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From Ornate to Unadorned: A Study of a Group of Yokeback Chairs

Curtis Evarts

It has been well documented that, for all practical purposes, no pieces of Chinese furniture bearing signatures of individual craftsmen remain. Nevertheless, the large body of Chinese hardwood furniture that has come to light within the last few years affords the opportunity to identify the products of individual family or village workshops through other, less straightforward signs. Sometimes a workshop's signature can be found in distinctive construction techniques and details that recur in a number of pieces, even though those pieces may not share the same basic form. Several groups of related pieces (each group composed of a single type—chairs, cabinets, canopy beds, *kang* tables, and mirror stands) have now been identified, and others undoubtedly remain to be discovered. In each group, the pieces appear to be based upon a standard prototype, with variations occurring solely in materials and decoration. A recent discovery is a group of nineteen yokeback chairs, whose common origin is apparent despite differences in their ornamentation.

These chairs share the same basic model (fig. 1), with variations occurring in the design of the splat and the shape of the optional side posts. Stripped of these elements, the entire group is reduced to an essential framework that has several distinguishing features, both in design and in construction. Although several side chairs belong to this group, the basic form is a yokeback armchair with four roundly shaped or "tear-drop" protruding ends. Its gooseneck front posts are set back, terminating at the seat frame with a through mortise-and-tenon joint. The connection between the front post and the armrest is reinforced by a unique, long, curvilinear spandrel that extends the entire length of the post, with a beaded profile reminiscent of running water. The

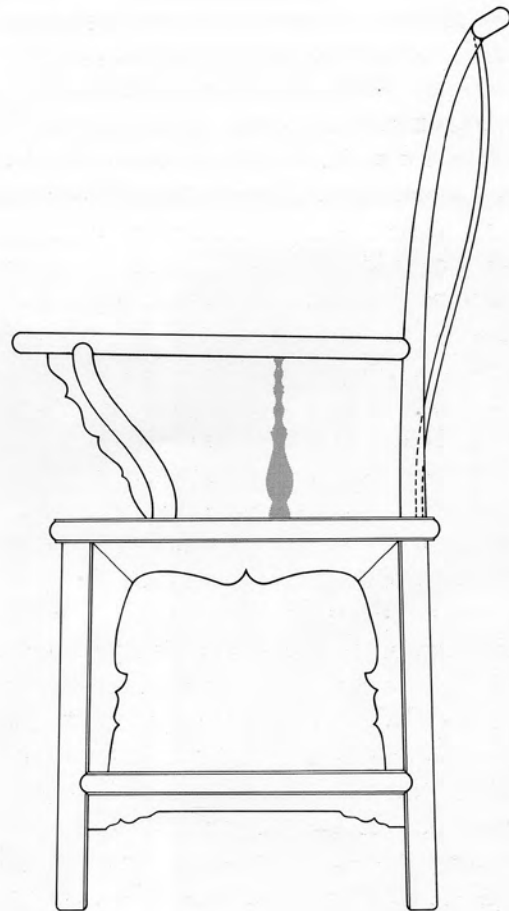
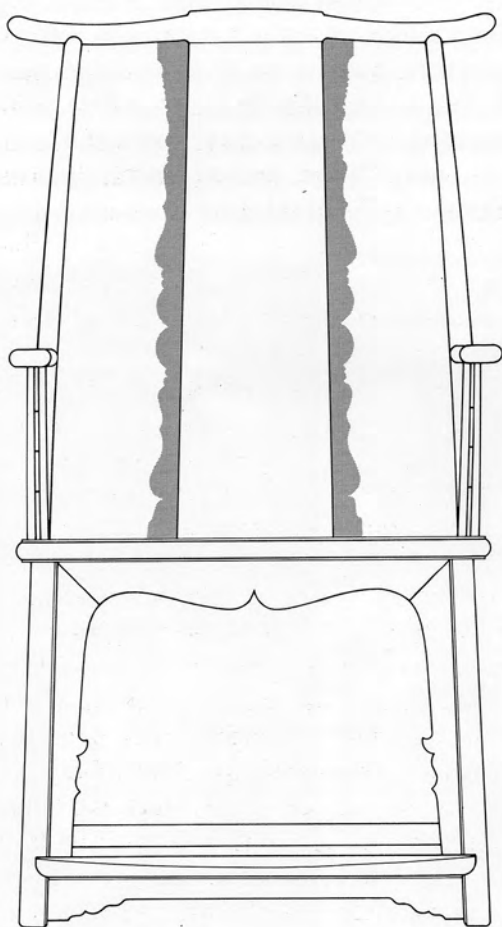
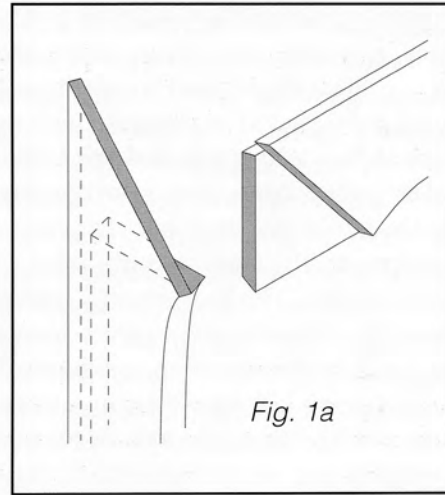
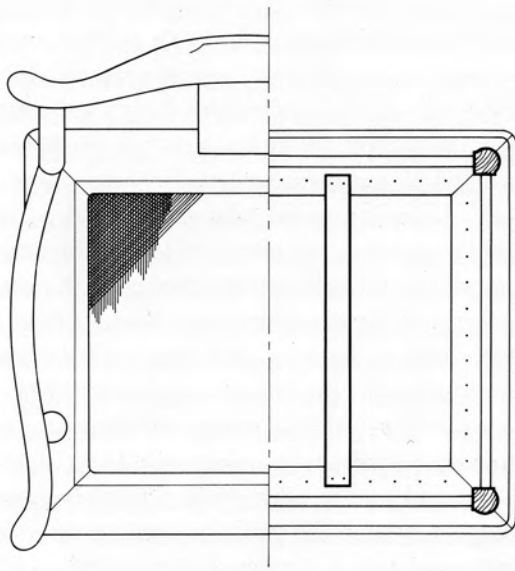
rear posts are strongly swept back, and at the same time slightly sprung inward at the top, producing a real as well as a visual tension. Other distinctive design features can be found in the beaded and convex profiles of the molded seat frame and side stretchers, the roundly arched and sharply cusped *kunmen*-shaped openings of the front and side aprons, and the uniquely shaped aprons beneath the stretchers.

