The Ming Guang Armor

This is a picture of a traditional Chinese Armor from Tang dynasty called the Ming Guang Armor (or bright armor). The whole look is composed by a helmet, a body armor with a belt, faulds, vambraces and Cuirass. The armor set was mainly made out of metal in color gold and black leather, which were considered the strongest and stiffest wearable materials back then. Against a black background, the garment stands out and shines.

Started form the top, the helmet with studded side cover shaped around top half of the head which looks like a dome with a jade adornment on the forehead. A high V-neck collar made out of black leather was decorated by two metal flowers on each side, connected to a leather gorget covering the shoulders. In the middle and on each shoulder of the gorget, there is a larger metal flower with a jade heart. The cuirass was made of hundreds of small overlapping metal plates laced together to achieve flexibility and stiffness at the same time. Lined with small fish-scale-shaped steel plates, the lamellar body part nicely fits to the body. As the most symbolic part of the garment, the two slightly convex chest protection on top of the cuirass looks just like two circular reflective mirrors indented by lace patterns on the side. Also, made of the same fish-scale-shaped overlapping metal plates, the faulds drape down to the knees, enabling flexibility of movements. On top of the faulds, there is a black leather belt with metal tips extended by a round leather piece right below in order to cover and protect the genitalia. Moreover, another less obvious symbolic element is the dragon head that hold and fix the belt with its mouth and teeth; it looks like it was biting the belt. The legs parts were also armored by angular metal pieces riveted to the leather fabric. The red lining of the armor was barely shown in the picture, yet it was an important point since red is a color that symbolized fortune in China. Both arms were armored by hard black leather under and vambraces with small oblong steel plates decorated by golden flowers on top.
The whole armor looks extremely detailed and well-made, which keeps me wondering what are the meanings of these details and why they were designed to be parts of the armor. In fact, the Ming Guang Armor was claimed to be most powerful armor in the history of ancient China. In the following paragraphs, I am going to explore and question whether this armor was truly a powerful armor in symbolic functional and historical aspects.

The first detail I noticed was the three dragon heads cast on both side of shoulders and center front waist. Today’s Chinese dragons are symbolic of being lucky, propitious, powerful, and noble; however, they had a different symbolic meaning in ancient China. According to the records of what is considered to be prehistoric China, the first appearance of the true dragon occurred about 46 centuries ago, during the reign of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, known as a group of mythological rulers preceded in the Xia dynasty. After the third of the fire emperor had reigned for one hundred and eleven years, a large dragon appeared and took him to heaven upon his back. Since that day, dragons have been seen in every dynasty and by hundreds of witnesses, as Chinese history abundantly attests and have been considered auspicious. It is said that in order to achieve grace and to establish himself as one who was empowered to rule, the fourth emperor of Xia adopted the dragon as the symbol of royalty and changed himself into a dragon after he had been cut up into small pieces. Since then, people started to use the word “the True Dragon” to metaphorize the later emperors; therefore, it turned into that the adjective dragon can be only used in the names of all that had to do with the emperor's life and office. The emperor’s throne was called the “dragon’s seat”; his hands was called the “dragon’s claws”; and even the robe he wore was called the “Long Pao”, the dragon garment. The dragon elements were only able to be used by the emperors until Tang dynasty, the most powerful and prosperous dynasty in history of ancient China. The Tang emperors believed that the country can only be truly rich and powerful when the civilians are rich and
powerful. So many of the traditional symbols of power and luck became open to all (male) citizens of all classes, including the dragon. Thus, the Ming Guang Armor, the most representative armor in the Tang dynasty, were designed with the three dragon heads symbolizing power and loyalty.

Another significant feature of the Ming Guang Armor is the two circular “mirrors” on the chest, since the name Ming Guang actually came from the two chest protectors. To maintain the prosperity in Tang dynasty, the country had been committed to strengthen the army. During the Tang dynasty, armored soldiers were 60 percent of all recruited soldiers. While the quantity of armors increased, the quality improved. Abandoning the traditional design, new armor design elements were emerged, including the two reflective round protector made out of high quality iron. In the previous dynasties chest protector were always made in a rectangular shapes. Why did people from Tang changed the design? Recorded in Jing Ming, a round-shaped-frame inscriptions in the Han Dynasty, “Once the sun rise, the world turns bright”, which implies that sun brings life. Inspired by the Jing Ming both literally and visually, the golden round chest protector were propitiously signalized as shining life given by the sun, so called Ming Guang (bring light) Armor. What’s more, also due to the richness of Tang dynasty, the material of the chest protector was improved. Back then, Chest sections in armors appeared to be metal pieces linked together, which could not avoid the unsteadiness. With wealth, more expensive metal were refined and smelted into a strong piece in one. Simulated by a famous Television program in China, Revelation of Ancient Weapons, different weapons at that time such as the most powerful bow were used to test the hardness of the two iron plates. Indeed, result showed the two plates were so hard that most weapons at that time could barely harm the vital body part.

The great invention, Ming Guang Armor, had been used in different battles from decade to decade. The earliest record of Ming Guang Armor was in the Three Kingdom Period (220-265
A.D.) by Cao Zhi. Since then it has been recorded that many soldiers and generals from different time period had worn Ming Guang suit. One of the most famous generals that wore the armor must be Cai You from the Western Wei Dynasty. Cai You was known for his smart, outstanding characters in his birth village. After he grew up, he became good at riding and shooting and soon became a general like his father. Value by the emperor, he was honored and given the powerful armor suit. In the 543 A.D, General Cai took part in a battle in Mangshan Mountain. In his Ming Guang Suit, General Cai turned into a brave during the battle. He could barely be harmed by enemy’s attacks due to both his braveness and the invulnerable armor. The enemies were shocked and scared by such a invincible warrior and soon all ran away. Since then, they gave him the name “the Iron beasts”.

In order to make further efforts to improve the invulnerability of Tang’s army, the armor suit came with a new weapon, Shuo, or the long spear. Different from the traditional spears, Shuo is much longer, heavier and more destructive. Shuo is mostly used by cavalries because of its weight. Shuo was the most powerful weapon to destroy armors. However, an interesting thing is that when the most powerful weapon, Shuo, meets the most powerful armor, Ming Guang Armor, it turns out that the armor is still unbreakable. Armed with Shuo and wearing the Ming Guang Armor, no wonder the Tang’s army could be invincible and successfully bear their last enemy, the Turkics. Since then, Tang had succeeded in reuniting China.

Unfortunately, such a historically important armor which accompanied with so many exploits and honors disappeared in history. There were no fully present of the Ming Guang Armor remained today. Only dispersed evidence and records occurred. There are some conjecture saying that the Ming Guang Armor started to decrease since Song dynasty, which later in Qing dynasty,
were replaced by armors were mainly made out of quilted fabric with only a few metal decorations. The functions of the armor were no longer to protect the body from injuries, but to keep warm.

People nowadays question about the real existence of the vanished suit. But no matter it was real or not, the Ming Guang Armor has proved the great imagination and creativity of ancient Chinese people.
Bibliography


