floor, legs splayed, not crying.” Pei calmly said to him, “Ruan is originally from elsewhere; thus, he does not follow the rules of etiquette. As a worldly man myself, I live according to ritual codes.”<sup>30</sup> Here, sitting with legs outstretched is seen as anathema to proper ritual etiquette. Sima Biao 司馬彪 (ca. 240–ca. 306) writes in the “Wuxing zhi” 五行志 chapter of the *Xu Hanshu* 續漢書 that, towards the end of the Han dynasty, “Emperor Ling 靈帝 (r. 168–189) admired foreign vestments, tents, furniture, and sitting positions as well as their harps, flutes, and dance. Thus, noblemen in the capital city vied to have them. It was all bewitching.”<sup>31</sup> The “foreign sitting position”

29 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), 1: 8.303.

30 Xu Zhen’e 徐震堦, *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), 394.

31 *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 3272.

here refers to the seated squat. Using the word “bewitching” to describe it reflects the repulsion of orthodox Confucians.

Debates around the sitting position belie a deeper cultural and ideological clash. Rather than stemming from sitting itself, the dividing line between the sitting kneel and more crouched or squatted sitting positions delineates the conflict and tension between foreign and Chinese ritual conduct. For Fan Tai, the dividing line illustrated in Figure 5 is as clear as the need to repel the seated squat. His attitude exhibits a staunch protectiveness towards the Confucian ritual code as well as the walled-off interiority of a Confucianist who rejects non-Chinese cultural norms.

That Fan Tai spent his youth admiring foreign-originated Buddhist teachings suggests that he is not an incorrigible conservative. However, when it comes to new trends and customs that accompany Buddhism and that may threaten to change long-held domestic social norms, Fan’s wish to safeguard the core features of China’s bygone eras placed him squarely on the conservative side. That is why he was willing to go so far as to instigate a political quarrel to stop the relentlessly advancing tides of change.

#### 4 Structural Shifts in Concepts and Institutions

From the pre-Qin “era of floor-sitting” to the post-Tang through Song “era of raised seating,” Chinese society underwent a wholesale institutional and structural change. The Wei, Jin, through Southern and Northern Dynasties, marked the transitional period for this change, and the seated squat sitting position represents an exemplary case study for examining that change. As Southern Dynasties people debated the legitimacy of the seated squat, Northern Dynasties society had already embraced the new sitting position as part of its customs. Even in as lofty a context as noblemen collating the classics, one sees someone squat-sitting on a foreign stool as if it were the most natural occurrence. The “era of floor-sitting” has passed, never to return; ultimately, it is the Tang through Song’s “era of raised seating” and all the accompanying dangling-legged sitting positions that would establish a permanent place in history.

Along with sitting position, these hundreds of years of transition also saw the evolution of many co-occurring shifts in various aspects of social life and customs. With sitting positions as his starting point, John H. Kieschnick expands on some of these shifts:

The appearance of the chair on the domestic scene demanded many changes in the Chinese household. Household objects are intimately

connected. When mats are used as the chief sitting implement, other pieces of furniture must also be low to the ground; conversely, once people began to sit on chairs, other furniture had to rise as well. [...] The size and shape of the tableware changed accordingly. [...] Extant Tang bowls and serving dishes point to the recognition that when dining on a mat, tall, larger eating implements are more convenient. In the Song, when eating utensils were placed up on the table, the spatial relationship between one's body and the food before one changed, and for this reason, smaller, more delicate bowls, plates, and cups soon became the fashion. After the chair came into use, the position of windows, screens, and ceiling heights all underwent dramatic changes, as did clothing, gestures, and how people interacted and perceived each other indoors. Entire industries withered and died with the rise of the chair, while other enterprises rose with it.<sup>32</sup>

One sees here the deep interconnectedness of daily life. With a shift in sitting position comes changes in the scale of furniture construction, the shape of everyday objects, the position of windows, and the height of ceilings, not to mention the clothing, shelter, food, and movements of people. Even the feelings and attitudes of people changed due to imperceptible influences. No wonder so many scholars describe this as a “domestic revolution of magnitude.”<sup>33</sup> Referring to it as a “revolution” draws attention to the start and end points of several hundred years of change and overtrains the comparative lens on some transcendental rupture between and imagined “before” and “after.” In actuality, change is slow and gradual, disordered, multifaceted, and vacillating. As Kieschnick writes, “Tang people sat on the floor.” In other words, it is not as though an epochal trend disappeared overnight; in this case, it retained its traces even after the transitional period. The complexity of transition is apparent in various aspects of social life; shifts in every life, in turn, affect changes in social customs which, ultimately, affect change on a larger institutional scale. Although many scholars have investigated these changes from particular perspectives, the scale of comparisons – either macrocosmic or scattered – is still far too limiting. There remains much work to be done.

What drew the curtain on the “era of floor-sitting” is a deep ideological and conceptual fissure, one capable of instigating social evolution. Zhu Dawei 朱大渭 (1931–2020) writes, “Changes to people’s long-held customs and rituals

32 John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 227–28.

33 This explanation is drawn from French scholar Donald Holzman, cited in *Ibid.*, 228.



are inevitably slow. Over eight-hundred years passed between the Wei dynasty and the Song dynasty.” Prior to the spread of Buddhism to China, “a school of obscure learning (*xuanxue* 玄學) had risen to challenge Confucian teachings” and “arouse a spiritual awakening among the people.”<sup>34</sup> Zhu’s argument here is worth revisiting.

