Gongshi, Spirit Stone or Scholar’s Rock



Gongshi or Scholars Rock (detail)

In China, the pure beauty of nature has been treasured for centuries, and this is most evident in the appreciation and collecting of highly unusual rocks called Gongshi. Long ago, the Chinese began decorating gardens and courtyards with large stones, and around 1,000 years ago smaller, more refined stones began to be brought inside by scholars, officials and connoisseurs so they could be appreciated in their studios. Ultimately, Gongshi became so deeply valued they were presented as tribute objects to powerful people in China and the rest of Asia.



Gongshi or Scholars Rock

Gongshi can be loosely divided into two general categories: abstract and representational. Abstract stones are commonly called “ scholar’s rocks.” They may be reminiscent of coral or cloudlike shapes and often have swirls, holes, perforations, and myriad caverns on their surface. They sometimes resemble famous or imaginary mountains and natural wonders, and typically appear to be naturally eroded, and are rarely shaped by human hands. Scholar’s rocks are considered the embodiment of the transformational powers of nature. Gongshi which fall into the second category, representational, can also be called “ Spirit Stones.”

In fact, the word *gong* means "spirit" and *shi* "stone." In this category, the rocks themselves transcend the abstract and begin to reference the known world. Stones with inclusions which look like people, mythological creatures, and other imagery fall into this category as well as those with shapes which can be identified. Spirit stones condense the known world in an abstract fashion, or conversely, expand the abstract world in a representational way.

To Chinese scholars of the past, Gongshi represented a focus for meditation and could be used as objects for contemplation prior to creating poems or paintings. They could also be functional, serving as brush rests, ink stones, incense holders, or seals. However they were used, all were embraced and appreciated for their aesthetic merits. The abstract, yet formal qualities of Gongshi that appealed to scholars of the past are the exact same qualities that appeal to collectors of today – and these are the same qualities informing both Chinese calligraphy and painting as well as modern, western art.

Gongshi are judged by evaluating four basic characteristics: shape, material, color and spirit. First, rocks should be naturally shaped. Although they may be enhanced by hand, it is not acceptable for them to move into the realm of manmade sculpture. Second, Gongshi should be hard in material and rich in texture. They should be composed of material which intimates they will endure. Thirdly, they should have a hue and lustre which is natural, simple and pure, oftentimes giving them a feeling of natural antiquity. And fourthly, regardless of the category in which they fall, Gongshi should be evocative, not benign. Although they may affect each person differently, they should have a "persona" evident to a focused observer.

Gongshi may also be categorized according to composition or type of stone. Historically, four types of stone have been revered: Lingbi (found in Lingbi County of Anhui Province), Ying rocks (from Yingde in Guangdong Province), Taihu rocks (from Tai Lake on the border of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces), and Kun rocks (from Kunshan in Jiangsu Province). However, other types of stone may also be considered Gongshi, including Yellow Wax Rocks, Petrified Wood , Zibowen Rocks, Black Ying Rock, Fengli Stone, Red River Stone and Laoshan Green Stone. Taken together, these comprise more than ten basic types of Gongshi, although even more types of stone can be classified as Gongshi.

Throughout history, Gongshi have been the subject of countless poems, stories and paintings. Some have even become venerated as deities and credited with their own consciousness and powers. Ancient Chinese believed Gongshi contained the basic life force – known as *qi* (chee) – and like people, underwent profound changes in the course of their development. Modern aficionados see earth as the ultimate artist. Yet, past or present, the appreciation of Gongshi has always been rooted in the aesthetics of form tempered by imagination; and this appreciation, often manifesting itself as reverence, gave rise to another interpretation of the word Gongshi – "fantastic rocks."