

# *The Transformations of Interior Furnishings of Urban Houses in Northern China from the TV Series “A Lifelong Journey”*

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**Abstract:** The debut of 2022 CCTV drama “A Lifelong Journey”, has won numerous viewers’ praise and admiration, generating both the ratings and word-of-mouth. The extremely elaborate scenes have attracted the attention of the design, literary and academic circles, and the nostalgic-themed furniture and interior furnishings have become a new trend. This paper takes the scenes of the TV series “A Lifelong Journey” as the research object, explores the changes in the interior furnishings of China's northern houses in different periods, and delves into the development prospects of interior and furniture furnishings, in order to provide reference for practitioners to carry out relevant designs. Research has shown that: The layout of residential buildings in northern China has gone through the transformation in both plane and facade. Formerly, the master bedroom functioned as the core, showing a symmetrical layout on the whole, and the facade decoration was arranged in a scattered pattern. The simple indoor furniture is becoming more diverse in function, with highlighted function of indoor space. The facade decoration is more orderly, and the indoor furniture is characteristic of both being functional and artistic. Moreover, the future trend is that indoor furniture is greener in materials, more personalized in style, and smarter in function.

## **1. Introduction**

In 2022, CCTV opening year drama “A Lifelong Journey” has been a huge hit among many viewers once it premiered, gaining both the ratings and word-of-mouth. The drama is a realistic representation of the ups and downs of 20-strong protagonists of the Zhou’s family and their neighbors in a shantytown, Guangzi district of Jichun City over five decades. The play not only showcases home furnishing art of different characters in different times and styles, a high degree of microcosm of people's lifestyles at that time, but also the evolution of contemporary furniture and interior decoration styles in northern China. An insight into the scene arrangement of this play has certain academic significance for it enables viewers to glimpse the impact of social development on home decoration art, and also a representation of the history of contemporary northern furniture and interior art in China.

In recent years, many scholars in China have conducted more in-depth discussions on the environmental art and scene modeling in both film and television dramas. Zhang Yang <sup>[1]</sup> explored the environmental art in “The Burning Years”, arguing that the "environmental art" of a film or television drama is the specific scenic arrangement of the film's environment, the skeleton structure that supports the entire film or television production. Through studying the influence and promotion of environmental art on the scenes of film and television dramas, Liu Hui <sup>[2]</sup> concluded that the employment of environmental art in the scenes of film and television works could reflect the changes in history. Chen Guojun <sup>[3]</sup> studied the “Wei Zi Fu” scenes and found that the scenery modeling functioned as enhancing the realism of the story, the realism of the characters and the aesthetics of scenes. In their study on the scene layout of “The Story of Yanxi Palace”, Liang Xinmu et al. <sup>[4]</sup> concluded that the furniture in the drama could reflect the reality of the characters' situation and bring people a physical aesthetic experience. Yang Liu <sup>[5]</sup> in a study of the interior furnishings of traditional houses in the north and south suggested that the bedroom in the north functioned as a hall and the layout centered on a kang. Dong Yu et al. <sup>[6]</sup>, based on a study of the soft furnishing design of the Grand Budapest Hotel, found that the soft furnishing design could embody the characteristics of the times and render the environment. Wen Danni et al. <sup>[7]</sup> believed that the environmental art of film and television drama could lead a bandwagon of furniture design and market.

The TV show “A Lifelong Journey” is adapted from Liang Xiaosheng’s award-winning novel of the same name, and co-produced by CCTV, the Publicity Department of the Jiangsu Provincial Committee, the Publicity Department of the Jilin Provincial Committee and many other units. Directed by Li Lu, the show is elaborately set in scene and decorative design. To put it simply, this paper will explore the transformation of interior decoration art of northern residential houses in China in the past 50 years by taking the interior and furniture decoration of the protagonist Zhou Bingkun’s family as the research object in three periods: before the reform and opening up, from the reform and opening up to the turn of the century, and since the new century.

