



Reading Quietly in the Shade of Pawlonia Trees
Qiu Ying (ca. 1494 - 1552) Ming Dynasty

Dream of the Ming Studio[©]

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August 21, 2011

Background

During the three years we lived in Beijing, Lijun and I quickly became enchanted with the antique furniture we found there, and spent countless weekends rummaging around dusty old warehouses searching for a few interesting pieces to take back to the US. Exposure to the furniture naturally led to a desire for more knowledge about it, so we read the available texts and Lijun enrolled in a course at the Central Academy of Arts and Design entitled “Appreciation of Chinese Antique Furniture” taught by Professor Chen Zengbi, president of the Ming Furniture Academic Association and one of the leading authorities on classical Chinese furniture. Over the years Professor Chen became a good friend as well as respected instructor, and his knowledge and enthusiasm for classical Chinese furniture provided countless insights as we developed our appreciation for this intriguing field.

The Song Dynasty saw the introduction of raised furniture into China. Prior to that people mostly sat on the floor, a tradition that was transferred to Japan and maintained in many settings even to the present. The basic Song forms were gradually developed and refined, reaching their apex during the Ming Dynasty. Much has been written about Ming furniture, but in very general terms its defining essence is natural elegance through restraint and balance. By the Qing Dynasty a new, more elaborate aesthetic had taken hold, generally characterized by extravagant ornateness and excessive decoration.

While Ming designs are generally recognized as the apex of Chinese furniture design and construction, the term “Ming” furniture itself must be more precisely defined. Ming furniture can refer to antiques actually dating from the Ming dynasty (which are exceedingly rare and notoriously difficult to appraise), as well as furniture built in the Qing dynasty or later which follows the Ming stylistic standards.

Unfortunately, much of the Ming furniture built after the Ming dynasty was of inferior design, construction, and or wood stock. From period paintings we can clearly see that during the Ming Dynasty itself there was a wide variety of furniture styles. However, in our own times the style which has come to epitomize “Ming” furniture is the restrained, elegant designs made of tropical hardwoods such as Huanghuali or Zitan. This may be because most of the pieces to actually survive from the Ming dynasty tend to be made of hardwoods, or simply due to the fact that this style is more appealing to our contemporary aesthetic preferences.

While an individual piece of Ming furniture may look stunning by itself, or integrate well into a many contemporary interiors, we dreamt of going beyond the collection of a few pieces to decorate our home: our ambition was to create a complete interior environment that authentically replicated the Ming aesthetic. We spent many Sunday afternoons in Professor Chen’s book-filled apartment discussing Ming furniture and traditional interior designs, and concluded that a scholar’s studio would be the optimal environment to recreate, both in terms of reflecting Ming aesthetic ideals and contemporary practical usage.



Professor Chen Zengbi

Having a dream is one thing, overcoming the barriers to achieving it is quite something else. Assembling an integrated collection of authentic Ming furniture is a daunting, if not impossible, task. In the first place genuine antiques dating from the Ming Dynasty now are incredibly expensive and only the seriously wealthy could afford to collect them. Secondly, with such limited quantities available it would be nearly impossible to collect an entire set that was consistent in terms of design, embellishment, grain pattern and finish. We rejected mass-manufactured hardwood reproductions due to significantly inferior quality standards both in terms of aesthetics and construction techniques.

After further discussions with Professor Chen, it became evident that his knowledge of the field wasn't limited to strictly academic studies. Through his wide range of contacts he was able to recommend the Li clan of master furniture craftsmen who live in a village more than 100 kilometers west of Beijing, and still use traditional methods to hand-craft outstanding individual pieces of traditional furniture. We found the idea of supporting the traditional crafts very appealing, and commissioned Professor Chen to design the studio furniture and supervise its construction, strictly following the highest Ming aesthetic standards.