The chairs also share specific construction techniques. The seat frames are all mitered with blind mortise-and-tenon joinery, and each is reinforced with two transverse braces (figs. 12a, b). The apron frames are joined with a half-lap miter joint (fig. 1a) that would not be as secure as other sophisticated variations (Evarts 53) were it not for an unusual addition. Rather than simply abutted to the underside of the seat frame as is most often the case, here the aprons are securely married to the frame with the same tongue-and-groove joint that is usually employed only on the legs. This requires that a groove be cut into the underside of the seat frame around its perimeter, into which the tongues of the four aprons fit. This same technique is also used to join the small, lower aprons to the stretchers, surely accounting for the survival of so many of these original parts, which are commonly lost. Were it not for differences in measurements that cannot be attributed to restoration and wear, one might readily think that these chairs were mass-produced. But the fact that the seat frames, for instance, vary as much as 5 cm in width and 3.5 cm in depth leads one to conclude that they were more probably custom-made (see chart A).

One could, however, make a strong case for the

Fig. 1. Drawing of basic model of yokeback armchair.

Fig. 1a. Detail of apron showing half-lap miter joint.



use of templates, which have most likely been used since the Ming dynasty (Cooper 49). Templates are patterns used to mark the outlines of members with curvilinear profiles, such as the yoke, front and hind posts, aprons, spandrels, and flanges of the chairs presently under discussion. After a prototype has been executed and perfected by the workshop's master, templates are made to ensure that it is faithfully reproduced by the workmen. Templates can also be manipulated to accommodate minor changes in dimension. Of course, the template only aids in the rough shaping of parts. The final shaping—utilizing chisels, planes, spokeshaves, and scrapers—was entirely in the hands of the individual carpenters. The carpenters, moreover, had widely varying levels of skill—the same workshop might include the young carpenter who had just survived the ordeal of a demeaning apprenticeship that actually taught him little about the craft, and an older carpenter with decades of experience (Cooper 23-26). For this reason, we are well advised to avoid premature conclusions regarding authenticity, and to exercise caution in our criticism when we observe that a piece of furniture is not entirely “from the same hand.” This is especially true in the case of pieces that have carvings and/or carved panels, the craft of which

is traditionally distinct from that of the joiner.