## 2. Before the Reform and Opening up

### 2.1. Interior Layout Features

Before the reform and opening up, confined by the size of the premises, the indoor space was not clearly divided based on function. The kitchen functioned as cooking, feasting, washing, and even meeting guests. In a similar fashion, the bedroom not only had the function of living and resting, but also of receiving visitors, reading and writing, working, feasting and so on. Take the Zhou’s family as an example. Their indoor layout is centered around the master bedroom. The master bedroom, the second bedroom and the kitchen constitute a symmetrical layout of the space as a whole. As shown in Figure 1, the interior layout is featured by simplicity. To meet the resting and sleeping of the family, the master bedroom centered on a heated brick bed called *kang*, surrounded by such pieces of furniture as *kang* tables, chairs, *kang* cabinets and closets.

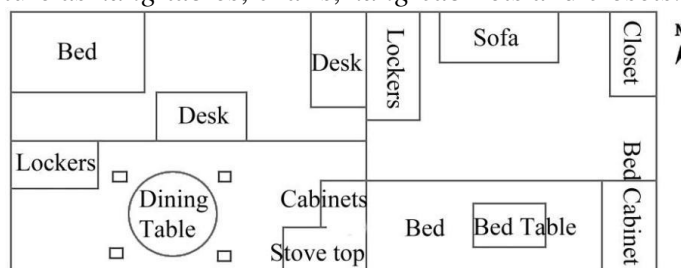


Figure 1: Interior furniture layout of the Zhou’s family before reform and opening up

## 2.2. Interior Facade Layout Features

Take the partial east wall facade of the master bedroom of the Zhou's family in this period for instance. The main body of the wall is whitewashed and decorated with framed photos of the master's family, publicity pictorials, awards and calendar plates, etc. These decorations and hangings are arranged in a partially symmetrical scattered pattern with the leader's portrait as the core, as shown in Figure 2.

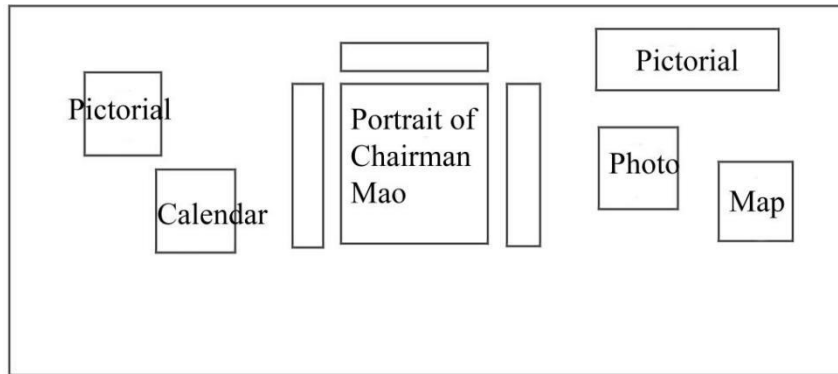


Figure 2: Distribution of the main wall decorations of the Zhou's family before the reform and opening up

## 2.3. Furniture Type and Style

The major sleeping and resting furniture is *kang* (Figure 3a). The piece is located close to the south window of the bedroom, and consists of a stove connected to the kitchen, a *kang* body and a chimney connected to the west wall. On the *kang* is equipped with such practical and decorative pieces as a *kangban*, a *kang* mat and a *kangqin*. The representative supporting furniture includes dining tables, dining stools, office tables and backrest chairs, all of which are made of solid wood.

The typical wooden furniture like the kitchen table as shown in Figure 3b is round in surface with obvious signs of splicing. The legs and feet are of framed structure, and the horizontal and vertical timbers between the legs and feet are connected by right-angle mortise and tenon. The legs and feet are partially decorated with hollow pentagrams. The table is arguably made of elm, evidenced by its surface grain characteristics, the overall structure, and production process. Figure 3c is a closet in the second bedroom. It is in a single door symmetrical structure, the middle of which is embedded in the dressing mirror, and the below inlay decorative paintings. Beneath its drawers are hidden storage compartment called *mencang* in embedded transparent glass. Its feet is decorated metal corner mounts *baojiao*. On the top of the cabinet can be placed leather boxes and other large infrequently used items. The overall piece is sturdy in structure.

