

# Study on the Influence of "Pragmatism" Thought on Dowry Furniture in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Shuizhen Zhu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Wuhan, Hubei, China

## ABSTRACT

Under the influence of the idea of "pragmatism", "practical science" began to prevail, which had a huge impact on all aspects of society in the Ming and Qing dynasties, including that creation activities must serve the society and people's livelihood, and functional practicality became the basic criterion of creation. Taking the dowry box furniture of the Ming and Qing dynasties as an example, the article proves the creation idea of "pragmatism" contained in the creation art of dowry furniture of the Ming and Qing dynasties from the aspects of modeling structure, technological process, material quality and aesthetic concept of life.

**Keywords:** Ming and Qing Dynasties, Pragmatism, Design of dowry furniture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Ming and Qing dynasties were the heyday of the development of dowry, which played a very important role in the study of ancient Chinese furniture culture. In the long-term development process, its shape and function are also adapted to the factors such as dressing supplies, dressing habits, sitting posture, social customs, and so on. It is developing towards the unity of practicality and aesthetics, which is the reflection of the most representative "pragmatism" thought in the creation at that time. This paper explores the connotation of the creation idea of "being practical" hidden behind the dowry in the Ming and Qing dynasties, which is the value and vitality of traditional creation and also the factor that makes Chinese design influential.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE THOUGHT OF "PRAGMATISM"

"Pragmatism" originated from the theories of famous thinkers such as Gu Yanwu and Wang Fuzhi during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This idea was put forward in the light of the prevalence of mind thought in the late Ming Dynasty, and the lack of learning style of "talking about disposition without doing anything", which led to numerous drawbacks in politics, society and culture. To be practical and practical is to advocate a new style of

study or concept of scholarship, which advocates that the study of scholarship should be linked with the social reality at that time. It also had a great impact on the social and economic form, lifestyle, scientific and technological level and aesthetic consciousness of the Ming and Qing dynasties at that time.

From the perspective of creation, "pragmatism" requires that creation activities should serve the society and people's livelihood, and take the efficacy of creation as the main criterion for evaluating the value of creation, that is, the "practicality" of objects. Its creation process pays attention to investigation and research, and is committed to the spirit of innovation. It is a combination of practice, verification, measurement, experience and rational deduction.

## 3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARTISTIC FEATURES OF DOWRY FURNITURE IN THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES

The earliest document record of the dowry box can be found in the words of "Exhorting, it is the mirror. It is made of bamboo, and it is level tone." in "Shuo Wen Jie Zi - Zhu Bu". [1] "奩 (lian, a kind of box)" was originally used to hold dressing utensils and food, and later "lian" specifically refers

to the appliance used to hold dressing utensils and supporting mirror functions.

The dowry originated in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, and lasted until the Ming and Qing dynasties. In order to match the increasing trend of indoor furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the design of the dowry also changed accordingly. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the main production of the dowry box was wood, and the dowry box was made of hardwood such as red sandalwood, yellow pear, etc. The design of its shape is the inheritance of the Song's mirror box, which is a folding dressing box with a relatively small size and a mirror frame and dowry box. One refers to the reference and combination of screens, armchairs and other furniture, which is a large furniture type dowry box.[2] The decoration uses gold inlay mosaic process to form patterns of various themes, and the carving patterns are intricate.

#### **4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE THOUGHT OF "PRAGMATISM" AND THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FURNITURE IN THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES**

The connotation of Chinese traditional culture and thought has a guiding role in the formation of furniture, and the idea of "pragmatism" contributed to the formation of furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the late Ming Dynasty, the unprecedented prosperity of ideological and cultural activities, the great transformation of social concepts, and the prevalence of practical learning in the cultural and academic circles also affected the creation activities in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

First, under the influence of the idea of "pragmatism", the social concept of literati and officialdom has changed, making cultural and academic affairs serve the people's livelihood. At the same time, because the literati are keen to participate in the design and production of traditional furniture, they cooperate with craftsmen and integrate the creation idea of pragmatism into furniture design.

Second, the idea of "pragmatism" in the Ming and Qing dynasties made the creation concept more practical and rational, seeking empirical technology and experimental results. Therefore, the science and technology of the Ming and Qing dynasties creation have been greatly developed, and the production

process and technology have been improved. For example, "Tian Gong Kai Wu" in the Ming Dynasty, combines the experience and technology of the working people in agriculture, handicraft industry and chemical industry. The contents are extensive, the records are detailed, the structure design is reasonable, and the preciseness of modern science.