When Westerners first began collecting Chinese hardwood furniture in the 1930s and 40s, they were attracted to simple, unadorned forms that embodied the purity of line and minimalistic ideal consonant with the contemporary Bauhaus fashion that had developed in northern Europe. Fifty years later, however, following more relaxed political policies in China, as well as the release of Wang Shixiang's two monumental works on furniture from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, more ornate forms, which were said to have existed side by side with the minimalistic forms, began to appear in the West.

For the Chinese, ornamentation was seldom used only for decorative purposes. Most often it was connected with a sophisticated symbolic language whose subtleties can easily be overlooked or misunderstood. The grammatical brevity of the Chinese language, as well as social conditions that hampered free expression—such as cultural taboos regarding direct references to the human body and sex—may have contributed to the development of a secondary, suggestive language in which subtle nuances of meaning could be couched (Eberhard 8-12).

Many Chinese symbols tend to be more or less pictorial; some of the most common, however, are

Chart A							
Armchairs							
<i>Figure</i>	<i>Collection</i>	<i>Qty</i>	<i>Splat</i>	<i>Side posts</i>	<i>W (cm)</i>	<i>D (cm)</i>	<i>H (cm)</i>
A, fig. 3	Cheney Cowles coll., Seattle	1	<i>fujing</i> character/burl/ <i>liangjiao</i>	vase/bamboo	63.3	49.0	115.5
B, not illus.	Rev. Richard Fabian coll. San Francisco	2	<i>fujing</i> character/burl/ <i>liangjiao</i>	vase/bamboo	63.5	49.0	116.8
C, fig. 4	Rev. Richard Fabian coll. San Francisco	2	<i>fujing</i> character/burl/ <i>liangjiao</i>	vase/bamboo	65.0	51.0	118.8
D, not illus.	Hong Kong, private coll.	1	<i>fujing</i> character/burl/ <i>liangjiao</i>	vase/bamboo	63.5	48.9	116.2
E, not illus.	Sotheby's NY, Nov. '91	2	<i>fu</i> character/plain/ <i>liangjiao</i>	vase/bamboo	59.7	48.3	115.0
F, fig. 5	Los Angeles, private coll.	1	<i>fu</i> character/marble/ <i>liangjiao</i>	tapered S-shaped	60.3	47.6	116.8
G, fig. 6	Beijing, private coll.	2	marble/inscribed burl/ <i>liangjiao</i>	tapered S-shaped	61.0	50.5	113.5
H, fig. 7	Hong Kong, private coll.	2	solid C-curved	vase/bamboo	63.0	51.0	117.5
I, fig. 9	Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture	2	solid S-shaped	no posts	61.0	47.0	118.0
Side Chairs							
J, fig. 10	Robert Ellsworth coll., NY	2	open medallion/burl/ <i>liangjiao</i>		54.9	42.5	116.2
K, fig. 11	Sotheby's NY, Apr. '87	2	<i>fujing</i> character/burl/ <i>liangjiao</i>		51.4	39.9	107.8

simple abstractions. Most tend to deal with the basic concerns of the Chinese: longevity and health, the attainment of high civil and social rank, and the bearing of precious male offspring. Others deal with Buddhist and Taoist religious tenets and achieving virtue through Confucian doctrine. Symbols were also combined with one another to convey more extended meanings. Even the illiterate were well aware of these subtle ways of expressing auspicious wishes, and most Chinese believed that these expressions in symbolic form would actually help to bring about the results that they represented (Cammann 93-99). This codified language was used for decoration on almost every kind of object, including furniture.