This new development, the rise of *xuanxue*, occurred during the Wei and Jin dynasties. Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897–1986) describes this period as “historically one of great spiritual freedom, openness, and abundance of wisdom; it is an era saturated with passion.” Additionally, it is a period that saw “the breaking down of old Confucian teachings, where freedom of thought and beliefs, artistic creativity and spirit, can flourish.” “Fierce, contradictory, passionate,” he writes, “a period rife with the colorful vicissitudes of life.”<sup>35</sup> Born out of such a period, the intense rebellion of obscure learning against Confucian teachings paved the way for Confucian DNA to evolve by forming the first great fissure from within.

Lu Xun’s 魯迅 (1881–1936) 1927 essay, “Wei Jin fengdu ji wenzhang yu yao ji jiu zhi guanxi” 魏晉風度及文章與藥及酒之關係, is a landmark work of scholarship on anti-Confucian movements during the Wei-Jin period. In it, he reconstructs the psychology of representative anti-Confucianists, Kong Rong 孔融 (153–208), Ji Kang 嵇康 (224–263), and Ruan Ji.

Ji Kang and Ruan Ji are often charged with the crime of destroying Confucianism. From my perspective, however, this assessment is wrong. During the Wei-Jin era [...] *those who appeared to be denigrating Confucianism were actually the ones who most acknowledged it, and believed too faithfully in it.* This is because what most considered upholding Confucianism at the time was, in fact, using it for personal gain. Such conviction is fickle. When Cao Cao 曹操 killed Kong Rong and Sima Yi 司馬懿 killed Ji Kang, it was due to both being unfilial; however, can either Cao Cao or Sima Yi claim to be more filial? They merely borrowed the word to assign blame to those who opposed them. A genuine person can only view such abuse of Confucian teachings as blasphemy, the ultimate injustice, one against which they feel helpless. *This shock causes them to stop preaching Confucianism, to stop believing in it, and to even go against it.* But this is only a

34 Zhu Dawei 朱大渭, “Zhonggu hanren you guizuo dao chuijiao gaozuo” 中古漢人由跪坐到垂腳高坐, in *Zhu Dawei xueshu jingdian wenji* 朱大渭學術經典文集 (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2013), 85.

35 Zong Baihua 宗白華, *Meixue sanbu* 美學散步 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1981), 208–9.

matter of attitude. At heart, they most likely continue to believe in Confucian teachings. They *hold it precious and more steadfastly*, in any case, than the Cao Caos or Sima Yis of the world.<sup>36</sup>

In retrospect, accompanying the steady prominence of traditional Confucian thought throughout the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties was always the rising abuse and misappropriation of its ethics. Although Confucianism enjoyed a period of revitalization during the Han period, by the end of the Eastern Han (25–220), it was once again in a state of crisis. Like a worn, unwieldy machine, this time it had fallen into an irreparable state of disrepair. In the words of Hsiao Kung-chuan 蕭公權 (1897–1981), “The hundred or so years between the Cao-Wei and Eastern Jin dynasties [...] were likewise a period when Confucian teachings were met with counter reactionary resistance.”<sup>37</sup> The research of He Lin 賀麟 (1902–1992) offers some insight into what is meant by “reactionary.” He writes,

As the term implies, it refers to the action that takes the direction of fierce opposition to something. Say, for instance, one was brought up under the strict moral training of extreme traditional Confucianism. Currently, one harbors intense hatred towards Confucianism, towards morality; eventually, one gives free rein to these intense emotions. [...] One’s actions are bound to take an extreme turn in the opposite direction and try to act in violent contradiction to one’s past. This is the kind of reactionary behavior I here refer to as intrinsic or self-effacing.<sup>38</sup>

Wei-Jin obscure learning might be considered a counter reactionary movement against Confucianism. It is precisely because Kong Rong, Ji Kang, and Ruan Ji began as the most devout believers in Confucian teachings that they were pushed towards the polar opposite stance of desiring its destruction. Following on its heels, the spread of Buddhism to China was able to send another shockwave to Confucianism because it aimed at the fissure left by obscure learning. Then, through force and impact, through an intense process of relinquishing

36 Lu Xun 魯迅, “Wei Jin fengdu ji wenzhang yu yao ji jiu zhi guanxi” 魏晉風度及文章與藥及酒之關係, in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 3: 535. Note that Sima Yi in this text should, in fact, be Sima Zhao 司馬昭 (211–265). This is Lu Xun’s error.

37 Hsiao Kung-chuan 蕭公權, *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi* 中國政治思想史 (Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 1982), 402.

38 He Lin 賀麟, “Fandong zhi fenxi” 反動之分析, in *Wenhua yu rensheng* 文化與人生 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2011), 318.

and remaking, that which was surface-level, extraneous, superficial, and rotten was finally abandoned. In place of the void left, a new kind of momentum swept in, breathing new life into an aging body.

Perhaps now we have a clearer picture of how Fan Tai's struggle failed. At a moment when, following on the heels of the anti-Confucian obscure learning movement, Buddhism had amassed about two hundred years of history in China, Fan Tai drew on his position as a great almsgiver and tried using the issue of sitting positions to put pressure on the monks of Qihuan Temple. In his desperation to safeguard traditional Confucian teachings, he focused on the minutiae of ritual, rending his impure motives clear as day. Fan seemed unaware that the cracks in the old Confucian system were long present. Cao Cao and Sima Yi tried lashing out against it with political power, but, across hundreds of years and along multiple axis of social institutions, change quietly happened. Confucian teachings melded first with Daoism, then Buddhism. Foreign stools became a part of daily life in China. Fan may have wanted to hold on to the last vestiges of traditional Confucian teachings, but his most lasting legacy is history's laughing stock.

*Translated by Casey Lee*

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