

A Study on the Form, Material, and Cultural Value of the Rosewood Four-Head Official's Cap Chair With Golden Flecks: A Case Study of the Inscribed Piece by Wang Shixiang*

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Ming-style furniture represents the pinnacle of Chinese traditional furniture, with the four-head official's cap chair standing out as a representative category due to its classic form and cultural connotations. This paper takes a specific rosewood four-head official's cap chair inscribed by Wang Shixiang as the research subject, employing a tripartite approach of form analysis, material examination, and inscription interpretation. The chair strictly adheres to the classic form of Ming-style four-head official's cap chairs, embodying the Ming Dynasty design philosophy of "the unity of function and aesthetics". The scarcity and unique grain pattern of the golden-flecked rosewood (Zitan) endow it with the status of "gold among woods". Wang Shixiang's inscription binds the furniture to the cultural essence of "the charm of the Ming Dynasty", transforming it into "heritable cultural heritage". This paper provides a new perspective for the case study of Ming-style furniture and offers theoretical reference for the contemporary inheritance of traditional craftsmanship.

Keywords: Ming-style furniture, Four-head official's cap chair, rosewood with golden flecks, Wang Shixiang, inscription, cultural value

Introduction

Research Background

Ming-style furniture (14th-17th centuries), characterized by its "concise, rustic, unadorned, and dignified" aesthetic, has become a paradigm of Chinese traditional furniture and was listed as a "National Representative Project of Intangible Cultural Heritage" (2006). As a core category within Ming-style chairs, the four-head official's cap chair, named for its form where the "top rail and the ends of both armrests protrude" resembling an ancient official's hat—symbolizing a "successful official career"—was highly favored by Ming Dynasty literati and nobility. In recent years, with the heating up of the collector's market, Ming-style furniture, especially fine pieces inscribed by notable figures, has become a focal point for research and collection.

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Research Object

This paper studies a rosewood four-head official's cap chair with golden flecks. It strictly follows the formal standards of Ming-style four-head official's cap chairs; is made of golden-flecked rosewood (*Pterocarpus santalinus*); and features an inscription by Wang Shixiang (1914-2009) on its splat.

The Classic Form and Design Logic of the Ming-Style Four-Head Official's Cap Chair

Historical Origins of Formal Features

The form of the four-head official's cap chair originated from the "high-back chair" of the Song and Yuan Dynasties and matured during the Ming Dynasty. Its core feature is "four protrusions" (四出头): Both ends of the top rail (the horizontal beam at the top of the chair back) extend outward and curve slightly upward, while the ends of both armrests also protrude outward, resembling the "wings" of an ancient official's hat. This form was not accidental but an embodiment of the Ming literati's practice of "using objects to express aspirations"—the official's hat symbolized an "official career," and the "four protrusions" implied "hopes for official advancement".

The Unity of "Function and Aesthetics" in Form

The chair's form strictly adheres to the "golden ratio" and ergonomics of Ming-style furniture:

*Seat Height: Approximately 45 cm (conforming to the sitting posture of Ming Dynasty adults, with a knee bend of about 90°); *Back Height: Approximately 100 cm (from the seat surface to the top of the top rail), fitting the curve of the human spine and supporting the lumbar and back when leaning against it; *Top Rail Design: Straight and expansive, with both ends curving upward about 10°, avoiding a "rigid feel" while adding visual "liveliness"; *Armrest Structure: Employing an "outer-curved, inner-straight" shape (the outer side is curved, while the inner side connects vertically to the chair leg), conforming to the natural hanging posture of the arm and fitting the arm's curve more closely when resting on it.



Figure 1. Four-Head Official's Cap Chair (Note: author's collection).

This design reflects the Ming craftsmen's "human-oriented" philosophy—furniture is not merely a "vessel" but a "tool serving people" (Fig. 1. Note: author's collection).

Golden-Flecked Rosewood: The Scarcity and Cultural Attributes of the Material

Wood Science Characteristics of Golden-Flecked Rosewood

The chair's material is golden-flecked rosewood (scientific name: *Pterocarpus santalinus*), belonging to the genus *Pterocarpus* of the Fabaceae family, and is considered the finest grade of rosewood (Zitan). The wood surface is covered with golden "flecks" (actually mineral deposits within the wood's vessels, appearing as dots or lines), creating a strong contrast with the deep brown wood color, resulting in a texture as "fine as satin"; Hardness: Air-dry density approximately 1.05-1.26 g/cm³, making it one of the hardest woods in the world, resistant to wear and corrosion; Scent: Possesses a faint "sandalwood fragrance".

The Cultural Status of Golden-Flecked Rosewood

During the Ming Dynasty, rosewood (Zitan) was regarded as the "wood of emperors", used exclusively by the imperial court and nobility. *Notes on the Principles of Life Preservation (Zunsheng Bajian)* (Ming Dynasty, Gao Lian) records: "Rosewood (紫檀木), produced in Jiaozhi [Northern Vietnam] and Guangxi, its wood is hard in nature, its grain is fine and smooth, it has fragrance, its color is purplish-red, also called purple elm (紫榆)". Golden-flecked rosewood, due to the presence of the "golden flecks", was further viewed as an "auspicious omen", symbolizing "abundant wealth and honor".

The chair utilizes "whole plank construction" (both the splat and seat surface are made from single pieces of wood) without any joinery, reflecting the Ming craftsmen's style of "valuing material quality over elaborate carving"—using the most precious material for the simplest design.

Wang Shixiang's Inscription: A Cultural Interpretation of "The Charm of the Ming Dynasty"

Inscription Content and Dating

The splat is engraved with Wang Shixiang's inscription: "明之韵韵如何，同旨酒醇且和，辛巳秋日，陽安王世襄銘" (How is the charm of the Ming? Like fine wine, mellow and harmonious. Autumn of the Xinsi year, inscribed by Wang Shixiang of Yang'an).

The Academic Value of the Inscription

Wang Shixiang is the "founding figure" of Ming and Qing furniture research in China. His works *Study of Ming Furniture* and *Classic Chinese Furniture* are considered the "bible" in this field. His inscription is not merely a simple "signature" but represents academic endorsement of this chair:

*The phrase "the charm of the Ming" in the inscription summarizes Wang Shixiang's view of Ming-style furniture aesthetics—the "charm" of Ming-style furniture lies in the unity of "concise form, precious material, and exquisite craftsmanship"; **"Like fine wine, mellow and harmonious" reflects his understanding of the relationship between "furniture and culture"—furniture is not only a "utilitarian object" but also a "carrier of culture", capable of conveying the cultural concept of "harmony", just like wine.



Figure 2. “明之韵韵如何，同旨酒醇且和，辛巳秋日，阳安王世襄铭”. Note: Author’s collection.

Conclusion

The uniqueness of the rosewood four-head official’s cap chair inscribed by Wang Shixiang discussed in this paper lies in the triple overlay of “form-material-culture”: It serves as a “living specimen” of Ming-style furniture form, represents the “pinnacle” of golden-flecked rosewood material, and is endowed with “cultural life” through Wang Shixiang’s inscription. Studying this chair can not only deepen the understanding of Ming-style furniture but also reveal the contemporary value of “traditional craftsmanship + celebrity culture”.

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