Chart A lists the eleven groups of chairs (A-K), both singles and pairs, that are considered in this study. Of the fifteen armchairs in this group, eleven are comparatively more ornate and rich in symbolism (A-G). Their framed splats have panels of marble, burlwood, and carved designs, and are flanked with long, undulating flanges (figs. 3-6, 10, 11). Nine chairs (A-F) have at the top of their backrests openwork panels carved with the *fu* character, sometimes referred to as a “good luck” character, and used to confer a blessing. Figure 2a illustrates the somewhat stylized, commonly utilized *fu* (福)

character from chairs E and F. Figure 2b illustrates an interesting variation found in chairs A-C, D. In the latter, the radical on the left side of the character approximates that in the written character. However, the lower righthand part of the character, which appears as *tian* (田) in the original character, has been ingeniously modified to contain a stylized *jing* (井) character. The literal meaning for *jing* is “well,” as in a well for water, and it is a rebus often associated with weddings; in erotic literature it is symbolic of the vagina, and can be directly associated with the desire for sons (Eberhard 14, 311). The extended rebus, *fujing*, can thus be interpreted, “may you be blessed with sons,” and its use on these chairs suggests that they were commissioned as part of a wedding dowry.

Chairs A-E, H also make use of turned side-post supports. Although most Chinese furniture members with rounded cross-sections were shaped by hand with spokeshaves and scrapers, these posts were probably produced by a hand- or foot-powered reciprocating lathe. In China the lathe most likely

Fig 2a, left. Detail of the splat of chair F figure 5, showing the carved *fu* character

Fig 2b, center. Detail of the splat of chair A, figure 3, showing the carved *fujing* character

Fig 2c, right. Detail of the splat of chair G figure 6.



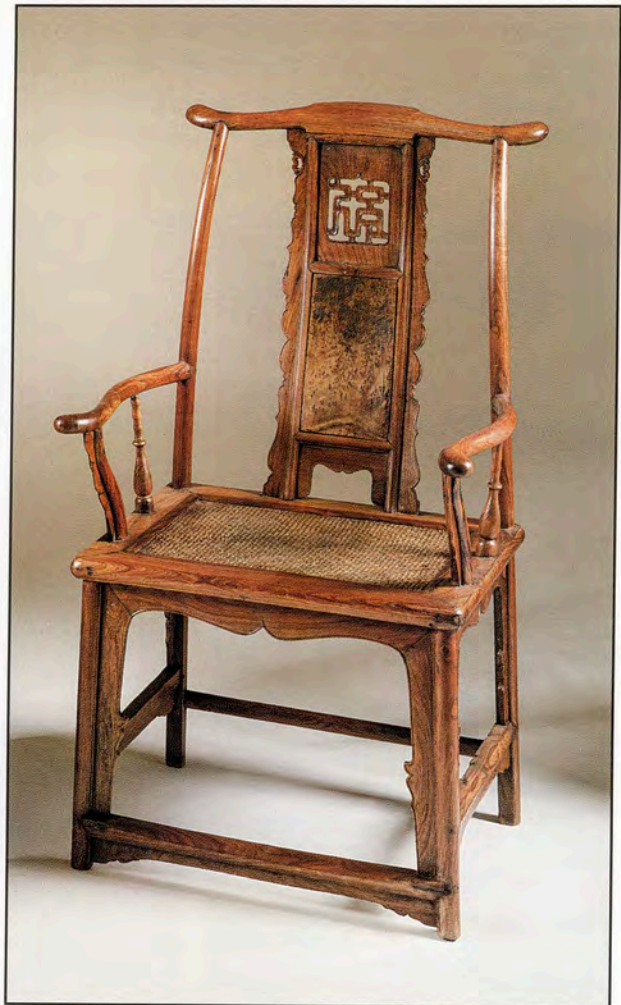
evolved from the ancient potter's wheel, and was used by craftsmen to roughly shape wood and ivory turnings that were often carved afterwards; when adapted with a cast iron polishing wheel, it was used to fashion and polish jade and other gems (Hommel 252-5) This turned side post is shaped like a long, narrow vase (*ping*) containing a stalk of bamboo (*zhu*). In Chinese, *ping* is a homophone, also meaning "peace." Because of its durability as a material and its evergreen foliage, bamboo is emblematic of longevity. The combined rebus therefore bestows a wish for peace and longevity. Characteristics of flexibility, strength, straightness, and a useful hollow interior also endow the bamboo with many other corresponding virtues. Therefore the rebus could also be interpreted, *zhubao pingan*, or "bamboo (virtue) brings peace."

