

From the Perspectives of Scholars and Artisans: A Study on the Forms and Aesthetics of Ming-style Furniture

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Abstract: Ming-style furniture, to some extent, remains an artistic concept, representing the highest achievement in the history of Chinese furniture development and standing as a unique existence in the global furniture system. There is no clear scope or definition for the concept of Ming-style furniture. In a broad sense, Ming-style furniture encompasses any piece that exhibits the style of Ming dynasty furniture, regardless of whether the material is expensive or inexpensive, the craftsmanship is simple or intricate, or even if it is a modern innovative creation. In a narrow sense, Ming-style furniture refers to furniture produced from the Jiaping period of the Ming dynasty to the Yongzheng period of the Qing dynasty. This period is regarded as the golden era of traditional furniture in terms of both quantity and quality. This article limits the scope of research on Ming-style furniture to the narrow definition and explores its forms and designs from a materialist historical perspective and the viewpoint of its creators.

Keywords: Ming-style Furniture; Literati; Artisan; Modeling.

1. Background of the Formation of Ming-style Furniture

1.1. Formation of Crafting Communities: The Imperial Examination and Artisanship Registration System

Ming dynasty furniture was primarily produced through the collaborative efforts of scholars and gentry alongside folk artisans. With the economic development and social disorder during the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, political restrictions on individuals shifted from being strict to becoming more relaxed. It was under this context that artisans were granted creative freedom. These two previously isolated social groups began to interact and integrate. After the mid-Ming period, intensified competition in the imperial examination system, the prevalence of corruption, and the rapid development of urban handicraft economies led many scholars to abandon the imperial examination as their sole life pursuit. They became merchants, authored books, sought solace in nature, or indulged in entertainment and pleasures. This created various scholarly inclinations, which were expressed through furniture as a medium, reflecting their unique aesthetic tastes [5]. The strict household registration system for artisans during the early Ming dynasty placed their production entirely under court control, severely dampening their motivation. In the 21st year of the Chenghua reign, the court implemented a policy of substituting labor service with silver, greatly liberating artisans' personal freedom and boosting their productivity. Their focus shifted from serving the court to catering to the public. This significantly advanced the marketization of the furniture industry and fostered the rise of artisans' self-awareness, transitioning their roles toward that of designers. In summary, the relaxed political climate of the mid-to-late Ming dynasty was a necessary condition for the formation of Ming-style furniture.

1.2. The Internal Drivers of Furniture Demand: Market Needs and Commodity Consumption

The ancient furniture market in China began to take shape as early as the Song and Yuan dynasties. However, due to the limitations of social and economic productivity at the time, it was not until the mid-to-late Ming dynasty that furniture truly became a popular trend in society. In the early Ming period, after prolonged wars had caused a significant population decline and widespread devastation, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang of the Hongwu reign adopted the longstanding policy of "emphasizing agriculture and suppressing commerce" to promote economic recovery. Simultaneously, to prevent coastal invasions by Japanese pirates and curb private trade along the coast, the government implemented a maritime prohibition strategy. By the mid-Ming period, social stability had been restored, the population had grown significantly, and trade flourished across the country. The establishment of the silver standard, replacing the earlier copper standard, greatly stimulated market circulation. Unlike the furniture of the Song and Yuan periods, which catered primarily to the refined tastes of the elite, furniture consumption in the mid-to-late Ming dynasty expanded to encompass all social classes. Particularly in prosperous regions such as Jiangnan, where the commodity economy thrived and wealthy merchants were numerous, a booming furniture market emerged. For instance, the Ming scholar Li Rihua recorded in his diary their involvement in furniture purchases: "Carried two marble screens, two folding chairs with marble inlays, all said to be made by the Anhua brothers" [1]. The merchant class, with their substantial economic power and high demand for furniture, played a pivotal role in fostering a large-scale furniture consumption market.

