

# Inheritance and Innovation: the Enlightenment of Modern Seat Design in the Chinese “Ming-Style Four-Headed Official Hat Chair” Form

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## Abstract:

The Ming-style four-headed official hat chair is a fine product in Ming-style furniture, which not only has a unique shape, but also has the symbolic significance of a smooth career and a step-by-step rise. Taking the Ming-style four-headed official hat chair as the research object, this paper first discusses its type characteristics and the source of its name, and explores the design ideas, formal characteristics and specific forms of the four-headed official hat chair “heaven and man unity”, and then from the following three aspects: First, the inheritance of the idea of creation; Second, the recreation of the form of the early four; Third, the reference of symbolic meaning, analyzing its influence and significance on modern seat design.

## Keywords:

Ming-Style Official Hat Chair, Form Characteristics, Symbolism, Modern Seat

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background Introduction

The artistic achievements of Chinese furniture mainly came from the Ming Dynasty. The characteristics of Ming-style furniture are summarized as “simple, thick, fine and elegant”. Jane is concise in shape, not cumbersome, not stacked, and generous; Thick is a thick image, with a solemn and rustic effect; Fine workmanship, one line and one side, straight and straight, rigorous and accurate, meticulous; Ya is elegant in style, attractive, not conventional, with a high artistic style. The Ming-style furniture that has been preserved so far is very rich in varieties, mainly chairs and stools, tables, cabinets, beds, screen shelves, etc., almost all the furniture utensils in life, and has the most complete types of utensils in classical Chinese furniture. [1] There are two types of official hat chairs: the south official hat chair and the four-headed official hat chair (Figure 1). The four-headed official hat chair is a kind of chair-style furniture with the head and armrests protruding out, which is a symbol of furniture grade.



*Figure 1. Four-headed hat chair.*

## **1.2. Research Review**

Through the review and collation of relevant literature, there are currently about 40 journals and papers on the Ming-style four-headed official hat chair, mainly involving the types, cultural significance, artistic characteristics and influence of modern furniture design on the Ming-style official hat chair. Specifically, they are divided into the following categories:

I. The study of the type characteristics of the Ming-style official hat chair, focusing on the types of the south official hat chair and the four-headed official hat chair, as well as their respective modeling characteristics and structural characteristics;

II. The study of the artistic characteristics of the Ming-style official hat chair is mainly discussed from the aspects of modeling characteristics, structure, component form, material and visual symbols;

III. Research on the cultural connotation of the Ming-style official hat chair, and discuss the aesthetic concept of the Ming-style official hat chair from various aspects of traditional Chinese culture and creation thought;

IV. The enlightenment and influence of the Ming-style official hat chair on modern furniture design are mainly analyzed from the aspects of formal meaning, connotation and decorative language.

## **2. The Source of the Ming-Style Four-Headed Official Hat Chair**

### **2.1. Origin of the Name**

The symbolism of the four-headed official hat chair derives from the overall form of the chair, but the origin of its name has been controversial. At first, it was believed that the official hat chair was named after the ancient official hat, but later this statement was questioned by many scholars, and the reasons for the controversy were as follows:

I. The official hat chair is divided into four-headed official hat chairs and south official hat chairs, and the brain and armrest of the south official hat chair are not out of the head (Figure 2), which is inconsistent with the image of the official hat. It can be seen that the origin of the name of the official hat chair is independent of form;

II. The lamp hanging chair (Figure 3) is very similar to the shape of the four-headed official hat chair, the lamp hanging chair generally has no armrests, and the two ends

of the head in the brain part are out, but the lamp hanging chair is not named the official hat chair;

III. The brain is only a small part of the chair, in addition to the goose neck, federal stick, coupon teeth, backrest, etc., therefore, just because the four-headed official hat chair with the brain part resembles the official hat, the name of this type of chair is slightly far-fetched.

All in all, there is no accurate conclusion about the origin of the name of the four-headed official hat chair, which needs to be further studied.



*Figure 2. South official hat chair*



*Figure 3. Lamp hanging chair.*

## **2.2. Characteristics of the Types of Four-Out Crowned Hat Chairs**

The four-headed hat and chair began in China during the Song Dynasty and reached its peak in the Ming Dynasty. The ancients paid attention to sitting, conveying the majesty and dignity of the people through the modeling language of the chair back panel and the curve of the armrest. Ming-style four-headed official hat chair without a trace of decoration, the structure is concise to the extreme, completely using lines and curvature to deal with, the line is curved and straight, square with circles, fully embodies the simple and bright characteristics of Ming-style furniture, is the best in the Ming-style chair.

From the perspective of the overall shape of furniture, the “four heads” official hat chairs are often divided into four categories, one is the four-headed official hat chair. This is the basic form of the four-headed official hat chair, and the shape of the head and armrest is straight; The second is the four-headed bent timber official hat chair, which is characterized by the use of various curved materials, and the curvature of each component is large, so it is required to be careful and cautious in the selection and production of materials; The third is the high-ranking official hat chair in the early four years, which resembles a throne; The fourth is the early four-headed official hat chair, [2] which is generally paired.

## **3. The Design Elements of the Ming-Style Four-Headed Official Hat Chair**

### **3.1. Creation Thought**

The Ming-style seats better inherit the natural beauty in traditional Chinese aesthetics, and use the art of line to combine and design, and create an artistic conception of combining virtual and real by interspersing and interlacing. This is very

close to the Confucian philosophical idea of “unity of heaven and man” and Taoist philosophical thinking of “unity of man and heaven”, which pursues the beauty of nature, emphasizes the harmony and unity of man and nature, and focuses on the spiritual core of letting the true and natural state appear in life [3]. The Ming-style four-headed official hat and chair are ingenious, making full use of the true color of wood, without covering, and reaching the realm of “although it is made for people, it is like opening from heaven”. In the production of the use of mortise and mortise structure, without any nails, glue, in different parts of the use of various forms of mortise, ingenious design, natural.