The Aesthetic

The aesthetic reflected in classical Ming furniture is derived from an ancient ideal that has served as the foundation for such various manifestations of traditional Chinese culture as painting, poetry, architecture and even garden design. In essence the goal is to achieve a naturally harmonious balance between Yin and Yang forces: delicacy and strength, sedate calm and dynamic energy, sophistication and simplicity, etc., and always reflect a reverent appreciation for the beauty of nature. Ming furniture elegantly achieves this harmonious balance through the following features:

- ⑤ Restrained design based on function. In contrast to Qing furniture, Ming furniture was designed first and foremost to be practical. All pieces are designed for specific uses, and the components of each piece are based primarily on structural necessity rather than cosmetic ornamentation. Nails or screws were never used: through the use of sophisticated joinery all furniture was assembled like 3D puzzles, which allowed them to be easily disassembled and transported. Ergonomic designs, such as S curved back splats, were incorporated to enhance comfort, but the furniture was never encumbered with upholstery.

- ⑤ Graceful strength through balanced proportions. The ratios of vertical to horizontal lengths, straight lines to curved members, and flat planes to shaped surfaces, are all naturally pleasing to the eye due to their balanced proportions. The degree of splay in vertical members achieves a perfect balance between static stability and dynamic upward lift. Even ornamentation was balanced, with decorative carving being placed in subordinate positions which gracefully complements the natural wood surfaces of the main panels.

- ⑤ Naturally elastic lines and shapes. Straight components join together or flow into curved components at natural angles to provide an unbroken continuity of shape. One never sees acute angles, and even when two pieces are joined at 90 degrees a gently curved spandrel or supportive brace often gently softens the intersection. Ming craftsmen disdained to use the lathe because the resulting perfectly circular components had an artificial flavor. Rails, posts, and stretchers were always hand-crafted, with the ideal cross-section often being oval rather than perfectly round.
- ⑤ Preeminent emphasis on natural wood grain patterns. Rather than using artificially colored lacquer finishes, Ming furniture glorifies the beauty of natural wood, especially rare tropical hardwoods such as Huanghuali. Connoisseurs would insist that all of the components of a single piece came from the same tree to ensure the color and grain patterns matched. All components are designed to complement the pattern of the grain, and large panels were selected so the grain patterns were symmetrically matched.

The Wood

Although Ming furniture is made from a variety of hardwoods and softwoods, the most prized wood has always been Huanghuali, a rare tropical hardwood that grows primarily in Hainan island in southern China. The wood has an extremely fine texture and close growth rings which provide the gently undulating patterns that resemble Chinese landscape paintings. Another interesting feature is the interlocking ring patterns that grow around knots to form the fanciful “lovable demon” face shapes. Although it isn’t as dense as other tropical hardwoods, such as Tielu, its hardness allows the formation of intricate joinery and carving that is able to endure over long periods of time. Huanghuali is most prized for its satiny amber hue that ranges from pale yellow to deep honey-brown.

Although new Huanghuali is available, it tends to be smaller sizes and inferior grain patterns. Once again we turned to Professor Chen’s amazing network of contacts, and after many months of inquiring were able to locate a sufficient stock of antique Huanghuali planks to construct our furniture. With China’s economic boom over the past twenty years, many old structures have been torn down to make way for new buildings. Timber from these old buildings can be several hundred years old, and is often used in production of classical furniture. Our stock had been salvaged from an old granary in Guangdong, that was being

demolished. From writing on the surface of the planks, we knew it had originated from Hainan, and dated from the mid Qing dynasty.

The Craftsmen

Professor Chen hired the Li family to produce the pieces from the rare wood stock. They live in a small village west of Beijing, in what looks like another non-discript little Northern Chinese village. Any contemporary craftsman would be surprised to learn the pieces were produced entirely with traditional hand tools in very rustic workshops. The women of the village spent two months sanding the pieces by hand to provide the satin-smooth finish that electric tools and finishes simply can't reproduce.



Mr. Li, Head Carpenter

The Pieces

Painting Table



The painting table was the central piece of the scholar's studio, where he wrote, painted and chatted with his friends and colleagues. This basic structure with recessed legs, straight aprons, short spandrels and high, double side stretchers was one of the most seminal designs of the Ming tradition. According to Wang

Shixiang, the design is derived from the architectural tradition, with the legs corresponding to vertical round posts of a building and the stretchers to horizontal beams. Similarly, the spandrels and aprons add stability to the post and beam construction. The single piece round legs are slightly splayed to make the table look lighter, graceful yet stable.

Officials Hat Chair with Four Protruding Ends



This is the main chair to accompany the painting table. The descriptive name is derived from the protruding crest rails, which resemble the horizontal decorations of an imperial official's hat. Horizontal stability is provided at the base through the classic "Bu Bu Gao" framework stretchers.