The combination of the *fuying* and the *zhuping* wishes the newlyweds the good fortune of male offspring, thereby bringing future happiness, peace of

mind, and longevity to the family line. The birth of male offspring not only ensures family security after the death of the father, but also guarantees that the ancestral graves will be properly maintained and the spirits given their due sacrifices.

The long curvilinear flanges on either side of the trisectional splat may also contain an abstract symbolic message. They resemble young vines whose burgeoning growth is pregnant with life. The vine is trained upward, lightly bound at three girdle points along its length until buds begin to break near the top. Its directed growth and eventual flowering can be interpreted as the attainment of high civil and social rank through the discipline and study necessary to pass through the rigorous system of examinations.

With an understanding of this sophisticated language, these ornamental elements become charged with innuendo and subtle meaning, and their design and execution may be seen as part of an integrated concept. The chairs in the Cheney Cowles (fig. 3) and



Reverend Richard Fabian (fig. 4) collections are among the finest of this type. If the symbolism is not read, however, such ornamentation can be misunderstood as unnecessary or awkward embellishment. A case in point may be seen in a similar single chair from this ornate group now in a private collection in Los Angeles (fig. 5). Its trisectional splat frames an upper panel with a *fu* character (fig. 2a) and a central panel of white marble with light diagonal veining. Below is the *liangjiao*, or base-brightening panel, whose uplifting effect is accentuated by the small separation of space between it and the seat frame. When the chair came to America from Japan twenty-five years ago, it had vase-and-bamboo-shaped side posts. Its new owner, not liking their stiff, awkward appearance, had them replaced with S-shaped side posts.

A pair of chairs from this group now in Beijing (fig. 6) is more likely to have been specially commissioned for a scholar of refined taste than for newlyweds (Tian 22). The *dali* marble abstract mountain

landscape, recalling the beauty of many renowned mountain ranges in China, and the inscriptions on the burlwood panels, copied after famous calligraphers, recall the idealized artistic aspirations of the scholar, and harmonize with the message contained within the vine-like curvilinear flanges. The proportions of the chairs have, however, been slightly altered from the basic model. Although the seat

Fig. 3, facing page, left. Yokeback armchair seventeenth century Huanghuali width 63.3 cm, depth 49 cm, height 115.5 cm. Cheney Cowles collection, Seattle, Washington.

Fig. 4, facing page, right. Yokeback armchair seventeenth century One of a pair Huanghuali width 65 cm, depth 51 cm, height 188.8 cm. Reverend Richard Fabian collection, San Francisco.

Fig. 5, below left. Yokeback armchair seventeenth century. Huanghuali width 60.3 cm, depth 47.6 cm, height 116.8 cm. Private collection, Los Angeles.

Fig. 6, below right. Yokeback armchair seventeenth century One of a pair Huanghuali width 61 cm, depth 50.5 cm, height 113.5 cm. Private collection, Beijing.