### ***3.2. Modeling Characteristics***

The four-headed official hat chair is characterized by the head and the armrest at both ends, and its head is similar to the lamp hanging chair. The armrests in their early forms, the joint stick (the vertical fir between the armrest and the seat, also called the stick, because it is shaped like the handle of the sickle), the goose neck (the vertical fir between the front of the armrest and the seat, that is, the upper half of the front leg). Generally speaking, the “four-headed” official hats and chairs are mostly paired or four, and they are also displayed separately in the middle of the middle hall. The form of the brain tilted upwards and the brain opening to both sides shows the identity and status of the seated person. [2] In addition, there are two kinds of firs under its feet, one is called “catching firs”, that is, the hind legs are lower than the front legs and the sides of the firs; The other is called “step by step rise”, that is, the front leg fir, the two sides of the fir and the hind leg fir are raised in turn. [3] This shape is not only for functional considerations, but also for the sake of expecting a smooth career.

### ***3.3. Symbolic Significance***

As a fine piece of Ming-style furniture, the four-headed official hat chair has always been a place where people talk about their symbolic significance. In ancient times, most of the literati had the expectation of even winning the middle three yuan and dominating the top. As a symbol of career, the official hat chair in the early four heads is deeply loved by people because it has a form similar to the official hat. In addition, its leg shape also has the symbolic significance of adding officials to the knighthood and rising step by step.

## **4. The Influence of the Ming-Style Four-Headed Official Hat Chair on the Design of Modern Seats**

### ***4.1. The Inheritance of the Idea of Creation***

As a masterpiece of Chinese furniture design, Ming-style furniture has always been the object of reference and imitation of modern furniture design. With the deepening of people’s understanding of traditional culture, Ming-style furniture has received great attention. The design ideas of Ming Dynasty furniture advocating nature also have a very far-reaching impact on the current design. Its cleverly shaped structure, making full use of natural materials as advocated today as “sustainable design”. In addition, the natural simplicity presented by the overall artistic style of Ming-style furniture will evoke the love of nature by contemporary people, thus arousing people’s attention to the environment. The typical tenon and tenon structure eliminates the accessories made of chairs and achieves the purpose of saving resources.

## ***4.2. The Re-Creation of The Form of the Early Four Heads***

The most typical form of the four-headed official hat chair is that its head and armrest are out on all four sides, and this form is interestingly excavated, so the target group when redesigning can be positioned as children. Children's seats are generally characterized by rounded transfers, interesting shapes, diverse colors and low saturation, which can be extracted from the form of four heads when designed, abstract sublimation, and exaggerated treatment of the armrests and the parts of the head at both ends of the brain. The redesign of the four-year-old official hat chair can make children be influenced by traditional Chinese culture from an early age, stimulate their interest in traditional Chinese culture, and help inherit and carry forward China's excellent traditional culture.

## ***4.3. Symbolic References***

Symbolic function is an important part of the functional principle of design, which refers to the spiritual connotation of conveying the "what it means" of the design. It uses a certain symbol, metaphor or symbolic symbol that implies meaning, which is the design object expressing a certain social significance, ethical concepts and other content in the process of human use. When people choose design objects, they require that design objects must have symbolic value that goes beyond the use value. [4]

The symbolic symbol of the Ming-style four-headed official hat chair itself relies on the excellent traditional Chinese culture, which is what modern design lacks. Compared with the simple pursuit of formal innovation, the spiritual connotation of a product metaphor can improve the grade and quality of the product. The achievements of Ming-style furniture are greatly related to Suzhou garden art, and most of the furniture designers are literati with elegant taste, so they often give furniture cultural connotations and create the symbolic meaning of Ming-style furniture. The symbolic meaning of the shape of the four-in-one crown hat chair, that is, the two shapes of the four-headed head and the foot of the official hat, one is "catching the maple"; The other is called "backgammon", which satisfies the ideal pursuit of the literati in praying for a career in the context of the prevalence of ancient scientific expeditions. These symbolic symbols are refined, sublimated, and applied to matching places, which will obtain better market benefits, such as chairs used in schools and education and training institutions, and the choice of chairs in family children's rooms. The original meaning of "taking the meritorious name of the examination, step by step and ascending" is extended to the beautiful meaning of today's college entrance examination, such as smooth academic progress and successful college entrance examination.

## **5. Conclusions**

Ming-style official hat chair is an important part of China's excellent traditional culture, has a high status in the history of Chinese furniture, the four-headed official hat chair in the design ideas, modeling structure, symbolic significance and other aspects have a deep cultural accumulation. However, today's seat design often only pursues formal innovation, especially when borrowing the design styles of other countries, such as Northern Europe, Japan and other countries, only seeking common ground in shape, ignoring the cultural significance of products. For the new Chinese style that has become popular in recent years, it seems to arouse the attention of the Chinese people to traditional culture, and as a fine product in ancient furniture - the

Ming-style four-headed official hat and chair, it is naturally also sought after. Not only because of its beautiful shape, smooth lines, natural materials, but also due to the special symbolic significance of its formal components, as well as the design idea of harmony and unity between man and nature emphasized by Ming-style furniture, these profound cultural accumulations are the places worth learning from modern furniture design.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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