2. The Scholars' Demands on the Forms and Aesthetics of Ming-style Furniture

By the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, the cultural atmosphere of society underwent a significant liberation, breaking free

from the stagnation and rigidity imposed by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism since the Song dynasty. This period marked a rebirth on the ideological level. Traditional notions, such as "conveying moral principles through literature" and "studying as a path to officialdom," gradually disintegrated. Scholars became independent from the concept of the gentry class, forming a new group that emphasized individuality and natural human desires. The overall social ethos shifted from simplicity and frugality to refinement and luxury, exhibiting certain modern characteristics. In the late Ming period, society embraced a highly open and liberal mindset, characterized by a culture of extravagance and self-expression. Furniture became a tangible embodiment of this societal trend. Scholars used furniture of various forms to display their distinctive aesthetic preferences. They were not only the intellectual contributors to the design and production of furniture but also the primary forces driving its dissemination and development [2]. The aesthetic preferences of Ming dynasty scholars had an indelible impact on the forms and styles of Ming-style furniture.

2.1. The Aesthetic Philosophy of "Harmony Between Heaven and Humans" and "No Objects Beyond the Mind"

During this period, scholar-officials were profoundly influenced by Yangming's philosophy of the mind. In terms of furniture aesthetics, they moved away from pursuing sensory pleasures and instead focused on inner emotions and self-expression. Influenced by Yangming's idea that "no objects exist outside the mind, and no principles exist outside the mind," they emphasized the importance of the true self and sought inner peace and tranquility in furniture design. A notable example is the Ming Dynasty Zitan Cane-Seated Low-Back Armchair housed in the Palace Museum (Figure 1). Its design and craftsmanship reflect simplicity and naturalness, with an understated and elegant appearance devoid of excessive ornamentation, embodying the pursuit of inner authenticity and a spiritual realm that transcends material representation. The minimalist design directs the user's attention to the chair's pure lines and texture, fostering a sense of inner calm and serenity. The chair's flowing and natural lines, such as the subtly curved armrests, provide a visual sense of tranquility and harmony, while its simple backrest and leg structures exhibit purity and simplicity, aligning with Yangming's aesthetic ideal of discarding distractions and returning to the true self. Crafted from Zitan wood, the chair highlights the natural grain, texture, and luster of the material, demonstrating respect for nature and the inherent state of things. This reflects the principle of "the mind is reason itself," embodying a harmony with nature and a respect for natural authenticity. By touching the wood's grain and feeling its texture, users connect with nature and are reminded of their inner longing for authenticity and truth. The natural patterns of the wood symbolize the purity of the human heart, embodying a pursuit of genuine emotion and a connection with the natural world, rather than an indulgence in artificially ornate decorations. Yangming's philosophy encouraged individuality and the liberation of self-expression, resulting in the diversity of Ming-style furniture aesthetics. The incorporation of a cane-woven seat exemplifies a departure from traditional, singular aesthetic norms, reflecting a boldness to embrace one's true aesthetic inclinations and pursue furniture styles that resonate with the inner self.



2.2. The Harmony is Cherished Above All, and Moderation is Esteemed



Confucianism, as the orthodox ideology of feudal culture initiated by Confucius, centers on the concept of the "Doctrine of the Mean." This principle advocates for impartiality, avoiding extremes, and seeking the appropriate balance between the two poles of any matter [4]. The aesthetic philosophy of Ming-style furniture design reflects this influence. In terms of furniture forms, the principle of symmetrical layout is followed, emphasizing a solemn sense of order. Traditional furniture predominantly features straight lines, presenting a square and balanced appearance. A typical example of such balanced and symmetrical design is the Ming Dynasty Huanghuali Four-Post Official's Hat Armchair housed in the Shanghai Museum (Figure 2). The chair adopts a centrally symmetrical design, with all components—including the top rail, backrest, armrests, seat, and apron—aligned along a central axis. This arrangement provides a sense of visual balance and structural stability. The overall form conveys a sense of dignity, grandeur, and stability. This rigorous, symmetrical, and orderly structure aligns with the "beauty of harmony," which seeks balance and coherence, embodying the Confucian ideal of moderation. The top rail and armrest extensions feature naturally flowing curves, gracefully bent to an appropriate degree, while the seat is enclosed by four horizontal lines. The legs are vertical, creating a smooth transition from horizontal to vertical elements. The perfect combination of straight and curved lines gives the chair a design that is both robust and elegant, blending the uprightness of straight lines with the gracefulness of curves. This reflects the Confucian aesthetic of balance and gentleness, avoiding extremes of rigidity or softness, and achieving a sense of moderation and harmony.

