MING FURNITURE

IN THE LIGHT OF CHINESE ARCHITECTURE

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Foreword: Walls Within Walls

Ming furniture and Chinese architecture are companion arts in Chinese culture. In my earlier book, Austerity Luminosity of Classical Chinese Furniture, although I did not focus on the deep and essential relationship between furniture and building structures, I felt the correspondence of their construction, decoration, and function cried out for recognition and elaboration. I was inspired by the architectural qualities of the distinguished pieces collected by Damon and Andrea Spilios for Ming Furniture Ltd. in New York to write a book about their collection in the light of Chinese architecture, thereby linking these two summits of Chinese art. As grand is small and small is grand, so this book explores the architecture of furniture and the furniture of architecture.

Like sculpture, furniture and architecture are three-dimensional, but, unlike other art forms, they require human activity within and around them. While we look at a sculpture or a painting from the outside, we enter a building and move about within it. We recline on a canopy bed, sit up on a chair, eat or write at a table, and insert a hand into a cabinet to retrieve a vase. It is only with this participation, which is always related to a particular time and place, that the purpose of the building or chair is realized. When not in use, the building and the chair are sculptural objects that may be admired from a distance for their visual beauty. But as soon as there is direct human contact, essentially they become interactive components of daily life.

Doors allow us to enter the protective space of a house, a room, or a cabinet. Open sides permit us to sit down on an armchair or couched. The empty space
around a table allows us to pull up a stool, sit down, and eat from the dishes of food set out on the table’s surface. Space is what makes these structures useful, a concept that appeared in China before the fourth century BCE in the Dao De Jing.

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends.
We turn clay to make a vessel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends.
We pierce doors and windows to make a house;
And it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends.
Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not.1

By giving a form to hollow space, a room (or a bed, or a cabinet) creates its own universe. This universe is a functional space that is separate, yet accessible from the outside. Enclosed spaces exist within enclosed spaces—the bed within a room, the room within the walls of a house, the house within the walls of a city, and the city within the Great Wall of China. Container and contained are related as part of a continuous process of living. The size and scale of the furniture are determined by the dimensions of the architecture. The furniture’s placement depends on the configurations of the room, along with use, other objects sharing the space, and aesthetic considerations. As with calligraphy, in which the spaces between the lines are as important as the lines themselves, the spaces between, around, and within a piece of furniture should be functional and visually pleasing. In a building, the demarcation and ordering of space is as important as the construction of walls and roof. Successfully organized space makes it work as a living environment. Space is not a meaningless void—voids are replete with meaning—but rather an important entity in design and arrangement.

Spatial configurations of architecture and furniture reflect the social rank, wealth, and taste of the owner. Size and generous proportions indicate status and wealth. The emperor holds court in a large hall seated on a wide throne elevated on a high platform, while a poor subject lives in a small room and sits on a narrow low chair. The emperor’s throne is centered at the back of the hall facing south,
just as the master of a house receives his guests seated against the northern wall of his reception room. Palace and house alike are arranged along a north-south axis with the south-facing rooms reserved for those highest in the social hierarchy. Likewise, in formal placements of furniture the senior and most honored member of a gathering sits at the back of the reception hall facing south, while those of lesser status are arranged in hierarchical order facing east and west in front. The design and arrangement of a house and its furnishings not only indicates social rank, but also reflects the fashion of the times, and the personal preferences of those who live in it.

The systematic historical study of both Chinese architecture and Chinese furniture is a twentieth-century phenomenon influenced by contact with the West. In the late 1920s Liang Sicheng and his wife Lin Huiyin returned from the University of Pennsylvania to become pioneers in the field. Together they traveled throughout China discovering, studying, and recording in detail important architectural structures. Both taught in Shenyang’s Dongbei University and a few years later Liang joined The Society for Research in Chinese Architecture in Beijing. During World War II, The Society was moved to Sichuan and Wang Shixiang joined the staff. Wang later became the foremost Chinese collector and authority on Chinese classical furniture. In the 1930s and 40s foreign residents in Beijing were buying and studying classical furniture which appealed to their Bauhaus-influenced taste. These collections became the subject of the first books in the field (Gustave Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture* published in Beijing in 1944 and George Kates's *Chinese Domestic Furniture* published four years later in New York). Many pieces were brought back to the West and formed the basis for important private and public collections.

During the twentieth century, the concept of Chinese "classical" furniture was developed to describe the furniture favored by contemporary collectors. Chinese classical furniture, also known as Ming furniture, refers to a style and an aesthetic rather than necessarily to a particular historical period. Made from hardwood, or *yìng", it is distinguished from the more ornate lacquer and softwood furniture. Hardwoods were widely used for furniture beginning in the mid-sixteenth century and the style is considered to have reached its apogee in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Ming furniture is associated with the wealthy social elite, especially the literati or scholar-officials. It is valued for the grain patterns and natural beauty of the wood. The hallmark of Ming furniture design is a special confluence of restraint, balance, and grandeur.
ARCHITECTURE: SHAPES TO LIVE IN

To understand the commonalities between furniture and buildings, it is helpful first to examine typical structural principles of architecture. Historically in China, timber is the favored structural material for furniture and fine residences, palaces, and temples. A building rests on a rammed-earth foundation on which stand the stone bases used to support a series of pillars. The more important the building, the higher the platform and these may be faced with stone or brick and paved with terracotta or marble tiles. The two main types of Chinese wooden framework structures are the pillar-and-beam, or taoliang 梁柱, and the pillar-and-transverse-tie-beam, or chuangian 穿斗 (page 6). The pillar-and-beam frame is particularly common in the north and is used for important structures. It has two pillars supporting a horizontal beam on which short vertical posts or struts are placed to lift another beam. On these are fitted pulleys that define the shape of the roof and across which the rafters are laid. The smallest building has four pillars and additional sets of pillars are added for larger structures. For stability, the outer pillars of a building may incline inwards, and to achieve visual balance, the pillars may taper towards the top. In important buildings a complex
group of cantilevered components called "bracket sets," or dougong, are placed atop the pillars to help support the beams or overhanging eaves (page 7).

In the pillar-and-transverse-tie-beam framing system, most common in southern China, the roof purlins rest directly on notched pillars, instead of on beams or struts. The horizontal tie beams are mortised into or tenoned through the pillars, thus the pillars are weakened and a greater number is needed. This is a less expensive construction because the vertical and horizontal members can be multiplied and consequently smaller, cheaper timbers can be used. The disadvantage is that a greater density of columns crowds the interior space, and so sometimes the pillar-and-tie-beam frame is used only in the gable and a pillar-and-beam frame is employed for the middle of the building. The eaves are supported by various types of slanting brackets that are simpler than the bracket sets.

The roof of a Chinese building is large with a wide overhang, diverting rain as well as shading the interior in summer and allowing sunlight to enter in winter when the angle of the sun is lower. The overhang also covers the verandah that extends across the front of a building. A Chinese roofline may be hipped, half-hipped, conical, or gabled. In the south exaggerated forms and curves are often used. Either thatched or covered with tiles, Chinese roofs not only offer protection from the elements, but they are important, expressive elements of the architecture and are associated with powerful symbolism.