

Analysis on the Historical Development, Characteristics and Placement of Ming Furniture

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Abstract: Furniture from the Ming dynasty is renowned for its distinct beauty and simplicity and is a priceless piece of Chinese history and culture. Additionally, the social and economic climate of the Ming Dynasty had a significant impact on the growth and prosperity of Ming furniture. The placement of furniture during the Ming Dynasty, however, not only emphasized the harmony of functionality and aesthetics but also expressed the thoughts and preferences of the Ming literati of the period. To highlight the distinctiveness of traditional Chinese furniture, this essay will first discuss the historical context of the development of furniture during the Ming Dynasty, then will particularly introduce a type of Ming furniture—Huanghuali furniture. The study will then analyze the simplicity, functionality, and indoor arrangement of Ming furniture to create a thorough introduction to Ming furniture and Chinese culture to let people better comprehend it.

Keywords: Ming furniture, historical context, simplicity, placement

1. Introduction

The artistic value of furniture from the Ming dynasty was found in recent decades. In contrast to most other crafts, it appears to be extremely organic and rather simple from the outside, but it requires a very exquisite craftsmanship from inside. The mortise and the tenon structure of the joints can be seen as other industrial skills. In the process of manufacture, no nails are connected to each other. Instead, all joints are connected with the perfectly matched shapes of the projections and recesses. Without nails and glue, the joints made in the mortise and tenon structure are very strong.

The artistic style pays great attention on details, which can be summarized as “minimalist.” The latter reflects how the wealth was perceived by the Ming literati, most of whom came from literati families who had accumulated wealth over several generations due to China's political stability and the economic prosperity of the Ming Dynasty. Wealth was no longer enough for them to manifest their status, but through daily upbringing and good taste in art can they become true aristocrats. Moreover, the arrangement of the furniture in a space is another important aspect that contributed to the unique simplicity and tranquility of Ming furniture [1]. More importantly, this exquisite furniture not only provided daily functional use, but also expressed the life orientation of Ming literati and nobilities-- Outwardly simple and bland, the inner thoughts are rich and complex. They have the qualities of introverted and seemingly uncontested. In other words, Ming-style furniture has both straightforward and useful functionality as well as a distinct aesthetic and a deep philosophical

meaning. However, due to its simplicity, Ming furniture is often inappreciative to many people for its lack of decoration. Therefore, it is essential to hold exhibitions displaying Ming furniture in order to showcase its beauty. These exhibitions have three main goals: first, to present the aesthetic tastes of the Ming literati in their everyday selection of ware, creation, and furnishings; second, to help people learn more about Ming furniture while establishing connections to and comparisons with Western furniture; third, to breathe new life into contemporary furniture design and space design, create a Zen and art book space, and improve the aesthetics in people's lives.

This paper will first introduce the historical background of the Ming furniture's evolution on a global and national scale, including a specific type of furniture material Huanghuali, then go into depth about its simplicity and arrangement, before examining the distinctions between conventional Chinese Ming-style furniture and western furniture.

2. Background

From the perspective of the world, China is regarded as a mysterious nation. China has been added to the enigmatic palette since Marco Polo's adventures have sparked Westerners' imagination and speculative thoughts about the old "East" [2]. The world has always been in awe of Chinese-influenced works of art in bronze, lacquer, porcelain, silk, and other materials. Thus, from the 17th and 18th centuries, missionaries have brought back to the West in vast amounts porcelain, silk, and other works of art, but furniture, the closest work of art to people's daily lives, has been neglected. Chinese Ming furniture with Chinese aesthetic interest didn't formally enter the global scene until 1944, when German scholar Gustav Ecke wrote the book *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and had it published in Europe [3]. Since that time, prominent institutions, collectors, explorers, and traders have begun to export traditional Chinese furniture, particularly Ming furniture, around the world. Ming furniture, which reflects the aesthetic sensibility and spiritual traits of Chinese culture, started to be displayed in museums around the world during the same period. As a result, this furniture became a valuable part of the world's cultural heritage [4]. Overall, throughout the past century, people have started to pay more and more attention to furniture, and Ming furniture has emerged as a major subcategory of Chinese art that collectors and connoisseurs are very interested in.