2.3. The Aesthetic Pursuit of Refinement and Natural Subtlety



Figure 3. Zitan Wood Table Screen with Inlaid Design of Lions at Play

The idiom "Wenzhi Binbin" originates from The Analects of Confucius, Yong Ye: "When substance surpasses refinement, one becomes uncivilized; when refinement surpasses substance, one becomes superficial. Only when refinement and substance are harmoniously balanced can one become a gentleman." This emphasizes the integration of external behaviors and inner qualities, advocating a state of internal and external harmony. Applied to Ming-style furniture, "substance" refers to the functionality and essence of the object, while "refinement" refers to its external decoration. Ming-style furniture often features a simple and unadorned appearance with practical designs but pays close attention to the details of its craftsmanship. This highlights the complementary relationship between substance and refinement, leading to the unity of functionality and aesthetics. (Figure 3), a Zitan wood table screen with inlaid designs of lions at play, exemplifies this principle. The Zitan wood used for the screen's frame reflects the "substance" aspect. Its robust texture provides a solid structural foundation, ensuring the screen's durability and resistance to wear over time, showcasing the essential characteristics of Zitan as a premium material. The screen also serves a practical purpose as a spatial divider, delineating areas within a room and obstructing the line of sight, thereby fulfilling its functional "substance." The intricate inlay craftsmanship, known as Babuqian (hundred-treasure inlay), represents the "refinement" aspect, displayed prominently in the core of the screen. This technique utilizes various precious materials, such as mother-of-pearl, lapis lazuli, and coconut shell, to create exquisite patterns that preserve the natural beauty of

the materials themselves. The unadorned sturdiness of the Zitan wood provides a stable platform for the dazzling inlays, while the ornate decorations elevate the screen's cultural value and artistic appeal, creating a harmonious balance between substance and refinement. The motifs on the screen, such as plum blossoms or the "foreigners playing with lions" scene, are not presented explicitly but conveyed through symbolic techniques. Plum blossoms symbolize resilience and purity, while the lion motif may imply cultural inclusivity or blessings of prosperity and joy. These meanings are not immediately obvious and require the viewer to interpret them through an understanding of cultural traditions and personal reflection. This subtle expression of meaning resembles the metaphors in Chinese poetry, which convey deeper implications through symbolism and suggestion rather than direct statements. It effectively conveys the beauty of subtlety, reflecting the implicit and introspective nature of Eastern aesthetics.

3. The Theoretical Innovations and Institutional Norms of the Craftsman Community in Ming-style Furniture

3.1. The Theoretical and Technical Innovations of Ming Dynasty Craftsmen

The remarkable achievements of Ming-style furniture are not only the result of the exquisite craftsmanship of Ming artisans but also stem from their profound innovations in design concepts and techniques. Unlike earlier craftsmen, those in the later Ming Dynasty gradually shed their roles as mere laborers and began to take on the identity of independent creators and designers. This period witnessed unprecedented technological and theoretical innovations within the craftsman community, which propelled the development of traditional Chinese furniture.