During this period until the reform and opening up, the interior and furniture furnishings of China's northern urban dwellings focus on practicality and functionality. They are characterized by basic decorations, simple shapes, and straight lines. It can be seen that these characters of interior furnishings fit well with local economic and social development, forest resource supply, and climatic conditions. The interior decoration highlights the sense of the era and the spirit of the leader, and looks warm and energetic, complementing the scene of the times when the new China was thriving and the whole country was running forward with great enthusiasm.

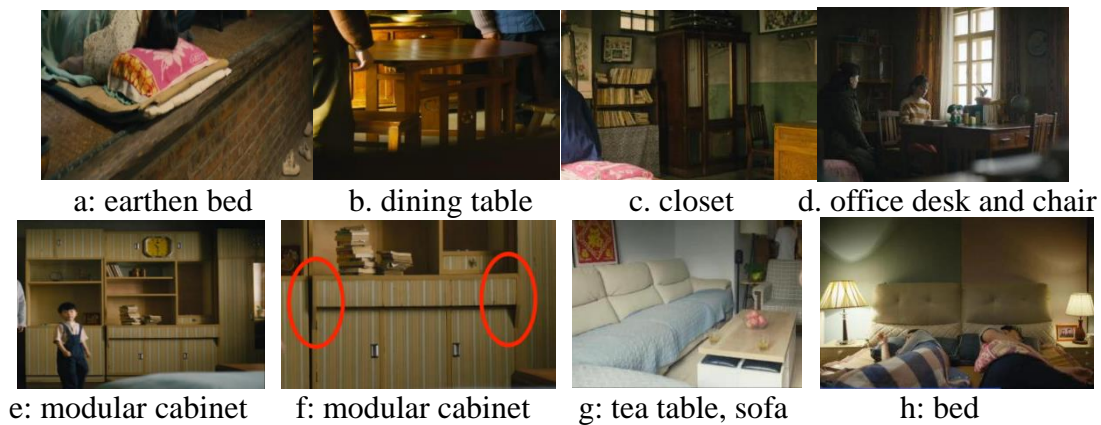


Figure 3: Examples of furniture from different periods in the “A Lifelong Journey”

### 3. After the Reform and Opening up to the Trans-century

#### 3.1. Interior Layout Features

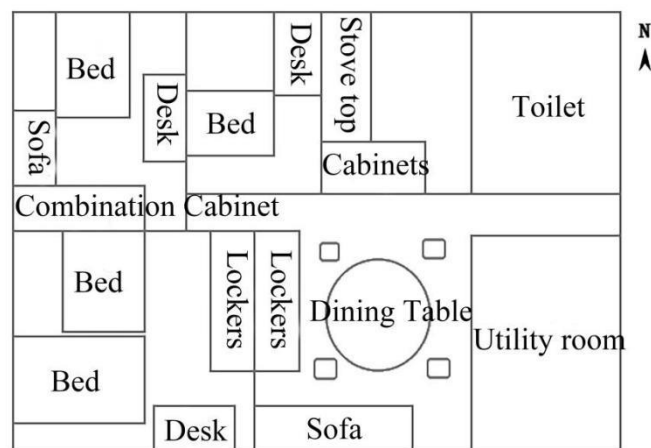


Figure 4: The layout of the interior furniture of the Zhou’s family after the reform and opening up to the cross-century (2000)

As people’s living standard improves under the market economy, the interior space at this time has a clearer functional division. As shown in Figure 4, the contemporary interior layout of the Zhou’s family is well distributed with the living room as the core, and surrounded by the master bedroom, the second bedroom, the children’s bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom and the utility room. The plan layout of furniture is neat and orderly in richer varieties, to satisfy the burgeoning living and functional needs of the main character’s family of seven.