The Ming Dynasty's economic growth and cultural success were the key factors contributing to the growth and prosperity of furniture at that time. From the Hongwu to Xuande eras to the Jiajing years, Ming furniture first appeared. Rapid socioeconomic development caused a surge in handicrafts, and the production of Ming furniture peaked, reaching its highest level of scale and skill. Thus, the development of the economy was a key factor that thrived Ming furniture. Early Ming Dynasty rulers improved official rule, lowered taxes, and promoted social production, which sped up economic growth. Midway through the Ming Dynasty, trade was booming, and handicrafts were growing quickly. In particular, numerous palaces, gardens, and residential structures were constructed, which substantially aided the creation of Ming-style furniture. After Zheng He's journey to the West, trade between China and Southeast Asian nations increased, and a lot of high-quality wood entered China. China's ties with Southeast Asian nations were also enhanced. The Ming government lifted the sea ban during the Longqing era, allowing for private overseas trade and the importation of high-quality hardwoods from Southeast Asia. These hardwoods served as the raw materials for the manufacture of Ming furniture, greatly advancing the industry's technological development [2].

Additionally, Ming culture had a significant impact on the design philosophy of Ming furniture. Wang Shouren's "mind science," which emphasizes that there is nothing outside the mind, to the conscience, the oneness of knowledge and practice and that people should focus on the inner world, is ideologically the best example of Ming philosophy. The authority culture and the burgeoning citizen culture co-developed and prospered in this great clash of civilizations, and the artistic forms correspondingly expanded in variety. From the solitude of the house and the woods, people free the

chains of life and seek spiritual beauty. Given this context, Ming furniture has developed and grown in sophistication, becoming a vital component of the national cultural legacy of China [5].

3. Ming Furniture—Huanghuali

Huanghuali furniture is the most noted and valuable Ming furniture. The “golden age” of Ming furniture was from the end of the 16th century to the end of the 18th century. The word “Ming furniture” was regarded as a guarantee of quality and rareness [12]. Huanghuali furniture has always held a special place in history. However, with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Ming furniture became a valueless daily necessity. Even in the 1980s with the reform and opening of China, the economic recovery, and the introduction of Western culture, the people sought after Western aluminum combination furniture and sold the old Ming furniture at cheap prices.

In 1989, Wang Shi Xiang then named his second landmark book, “Chinese Furniture Appreciation: The Early Ming and Qing Dynasties” to “Chinese Furniture Appreciation” [6]. The value of Huanghuali furniture was discovered. First, it is a relatively scarce material. Huanghuali wood grows extremely slowly to the extent that more than a hundred years can only grow to the thick of a bowl. Therefore, the tree must grow thousands of years to come to the age. Huanghuali wood grows in the south of China on a small island - Hainan Island. The hardwood, bright color, pleasant aroma, and clear texture makes it the world's most precious wood material. Second, in the case of inconvenient transportation at that time, it was very luxurious to transport to the north of China. Third, the usage rate of Huanghuali furniture is very low. Due to the curved design, the craftsman had to use a whole piece of wood to meet the curve of the style. However, the choice of materials was extremely strict and advanced, and the workmanship requirements were comparatively extremely high. It was necessary to have skilled craftsmen to complete the perfect production. Therefore, the first vision of the furniture is very simple and unobtrusive. However, the internal structure and production process are extremely complex, and the wood and production costs are very high, which made the Huanghuali furniture extremely valuable. This also shows the understated luxury sought by scholars and nobles during the Ming Dynasty.

4. Simplicity (Structure & Design)

Ming furniture is renowned for its unique design concept, superb structural construction, and elegant aesthetic sensitivity. Concise and beautiful design exhibits a high degree of artistic aesthetics, earning it a position in the history of global furniture design and influencing how furniture is made around the world. Future generations will refer to the furniture from the Ming Dynasty as “Ming style” because of its reputation for simplicity. Even the straightforward Ming design contained ornamentation. The application of modest decoration on Ming furniture in key areas is also typical. Additionally, the intimate coupling of decoration and structure that characterizes Ming Dynasty furniture is what makes it special.