Before the Ming Dynasty, it was rare for artisans to compile design books. However, during this time, it became common for craftsmen to author design treatises, significantly influencing Chinese culture and design [3]. This shift marked a pivotal moment in the history of Chinese design. One of the most representative works is the *Luban Jing* (The Classic of Lu Ban), a design classic written by craftsmen themselves. It systematically summarized techniques in wood joinery, carving, and dimensional proportions, profoundly impacting the production of Ming-style furniture. The *Luban Jing* introduced the "two-in-one" joining method, which became the core technology for the mortise-and-tenon structure in Ming-style furniture. This method, through precise joinery, ensured both the stability and aesthetic appeal of the furniture structure. Furthermore, the "straight-line principle" from the *Luban Jing* was flexibly applied in Ming-style furniture design. Craftsmen adjusted proportions and details according to practical needs, making the furniture not only aesthetically pleasing but also functional and personalized. Although the *Luban Jing* had a profound influence on furniture design, artisans did not merely replicate its principles. Instead, they innovated and improved upon them in their actual work, which led to the unique and diverse development of Ming-style furniture. This innovation demonstrated not only the craftsmen's mastery of traditional techniques but also their constant pursuit of novelty and change in practice.

3.2. The Institutional Norms of Ming Artisans in Furniture Making

Ming-style furniture, as the pinnacle of traditional Chinese furniture, owes its success not only to the craftsmen's innovative skills but also to their profound understanding of and strict adherence to furniture system norms. The craftsmen were not merely transmitters of traditional skills, but also creators of culture and art. In the design of Ming-style furniture, practicality and aesthetics were always the core principles, and the craftsmen played a crucial role in balancing functionality with beauty, thus driving the artistic evolution of furniture.

Take the screen, for example. Craftsmen employed techniques such as carving, inlaying, and painting to transform it from a simple spatial divider into a decorative piece rich in artistic and cultural symbolism. The design of the screen not only took functionality into account but also incorporated profound cultural meanings and natural elements. The use of patterns such as plum blossoms, bamboo, and pine trees on the screen combined both aesthetic value and deep symbolic significance. Plum blossoms symbolize resilience and nobility, bamboo represents integrity and perseverance, while pine trees symbolize longevity and immortality. These patterns not only demonstrate the craftsmen's exceptional skills but also reflect their reverence for nature and their deep understanding of life philosophy. Through intricate carving and clever combinations, the craftsmen ensured that the screen not only had ornamental value but also became a vessel of culture, transmitting the philosophical thoughts and moral concepts inherent in traditional Chinese culture. The use of plum blossom patterns conveyed the virtues of perseverance and self-discipline, while bamboo and pine trees further expressed reverence for moral integrity and longevity. This design philosophy was widely applied in Ming-style furniture. The craftsmen not only focused on the functional aspects of furniture but also integrated cultural and aesthetic factors into the design, making each piece a medium for cultural inheritance and artistic expression. The creation of Ming-style furniture not only showcases the craftsmen's outstanding skills but also reflects their profound understanding of culture and their pursuit of aesthetics, further promoting the innovation and development of Ming-style furniture in both design and technique.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the form and aesthetics of Ming-style furniture from the perspectives of both scholars and craftsmen, revealing the historical context, cultural motivations, and artistic achievements behind its development. In the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty, political leniency and economic prosperity provided the craftsmen with creative freedom, which in turn fueled innovation in furniture technology. Building on traditional craftsmanship, the artisans, influenced by classics such as *The Lu Ban Classic* (*Lu Ban Jing*), introduced refined mortise and tenon structures and proportional adjustments, ensuring both the aesthetic appeal and practicality of the furniture. Meanwhile, the scholarly elite's pursuit of aesthetic ideals in Ming-style furniture propelled the design toward simplicity, naturalness, and personalization, aligning with the concepts of "unity of heaven and man" and the "Doctrine of the Mean" (*Zhongyong*). The balance between form and function in these pieces showcases their unique and harmonious beauty.

The interaction between scholars and craftsmen not only fostered innovation in both technique and design but also imbued the furniture with profound cultural significance, making it a symbol of traditional Chinese culture. In conclusion, Ming-style furniture is not only a masterpiece of craftsmanship but also a material embodiment of culture and thought, reflecting the deep integration of society, philosophy, and aesthetics. Its influence continues to resonate in furniture design in China and across the world to this day.

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