Ming chairs are quite high, with the seat at nearly 50 cm. This was to keep one's feet off the cold stone floor, so the front stretcher conveniently doubles as a foot rest. The front legs continue up through the frame of the seat and connect to the S curved armrests, allowing an extremely solid and durable construction. The back splat is a slightly S curved panel which very comfortably matches the contour of one's back. The front apron has a symmetrical design carved in low relief, and a traditional cusped kunmen medallion is carved in the back splat in low relief.

Foot Rest



The foot rest is fitted with cylindrical rollers that allow one to stimulate the acupuncture points on the bottom of one's feet while sitting at the painting table, thus "improving one's circulation and sense of well being."

Cabinet with Round Tapered Leg (two piece matched set)



Tapered cabinets are some of the most elegant forms that characterize classical Ming furniture. With little or no ornamentation, they convey a serene beauty simply due to the perfection of proportion and natural grain patterns on their panels. The gentle splay of the legs lends a graceful feeling of vertical stability, which is perfectly balanced by the slight overhang of the top panel. Under the bottom stretcher is a simple apron with short spandrels. In the center of the cabinet is a removable stile with white

brass brasswork. The floating panels of the doors are single planks of wood with matching symmetrical grain patterns. The inside of the cabinet has two selves with two drawers beneath the lower shelf.

Side Table with Everted Flanges



Ming furniture includes a wide variety of narrow side tables placed against the wall for displaying objects. The tops of most side tables with everted flanges consist of a framed top with a floating panel in the center. The top of this table is unique in that it consists of a single thick solid plank of Huanghuali wood. The short spandrels are carved in symmetrically opposed phoenix patterns connecting into the beaded edges of the aprons. Between the legs on the short side are inset panels with openwork carving of a pair of symmetrically facing dragons.

“Lamp Hanger” Side Chair (two piece matched set)



Side chairs such as this are placed at the ends of the side table described above. This armless side chair is notable for its simple elegance, and forms an appropriate complement to the more elaborate side table. The back splat is decorated with an inset of cherry burlwood, and slants back at slightly greater than the 90 degree vertical for enhanced comfort. The construction of the seat also contributed to the comfort of this chair. The seat has two layers of matting; rattan above and palm fiber below, which provides both strength and elasticity. The seat gives way slightly under the weight of the sitter, allowing the pressure to be evenly distributed.

Incense Stand with Five Legs



Incense stands were originally designed for use in Buddhist temples, where the incense enhanced the atmosphere of the religious experience. Subsequently they were brought into the scholar’s studio where they were used to hold either incense burners or other decorative objects such as plants or magnificent stones. Most Ming incense stands have waisted round tops and cabriole legs which rest on a wooden base. The long, upward sweeping curve of the “dragonfly legs” match perfectly with the curvilinear aprons which again naturally flow into the high waist and round top surface, to provide an overall feeling of uplifting grace.

The Studio



The painter Bada Shanren (1626 - 1705) wrote, *“I have a clean table under a bright window. My book closed, I burn some incense. When I feel that I understand something, I am happy and smile to myself. The guest arrives, but we don’t bother with formalities. I brew cups of bitter tea, and together we enjoy some wonderful literature. After a long while, the rays of the setting sun light up the room, and I can see the moon rising above the pillars of my hall The guest departs, crossing the brook in front of my house....I sit there quietly for a while, feeling carefree and content, my mind carried far away.”*¹

We hope our studio will provide an interior environment in which Bada Shanren would feel quite at home, with the furniture spaciouly arranged in a simple interior with white walls and a few traditional paintings, a large open window, and tall, lattice work partition doors. Even more, we hope it will provide an environment where you will feel inspired to stay and chat for a while as well, although we’ll probably have coffee rather than bitter tea!





POSTSCRIPT

Upon our return to the United States in 1999, we built the original Shuikun Yaju Ming Studio in the historic Cherry Building. The original studio was destroyed in the Great Flood of 2008. Fortunately we were able to move the furniture to the second floor in time to be saved, but the entire first floor of the Cherry Building was a complete loss and had to be rebuilt. The second studio, featured in the photos above, was completed in 2011.

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