In addition, the strict proportional relationship is the basis of Ming furniture modeling. In addition to the elegance of the lines and the perfection of reasonable proportions, the mortise and tenon construction of the joints is a characteristic of the minimalist aesthetic. While effortlessly simple in appearance, the interiors of the joints are complicated by solidly matched projections and fluted shapes. Traditional Chinese Huanghuali furniture (Figure 1&2) has survived for centuries with its innovative design using neither nails nor glue. It formed as its unique style. This is another characteristic of Ming Dynasty furniture.



Figure 1: Huanghuali Square Table [original].

Ming-style furniture has broad and narrow senses. In the broad sense, Ming-style furniture has no requirements on the material, style, or even time of making furniture. As long as it has the structure of furniture, it can be considered Ming furniture. In a narrow sense, Ming-style furniture refers to furniture that is relatively small in scope, and has a specific reference point; that is, furniture of fine materials and well-made from the Ming Dynasty (1368-14AD) to the early Qing Dynasty (14-1911AD) [6].

The Ming culture had an impact on Ming furniture's simplicity. The Confucian and Taoist philosophies have dominated and shaped people's perspectives since antiquity. After the middle and late Ming dynasties, it seemed that the three schools of thought were complementing one another. Taoism promoted "simplicity" and the natural world. Confucianism placed a strong emphasis on "ritual" and promoted the idea that art should be "beautiful and joyful." Buddhism concentrates on the fusion of nature and the mind and holds that beauty is contextual. Because the Ming literati were active in the design process, Ming furniture bears a distinctly cultural signature [7].



Figure 2: Huanghuali Corners-leg table [12].

Ming furniture has a simple but distinctive design. The scholars and nobles in the middle of the Ming Dynasty were particularly concerned with the quality of their spiritual lives and had a unique aesthetic focus. The simplicity of the rate of escape reached the highest level of artistic aesthetics, and they were directly involved in the design and production of furniture. They incorporated the humanistic class' aesthetic awareness of literary and artistic ideas, as well as nature, into the creation of furniture, which was simple and elegant, smooth, ethereal, full, and gorgeous [8]. Moreover, waist and non-waist are the two main types of constructions seen in Ming furniture. The primary form is the frame-based overall structure. The non-waist furniture is shaped simply, while the waist furniture is thick but attractive. These two constructions are both functionally useful and have a very stable, square shape. The construction of the distinctive aesthetic and style of Ming furniture may be attributed to the use of high-quality materials, particularly lines, which perfectly capture the dignified

and noble art style [5]. The following two pictures show two Ming-style chairs, both of which embody the perfect unity of form and function of Ming furniture.



Figure 3: Shows Huanghuali yoke-back armchair on the left, Huanghuali round-back armchair on the right [original].

5. Placement

Beyond the furniture's inherent beauty, Ming furniture is made to stand out and be stunning by its thoughtful arrangement in a space. Despite their disparate economic circumstances, the ancient Chinese literati placed a high value on the study environment, paying particular attention to the opulent surroundings to create a rich studying ambiance [8]. With the growth of society and the economy, particularly in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, the social class started to take shape, with the literati emerging as the dominant group. This literati group promoted taste and refinement in art as well as in the design of study furnishings. They gave particular attention to the study of a beautiful layout. According to "Superfluous Things", a book that completely records the lifestyle of study rooms in the late Ming Dynasty, "Couch has a change, apparatus has a style, location has been established, exquisite and handy makes the value, and it is natural and ingenious." [9]. The placement typically has standards and requirements that are established by literati. "The study room should be clear and quiet, not too open. 'Clear' and 'pure' can be chill and relaxing, wide open will hurt the eyes. Four walls outside the window, Plants are growing on the walls; Build one or two orchids, around the masonry planted with grass to make all over, lush green. Next to the wash pool, there is a basin pool, near the window, storing gold carp five or seven heads, to see the sky alive." [8]. This quotation was written by an anonymous Ming literatus. In his notebook, he sketched the arrangement of the furniture in his home, and similar arrangements may be seen in some well-known works of art from the era. A typical Ming Dynasty furniture layout style work is Chou Ying (Ming) "(Facsimile)—Song Dynasty Painting and Drawing" (Figure 3). Despite being a reproduction of a Song Dynasty picture, the artwork demonstrates that the Ming Dynasty served as an inspiration for the Song Dynasty's furniture arrangement (Figure 4&5).