#### **5. THE EMBODIMENT OF THE THOUGHT OF "PRAGMATISM" IN THE DOWRY FURNITURE OF THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES**

The dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties took "pragmatism" as the basic starting point and judgment standard of creation, took the function as the principle, paid attention to investigation and research, and committed to the spirit of innovation. It is embodied in the shape structure, craft, material and aesthetic concept of life of the dressing boxes in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

##### ***5.1 Embodiment in Shape and Structure***

###### ***5.1.1 Combination of Multi-function Application***

The combination structure of the dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties is diverse, and different combination forms form furniture with different use functions, which meets the needs of women's daily use. On the basis of inheriting the previous dowry and combining the shape of traditional furniture, the structure has extended the dowry style suitable for different scenes. It reflects the creation thought of "pragmatism", which focuses on function and practicality.

The combination of the bookcase and the mirror box in the Song Dynasty formed a small folding dowry box and an official leather box dowry box. The upper mirror frame is used to place bronze mirrors. Its shape is similar to the bookcase used to place calligraphy stickers when ancient people were learning calligraphy stickers. The lower part is a pedestal with a built-in drawer, which can store dressing utensils and jewelry. (As shown in "Table 1") The combination of furniture and pedestal forms a large throne type dowry and screen type dowry. The treasure seat structure and screen structure are used as mirror frames, and drawers are

set in the lower pedestal for storage. (As shown in "Table 2")

This versatility of "one tool for multiple purposes" is a comprehensive work both in form and function.

Table 1. Folding dowry



Traditional furniture form	Extend dowry style
	
The combination of bookcase and mirror box in Song Dynasty	Folding mirror platform and official suitcase

Table 2. Furniture-type dowry

Traditional furniture form	Extend dowry style
	
Huanghuali throne/screen structure combined with mirror box	Throat type and screen type

### 5.1.2 Flexible Opening Mode

The dowry in the Ming and Qing dynasties showed flexible opening modes according to different shapes and structures, and the internal structure space was hidden, which guaranteed the concise features of the appearance design to the greatest extent, and reflected the creation concept of "usage-oriented" in the thought of pragmatism.

Double-opening type (as shown in "Figure 1"), that is, the open can be divide into two halves, and open it with both hands to see the structure inside. On the one hand, the symmetrical balance of the double-opening type is consistent with the overall sense of solemnity of the dowry. On the other hand, it protects the drawer structure inside the dowry, so that the dressing utensils are not easily scattered when carrying the dowry.



Figure 1 Double-opening type.

The lift cover (folding) type (as shown in "Figure 2") has hinge links on the back of the container, some have chain links on the side, and there are copper ornaments such as the face page and twist on the front, which can be locked and used to hold private items. The size of the dowry box is reduced after folding, which not only saves space, but also is easy to store and transport. At the same time, folding can reduce costs and losses, and can better protect objects from damage, because it is easy to store and not easy to lose.

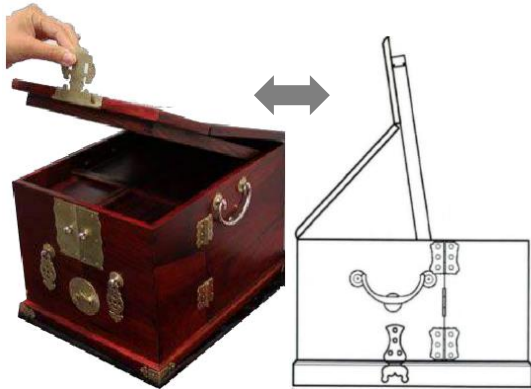


Figure 2 Lift-over type.

Drawer type (as shown in "Figure 3"), used to store cosmetics in the dowry. The drawer-type structure has greatly expanded the storage space, and has the most reasonable functional partition. According to the different storage items, the partition is made, and the classification and placement are also more orderly, and its practicality is clear at a glance.



Figure 3 Drawer type.

## 5.2 Embodiment in Process Production

The skilled craftsmen in the Ming and Qing dynasties followed the idea of "pragmatism", and based on the actual situation, sought empirical technology, experiments, and the scientific and technological development of the Ming and Qing

dynasties' creations, which improved the craft of the Ming and Qing Dynasty's dowry furniture, which was embodied in the innovation and progress of the tools, and the tenon and mortise technology with tight seams.

First, the improvement of steel smelting technology in the Ming Dynasty greatly promoted the development of wooden tools, which increased the variety of wooden tools and reached a new level of hardness. Therefore, the precision and efficiency of making dowry furniture were also improved.