#### 3.2. Interior Facade Layout Features

Take the west wall facade of the bedroom of the Zhou’s family in this period as an example. The main body of the wall is painted white with various decorations. It is decorated by character pictorials, military trumpets, photographs of the master as well as flower and bird brush paintings. Rather than being distributed in a scattered manner, the decorations on the wall are arranged in neater and orderly row, as shown in Figure 5.

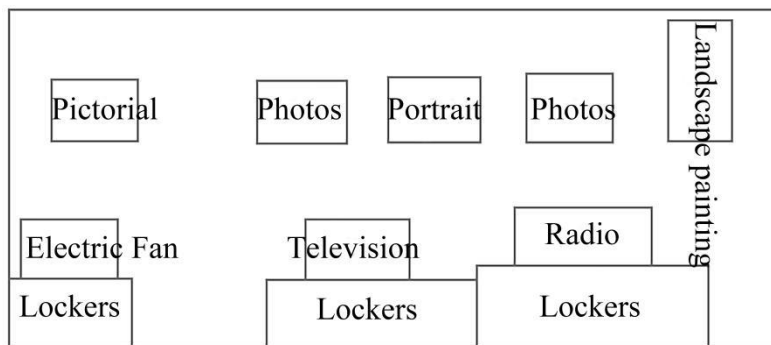


Figure 5: Distribution of wall decorations in the Zhou's family after the reform and opening up to the cross-century (2000)

### 3.3. Furniture Types and Styles

After the reform and opening up, new pieces including artificial board furniture, modular furniture, upholstered furniture emerged quietly<sup>[8]</sup>. With the advancement of the living environment of the Zhou's family, the sleeping furniture was upgraded from an earth bed to a wooden bed. Accordingly the representative supporting furniture of this period includes the dining table, side chairs, desks and sofas.

Typical pieces as shown in Figure 3d include desk and chairs in the guest bedroom. They are made of solid wood as the main frame. Desks function as leaning and storing with drawers and cabinets. Chairs match desk in size and is decorative with vertical rods and curved top rails. Figure 3e, and 3f combined cabinets are the most representative of the new furniture of this period. They are framed by solid wood, and decorated by panels and doors. The lower part has drawers and cabinets. The middle is an open space for storing and showcasing commonly used items, while the upper shelf compartment serves as storing seldom used items. The whole piece is mainly in straight lines, and the two ends of the cabinet create the effect of flanking outward, with distinctive Czech furniture style features<sup>[9]</sup>. The doors of the furniture cabinets use silver metal handrails with embedded aluminum alloy, which contrasts with the overall warm color of the furniture and provides an embellishing effect.

Since the reform and opening up, with the continuous improvement of the living standards of urban residents in the northeast, more diversified interior furnishings are available to match growing needs of people's lives at the time. They boast both functionality and art. In function, new materials like decorative plywood, fabric, and metals are adopted. In art, such techniques as carving, inlay, curved and straight square combination are applied. Even various types of brushwork, quartz clocks and other soft furnishings are employed, so that home furnishings at this period appear both warm and elegant.

## 4. Since the New Century

### 4.1. Interior Layout Features

Since the new century, along with China's entry into the WTO, China's furniture manufacturing industry has developed significantly. Meanwhile, the interior decoration of Chinese families nationwide has also undergone a transformation<sup>[10]</sup>. In this period, the Zhou family room space is more reasonable in layout and more diverse on functional partition. Bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom are all available. Take the Zhou's family as for instance. The indoor layout was formed with the living room as the center. The master bedroom and the second bedroom were

symmetrical from north to south with enhanced openness and mobility. As shown in Figure 6, the furniture plan layout highlights the combination of functionality and artistry, focusing on the functional matching between furniture. The whole interior plan layout is compact and reasonable, with the matching of bed and closet, of cabinet and sink, and of sofa and TV cabinet.