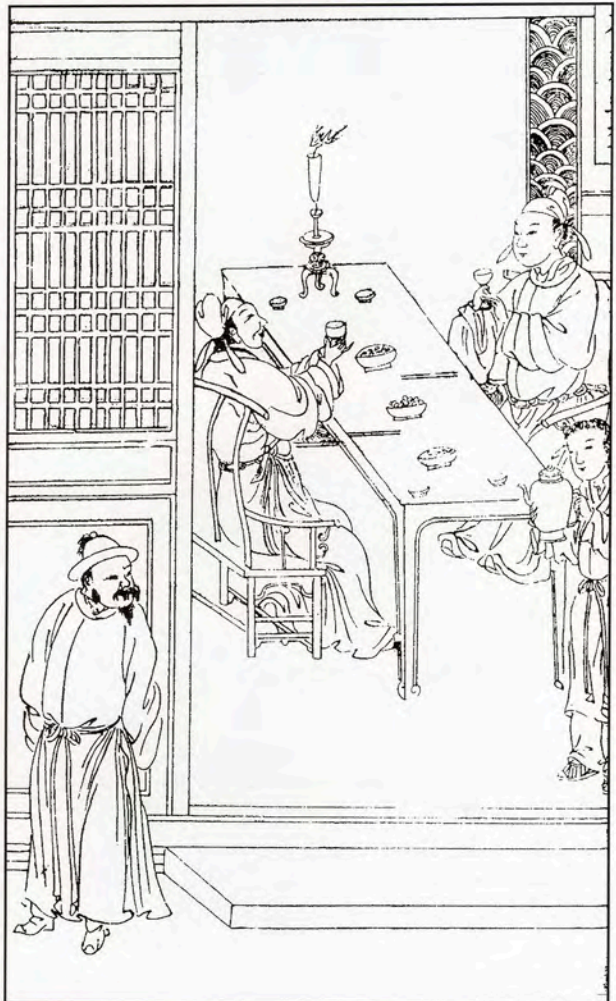


dimensions are relatively close to average dimensions, these chairs are the shortest of the group, even taking into account the fact that the deteriorated feet indicate that some height has been lost. The difference in the height has come primarily from the upper part of the chair, as can be clearly seen by comparing the proportional division of the splat and the long curvilinear flanges to those on the other chairs (fig. 2c). Proportionally, the marble panels are not as long as the *fu* character panels. Although the calligraphy panel is somewhat lengthened, the height of the *liangjiao* panel at the base has also been reduced. A minor variation also occurs at the top of the flanges, where only one bud sprouts. Otherwise, the flanges seem to have profiles identical to those on the other chairs, with the exception of the missing several centimeters that appear to have been cut off each end, again suggesting the use of templates. It is entirely conceivable that the proportional division of the splat was based upon the size of the marble panels



and the length of the calligraphic passages to be inscribed on the burl panels. This would concur with Tian's assessment that the calligraphy was not added at a later date. Unlike those in the Los Angeles chair, however, the S-shaped side posts appear to be original. It is obvious from the large base diameter of the side posts in the former that they were shaped to fit the large holes left when the vase-and-bamboo posts were removed. The side posts in the Beijing chairs are more typically shaped like a rat's slender tail—thus the common term "rattail post." Although Tian laments the loss of height and poor restoration at the bottom of the feet (Tian 25), a comparison with the feet on the other chairs indicates that not much height has been lost. It is actually the proportions of the upper part of the chair that have been compromised.

Another pair of chairs (fig. 7), now in a Hong Kong collection, have solid C-curved splats yet retain the vase-and-bamboo side posts. Here the turned side posts provide a sharp contrast to the otherwise



plain chair, and their significance seems rather remote without the support of the other symbolic elements. Even Wang Shixiang has said that he does not care for the use of this stiff element as a side post, which gives us some indication that it was not necessarily an accepted convention among those of cultivated taste. Perhaps its use reflected the more garish tastes of the late Ming/early Qing *nouveaux riches*. This design may have been relatively common, however, as other similar examples are known to have survived (Pu 28), and other unusual side post designs may have also existed, such as one seen in several examples of chairs illustrated in the Kangxi *Sheng yu xiang jie* (fig. 8) terminating with another wish-fulfilling device, the *ruyi*. Although this example has not yet appeared in any known examples of chairs, it might appear equally awkward to our present-day aesthetic sensibilities. In a pair of early Qing horseshoe-back armchairs known to this author, the use of rattail side posts shaped like vase-and-bamboo was a pleasant surprise.

The same model with a plain S-shaped splat and without side posts can be found in the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture at Renaissance, California (fig. 9). It is interesting to note that these chairs have the smallest seat frames (their overall height, however, is only one centimeter less than the tallest chair), while also being the least decorated of the group. It is not inconceivable, given the variance of seat frame sizes found within this group, that these chairs were custom-tailored for those who commissioned them. Their comparatively minimal form is supremely sculptural, and the unobstructed lines are exceptionally dynamic and vigorous. The swept-back hind posts, wide S-shaped splat, and raked armrests (inclined three degrees) all combine to produce a tension that captures the intensity of youth poised for action. These elements are firmly supported upon a well-grounded foundation with markedly splayed legs.