- Splitting tool - saw

In the Ming Dynasty, the sawing tools had been developed very well and exquisite, and were generally used to split wood and make profiles. Saw blades with different shapes and angles for different timbers and cutting angles will automatically straighten when the wood saw is used for incoming materials, and the sawdust can be discharged smoothly, which is smooth and labor-saving, and the use efficiency is improved. According to the functions, the types of saws also increase, such as small saws, large saws, digging saws, etc. (As shown in "Figure 4")

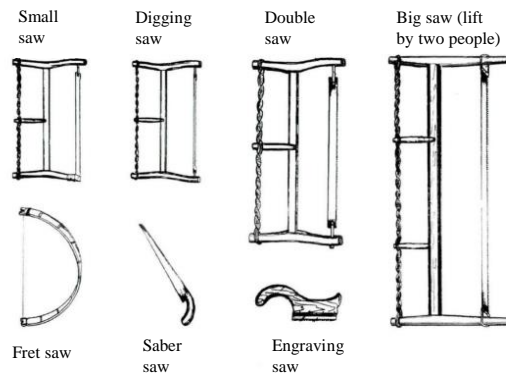


Figure 4 Types of Ming style furniture saws.

- Flat wood tools - planer

During the Jiaqing period of the Ming Dynasty, Chen Wenzhu wrote in "Shiwuganzhu: Tools" that "push planer, planer" is the earliest person officially called push planer in the literature.[3] The appearance of the planer (as shown in "Figure 5") changed the main decorative method of dowry furniture in the Ming Dynasty, which used to be painted with paint and ash, and painted with large paint, so that the original texture of the material itself can show the natural texture through scraping and polishing.[4] The use of the planer made the wood obtain a straight and smooth surface and precise size, which laid the foundation for the later surface waxing process. The natural texture of

high-quality hardwood in the Ming and Qing dowry furniture was highlighted.



Figure 5 Centipede planer.

- Trimming tool

The use of dressing tools has greatly improved the fineness of the manufacturing process of the dowry furniture. The trimming tool is mainly used to trim the knife mark left on the surface of the pattern and the burr at the root of the line during carving to make the surface smooth and round. The main types are scraper, wood pin, horse tooth pin, etc. (As shown in "Figure 6")

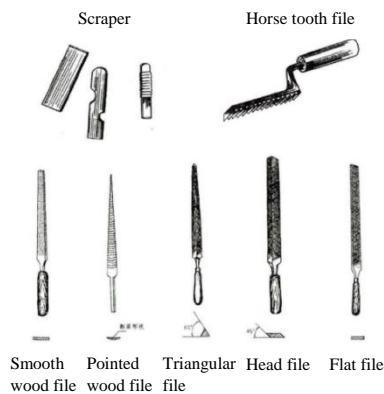


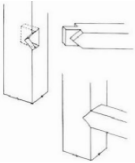


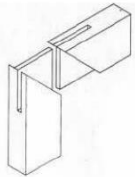


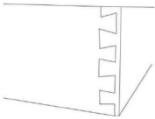


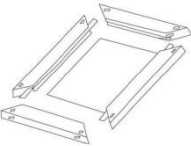
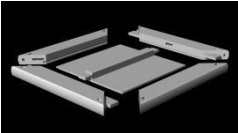

Figure 6 Trimming tools.

The second is the tenon and mortise process with tight seams.

The mortise and tenon joint connects the parts of the furniture into a whole through the insertion and combination, and its structural design makes each mechanism bite and support each other without using nails and glue. The process is precise and meticulous, which is reflected in the calculation and application of different types and specifications of scales and sizes, and the minimum cross section meets the stress requirements of extremely high strength. The model reflects the characteristics of the creation concept in the thought of "pragmatism", which is highly scientific and rigorous.

The mortise and tenon structure of the dowry in the Ming and Qing dynasties was mainly used in the brain, the foot seat, the drawer, the fan and the foot. The lattice corner tenon is mainly used to overlap the two ends of the wood, such as the corner of the lap joint and the handrail; The dovetail structure is widely used in drawers; Grooved plate structure is used in the mirror frame. The furniture panel made of this structure not only saves the material, but also avoids the exposure of the section of the panel, and improves the unity and beauty of the texture. (As shown in "Table 3")

Table 3. The mortise and tenon structure of the dowry

Lattice shoulder tenon structure			
Lattice corner tenon structure			
Dovetail in drawer			
Grooved structure plate			

### 5.3 Embodiment in Materials

Based on the statistics of the materials used for making wooden dowry in the Ming and Qing dynasties in archaeological data, it can be seen that high-quality hardwoods such as yellow pear wood, red sandalwood and rosewood are common materials for making dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and their functional practicability is the basis for selecting materials.