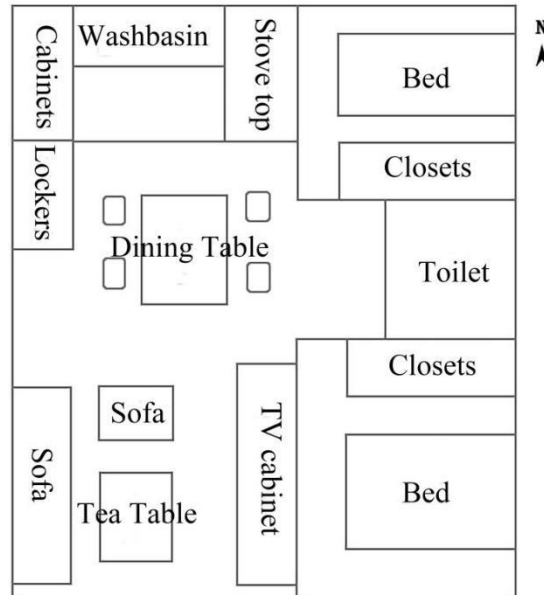


Figure 6: Layout of furniture furnishings in the Zhou family's interior since the new century (after 2000)

#### 4.2. Interior Facade Layout Features

Take the Zhou family's living room facade in this period as an example. Landscape paintings, old photos and TV sets are hung on the wall in a minimalist style. Being three-dimensional of the facade is enhanced by floor-to-ceiling curtains, various lamps, ceiling, cross-stitching and green plants. A case in point is the east wall of the living room. The decorations form a curved arrangement with the TV set as the center, as shown in Figure 7.

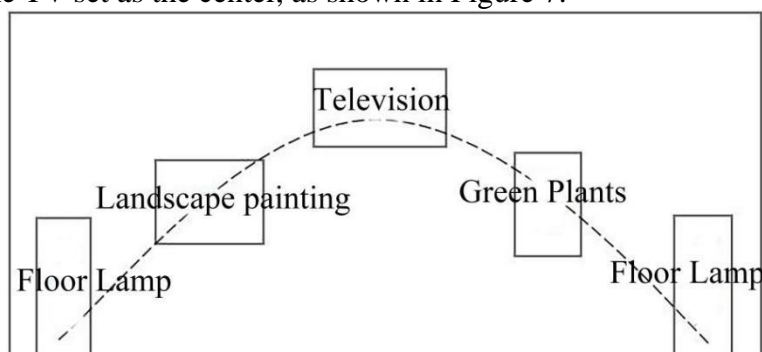


Figure 7: Distribution of wall decorations in the Zhou's family since the new century (after 2000)

#### 4.3. Furniture Type and Style

After 2000, China's furniture industry burgeoned; furniture products with new materials and technologies have found their way into the northern city homes. Here such new materials as solid wood, metal, artificial board, plastic, ceramics, and leather are widely used and furniture is in a simpler style.



In the living room, typical pieces include a tea table and sofa as shown in Figure 3g. The surface of the tea table is made of imitation marble. Under the surface are board drawer cabinets. The whole table is in simple lines and full of modern design. Framed by artificial boards, the sofa is stuffed with sponge and wrapped by leather. The whole piece appears elegant in an L-shaped structure. Figure 3h is a master bedroom bed. The bed matches sofa in style. Leather-covered upholstery material is soft as the bed screen and thus easy to lean on. A summer sleeping mat is added on the bed which is flanked by panel nightstands.

Since the beginning of the new century, most of the northern city residents, represented by the Zhou family, have moved into apartment-style “flats”. Their living conditions have been bettered and the functional partitioning of the interior has become more obvious. Some interior decorations and furniture are in a distinctly American or European minimalist style. Greenery has also entered the rooms, adding to their vitality. Pieces of furniture are more diverse in types and richer in the choices of materials, meeting people’s material needs as well as functional needs, while improving the quality of workmanship and reflecting the beauty of craftsmanship.