Figure 4: (Facsimile)—Song Dynasty Painting and Drawing [8].



Figure 5: Ming style room placement [original].

6. Influence of Ming Furniture to Western Furniture

Firstly, there are stylistic differences between Ming and Western furniture, which are evident in how they use ornamentation, carvings, colors, and curves. With Italian, French, and Spanish style furniture serving as its primary representatives, European style furniture is a significant component of European classical style decoration. Focus on the delicate hand-cut carving, the outline and turning portion of the symmetrical and rhythmic curves or curved surfaces, adorned with gilded bronze ornaments, basic structure, smooth lines, and vibrant colors [7]. It gives people a sense of luxury, elegance, and solemnity [10]. In contrast, Ming-style furniture is quite plain and straightforward. However, the simplicity and concision of Ming furniture differ from what is now known as the minimalist style, yet it clearly reflects Chinese aesthetic and production standards. Ming furniture is not ornament-free; instead, it strives for a cohesive, all-encompassing look by using sparing embellishment. Ming furniture's design and purpose effectively capture the aesthetics and culture of the traditional Chinese people.

Furthermore, the geographical setting and cultural landscape of the nations where they are located are strongly tied to the variances in furniture styles between the two locations. As mentioned above, the socioeconomic setting and traditional culture of the Ming dynasty had a significant impact on the simple design of Ming-style furniture. In comparison, Western furniture design emphasizes utility above form, uses natural materials to create pieces that are connected to nature, emphasizes the human touch in fusing man and nature, and serves as a paradigm for fusing contemporary and tradition. More specifically, the Nordic nations were affected by the global design movement in the early 20th century, which paved the way for modern design research. In contrast to other nations, Scandinavian design upholds its own traditions and maintains a humanistic, organic, and straightforward aesthetic. The foundation of the significant position of Nordic furniture design is largely due to three things. They consist of highly skilled local designers, artisans with a wealth of design expertise, producers of finished goods for sale, and the use of the three-design manufacturing technique. Therefore, Scandinavian furniture is made to blend workmanship, traditional designs, and regional materials while maintaining local flavor and a degree of material flexibility, enabling mechanical mass production without sacrificing the human touch of craftsmanship. The Scandinavian area has developed its own design aesthetic while also being impacted by the global design movement [11].

Furthermore, the style of Ming furniture also influenced the production of Western furniture.



Figure 6: A Huanghuali Scroll Table and the front view of the corner of it [12].

Scroll tables have always been one of the most popular forms of Chinese furniture in the western market. “The design that has become ‘timeless’ with its simple and basic lines has been accepted and utilized by modern furniture manufacturers around the world.” (Figure 6) [12]. Today, in many Western homes, hotels and offices, the design and style of scroll tables are appeared in public and private places.

7. Conclusion

The Ming style furniture's beauty is infused with Chinese national cultural consciousness and aesthetic soul, and it is replete with aesthetic traits. The expression of The Times and the crystallization of societal knowledge are the Ming furniture culture. Ming furniture has been inherited and improved by successive generations of craftsmen after a century of ups and downs. It is known as the "artistic pearl of the Oriental world" due to its distinctive aesthetic qualities [5]. The Ming Dynasty's peculiarities and aesthetic connotations, as well as its rich linguistic connotations, have had a significant impact on the modern era. The Ming furniture serves as the backdrop and narrative for the Chinese people, whose culture is intricately entwined with the aesthetic sensibility and taste of the Ming Dynasty. Therefore, through an exhibition of Ming furniture, People can better comprehend traditional Chinese furniture and the underlying spirit of Chinese traditional culture by learning the historical background, design features, and layout structure of Ming-style furniture.

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