Although this pair of chairs is comparatively un

adorned, it has not been entirely stripped of symbolic elements. Wang Shixiang has noted that its *kunmen*-shaped openings are not only round and gentle, but simultaneously crisp and sharp, and thus harmoniously combine *yin* and *yang* elements (Wang). Cammann also noted the indirect portrayal of *yin* and *yang* through the use of contrasting carving techniques on toggles. Traditionally, incised carving has been called *yinwen*, while relief carving was called *yangwen*. The number of toggles that he examined with balanced combinations of both techniques, for instance, one on the front and the other on the back, or on the top and on the bottom, led him to conclude that it was deliberately intended as a symbolic token of the harmoniously balanced order of nature (Cammann 94-5). In hardwood furniture, the utilization of both carving techniques is generally viewed as a defect. There are many examples of furniture with low-relief carving that have low aprons near their base with incised carving, which are thought to



Fig. 7 facing page, left. Yokeback armchair seventeenth century. One of a pair Huanghual width 63 cm, depth 51 cm, height 117.5 cm. Private collection, Hong Kong.

Fig. 8, facing page, right. Woodblock print from the Kangxi Imperial Edicts (*Sheng yu xiang jie*).

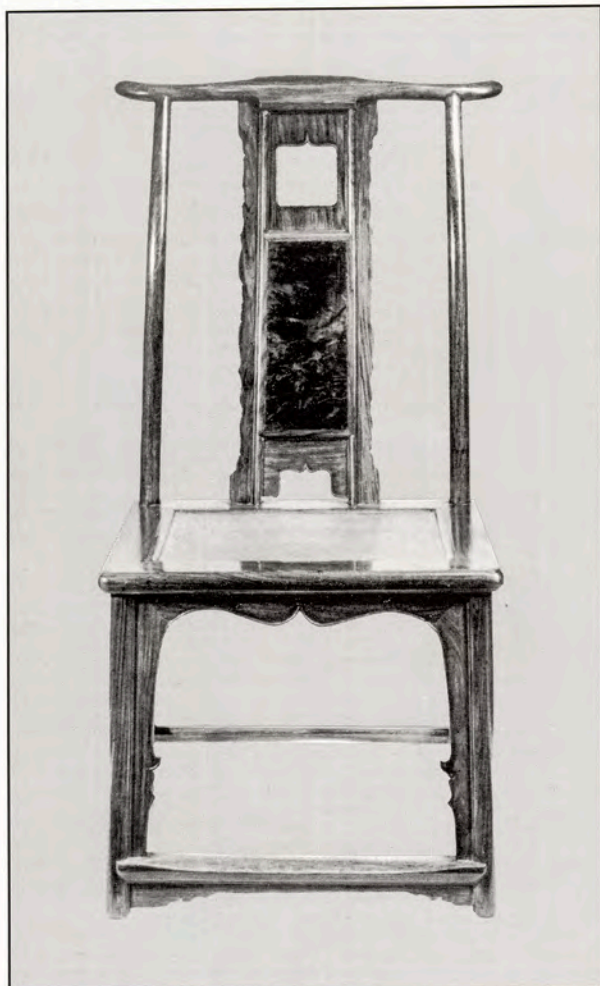
Fig. 9, right. Yokeback armchair late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. One of a pair Huanghuali width 61 cm, depth 47 cm, height 118 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.

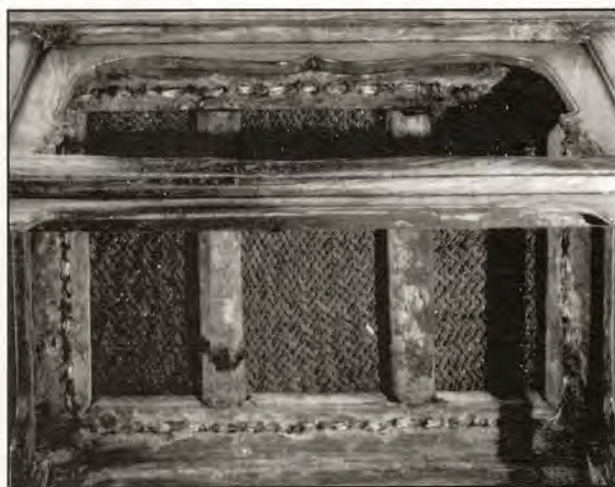
be replacements. While it may sometimes be true, the possibility that it was intentional should not be overlooked. The long, curvilinear spandrels under the front arms of these chairs, whose profile is reminiscent of running water, may also symbolize *yin*, the primeval female principle that moistens and strives downward. They are balanced by the upward-striving (*yang*) profile of the supporting aprons below the bottom stretchers (Eberhard 309). The complementary use of *yin* and *yang* is also a reminder of the Great Unity from which both principles descend.