## 5. Conclusion and Prospects

Table 1: Changes in interior furnishings of northern urban dwellings

	Space Layout	Furniture plane layout	Accessory facade layout	Category	Furniture types and styles		
					Structure	Materials	Styling
Before the reform and opening up (1980)	Functional	Compact type	Scattered	beds, writing desks, round tables, side chairs, sofa, closet	masonry, brame structure, brick and earth combination, mortise and tenon combination	brick, earth, solid wood plywood, solid wood sawn timber, solid wood squared timber, spring, leather solid wood plywood,	stable and sturdy, heavy, simple, and mainly straight lines
After the reform and opening up to the trans-century (1980-2000)	Comfortable	Continuous	Lineage	beds, side chairs, desks, sofas, and combined cabinet	frame structure, plate structure, mortise and tenon combination, hardware combination	cotton, silk, flannel, sponge, veneer plywood, aluminum alloy solid wood plywood, sponge, and	European neo-classical style, straight line combined with curves
Since the new century (after 2000)	Intensive	Loose style	Curved	beds, side chairs, dining table, sofa, tea table, entrance cabinet	Frame structure, Plate structure, Hardware combination, Glue bonding	leather, veneer plywood, finished particle board, aluminum alloy	American rustic, European simplicity, curve-based

Before 1980s, the plane layout of the residential houses in northern China took the master

bedroom as the core. The space composed of the master bedroom, the secondary bedroom and the kitchen presented a symmetrical layout on the whole, and the facade presented a partial symmetrical scattered arrangement. The interior furniture was decorated simply, the shape was simple, and the lines were straight and hard, to satisfy the usage of people. From 1980 to 2000, the functional division of indoor space became more and more obvious, the plane layout became more orderly, and the types became more diverse. The decorations on the wall were no longer distributed in the form of being scattered and irregular, rather they were arranged in a more orderly row, and the indoor furnishings matched the more diversified life needs of people at that time. After 2000s, the interior layout formed the living room as the center. The master bedroom and the second bedroom are symmetrical north and south, and the openness and fluidity are significantly enhanced. Some of the interior decorations and furniture manifest a distinctly rustic American and European style of simplicity, and green plants began to enter and thus enliven the interior. The variety of furniture is more diversified, the selection of materials is richer, and the quality of work is perfected, which reflect the characteristics of the beauty of the craft. The results of the study are presented in Table 1.

#### (1) Eco-friendly materials

With the further advancement of people's living standards and the enhancement of the concept of life and health, diversified natural and green materials will be widely applied in the future interior design. Recycling and reuse of used furniture also meet the current "carbon peaking and carbon neutrality" targets. Major contributors to these targets lies in the application of such technologies as pressure density enhancement of small diameter wood, fast-growing wood, branch wood technology, bamboo instead of wood technology, various types of bamboo-based and wood-based lightweight and high-strength home with functional artificial board development technology, and non-toxic green adhesive development technology, etc.

#### (2) Personalized style

With the further enhancement of national cultural confidence, furnishing styles with local spirit and national and regional characteristics will gain in popularity. Especially as China's both national power and international influence have enhanced, design styles with Chinese characteristics will become the new trend, pioneering in global furniture and interior design. In addition, customized home design to meet different preferences and needs of different people will also become a channel for them to highlight their individuality and values.

#### (3) Convenient and smart functions

Along with the advent of information technology and intelligent era, a growing body of people prefer comfortable and convenient "lazy" life mode to free up more time to adapt the fast-paced work and life. Against the context, digital furniture with such smart functions as reminders has sprung up. Especially in the "meta-universe" era, furniture furnishings will also achieve virtual reality and interoperability, allowing more people to sense, feel and touch the previously inaccessible living environment, and thus to achieve a high-degree integration of being practical, aesthetic and experiential.

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