#### 5.3.1 Huanghuali

Huanghuali is the most commonly used material for dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties. It has a long growth cycle, high density, strong and stable quality, and will not crack and deform due to changes in the environment. It can be better used to

process extremely precise mortise and tenon processes. (As shown in "Figure 7") In the sense of hand, because the Huanghuali wood contains a considerable proportion of odorant oil, the surface is smooth as jade, making the furniture feel comfortable and warm. From the perspective of efficacy, long-term use of Huanghuali furniture has the effects of calming the nerves, relaxing muscles and activating blood circulation, and reducing blood pressure.



Figure 7 Huanghuali dowry.

### 5.3.2 Red Sandalwood

Red sandalwood contains a colored substance, "pterocarpin", which is reddish-brown. After waxing, polishing and oxidation, it gradually turns into purple-brown or purple-black. [5-7] (As shown in "Figure 8") Because the red sandalwood is hard, the fiber is extremely fine and the adhesive force is strong, it just suits the craftsman's cutting without breaking, and is suitable for carving delicate patterns on the dowry furniture. At the same time, in Buddhism, red sandalwood is considered to have the effect of exorcism. The "Compendium of Materia Medica" records that red sandalwood has the functions of calming the heart, calming the nerves, relaxing the tendons and activating blood circulation.



Figure 8 Red sandalwood dowry.

In addition, the selection of materials for the dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties also includes mahogany, ivory, etc. All of them pay attention to their durability and stability, so as to ensure the realization of fine processes such as mortise and tenon, carving, etc. At the same time, people should pay attention to the color, shape, softness, hardness, roughness and temperature of the surface of the material, and make full use of the natural properties of high-quality hardwood, such

as texture, color and texture, to perform arts according to the material, which reflects the practicality and functional beauty in the thought of "pragmatism".

### 5.4 Embodiment in the Aesthetic Concept of Life

From the perspective of social background at that time, its decoration purpose also conforms to the applicable needs of the idea of "pragmatism", which reflects the value culture advocated in the Ming and Qing dynasties, reflects people's aesthetic concept of life, and contains the auspicious culture of marriage customs and feudal female culture in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

From the perspective of decoration purposes, the decoration of the dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties reflects the good wishes and auspicious blessings of the elders for future generations. For example, "happiness appears on the eyebrows" is a common theme of dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the image represents the beautiful implication that both husband and wife should raise their eyebrows and live together for a long time. (As shown in "Figure 9") At the same time, decoration contains the enlightenment of feudal ideas in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The deep-rooted patriarchal and ethical basis of the feudal concept in the Ming and Qing dynasties is reflected in the decorative patterns. From the perspective of the composition proportion of the decoration, the aesthetic characteristics of the decoration of the dowry are standardized, unified, symmetrical and balanced, showing the style characteristics of the moral order that men are superior to women, emphasizing the order of the elderly and the young, and stressing the standard and rigorous. The themes such as the "hundred children picture" and the "pattern of giving away children" on the dowry all have the meaning of "many children", and are deeply influenced by the concept of "women's virtue" in terms of inheritance.



Figure 9 Qing Dynasty official leather case with "happy eyebrows" pattern inlaid with pears and mother-of-pearl inlay.

As the daily necessities of ancient women, the patterns of dressing boxes in the Ming and Qing dynasties not only enhance the visual beauty, but also convey the meaning of blessing and enlightenment.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The economic form, lifestyle, scientific and technological development level and aesthetic consciousness of the society in the Ming and Qing dynasties all reflected the effect of practical learning under the principle of "being practical and practical", and affected the formation of the dowry furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The dressing room furniture of the Ming and Qing dynasties fully shows the pragmatic, pioneering and innovative spirit of the literati and craftsmen in the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as the profound creation culture contained therein. To this day, it still inspires people's thoughts and has positive reference significance for various inventions and designs.

## REFERENCES

[1] (Han Dynasty) Xu Shenzhuan, Shuo Wen Jie Zi [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1987. (in Chinese)

- [2] Feng Yuan, The Study on the Design of Cosmetics Organizers in Ancient China [D]. Jiangnan University, 2021. (in Chinese)
- [3] Li Zhen, Wooden Tools for Traditional Chinese Architecture [M]. Tongji University Press, 2004: 163. (in Chinese)
- [4] Li Kezhong, Tracing to the Sources of the Wood Techniques Used in Ming Style Furniture [J]. Furniture & Interior Design, 2008 (1): 36-37. (in Chinese)
- [5] Chen Zhijian, Aesthetic Orientation of Qing Style Furniture [J]. Oriental Collection, 2016(7): 46-48. (in Chinese)
- [6] Wang Shixiang, Appreciation of Ming-style Furniture [M]. Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2003. (in Chinese)
- [7] Hu Desheng, Furniture collection of Ming and Qing Dynasties [M]. Printing Industry Press, 2011. (in Chinese)