Two pairs of side chairs also seem to fit into this group. One pair is in the Robert H. Ellsworth collection (fig. 10). It features the trisectional splat with burlwood central panel. The panel at the top has the same beaded opening that houses the *fu* character in the previous chairs. It is not inconceivable that there were originally carved panels inset in these openings, which were damaged at some time in its long history and, rather than being repaired, were simply re-

moved. The curvilinear flanges have a similar profile to those on the armchairs, yet are not beaded and are somewhat less well defined. The other pair of side chairs (fig. 11) appeared at Sotheby's, New York in the April 1987 sale, together with the chairs (fig. 4) now in the Fabian collection. It is not known whether the two pairs are directly connected.

These side chairs may be the furthest removed from our original prototype, yet a relationship still remains. In place of the standard yoke with the raised central section, here we have a humpback yoke. The curvilinear flanges were also deleted, and some of the details below the seat frame were simplified. The trisectional splat, however, features the same *fuying* character with burlwood and *liangjiao* panels beneath, and the frame has the same swept-back hind posts and molded profiles. A comparison of the underside of the seat frame (fig. 12a) with that of the Fabian chair (fig. 12b) reveals the same beveled and curved transverse supports, as well as the typical lac-





quer coating found on most of the other chairs. Together with the same beautifully arched and cusped *kunmen*-shaped opening, these similarities suggest the work of the same workshop.

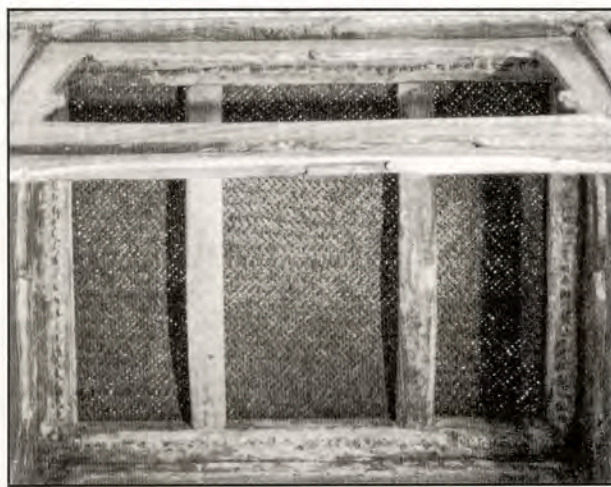
Although these nineteen yokeback chairs represent one isolated group, the comparatively larger number of relatively ornate pieces suggests that Ming-style furniture was not necessarily predominantly minimalistic. Furthermore, it can be seen that the ornamentation on Chinese furniture has a function that exists for purposes and dimensions of its own beyond surface decoration. Even simple forms of Chinese furniture contain their messages for those who are indoctrinated. The simple, yet classic, recessed-leg table illustrated in the sixteenth-century *Lu Ban Jing* is referred to as an *yizi zhuo* (一子桌), literally a “character one table” (Ruitenbeek 238). Its long flat top, resembling the *yi* (一) character, was just as likely a reminder of the Great Unity from which all is manifested, symbolized by the single unbroken line from which the Eight Trigrams were derived (Cammann 95). In the group of chairs in this study, we find a single workshop that produced both ornate and relatively unadorned variations on a perfected model to meet the needs of a varied clientele. The age-old Chinese attitude regarding the repetition

Fig. 10, facing page left Yokeback side chair seventeenth century. One of a pair Huanghual width 54.9 cm, depth 42.5 cm, height 116.2 cm. Robert H Ellsworth collection, New York.

Fig. 11 facing page right Yokeback side chair seventeenth century. One of a pair Huanghual Sotheby's, New York.

Fig. 12a, above left. Underside of seat of chair K, fig. 11

Fig. 12b, above right. Underside of seat of chair C, fig. 4.



of forms can be found as early as the sixth century A.D., when Liu Xie wrote, “Even if imitation should become the order of the day, when the development of a genre has reached its limit, if one is able to give it a freshness of ornamentation, his work would exceed his predecessors in excellence” (Shih 243). The creative use of symbolic ornamentation to adorn an already perfected yokeback chair testifies to this workshop’s pursuit of excellence.

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