Chinese Culture
Volume 2, Issue 1, 2025, Page 12–19
https://doi.org/10.6914/cc.020102

Chinese Culture

From Artifact to Lifestyle: A Triadic Model of Cultural Re-encoding in the Contemporary Redesign of Ming-Style Round-Backed Armchairs

Renbin Wang, Mingming Xu*
Shenzhen Polytechnic University **Corresponding author, Email: yuanqi@szpt.edu.cn*

Abstract

In the context of globalization and the resurgence of local cultural consciousness, traditional design artifacts face the dual challenge of preservation and contemporary relevance. Taking the Ming-style round-backed armchair as a paradigmatic case, this study investigates how classical Chinese furniture is transformed from a historical artifact into a modern lifestyle symbol. Moving beyond formal description, the paper conceptualizes contemporary redesign as a process of cultural re-encoding, grounded in design semiotics. Through a comparative analysis of three representative cases—Hans Wegner's The Chair, Shang Xia's carbon-fiber reinterpretation, and Neri&Hu's Ming Series—this study proposes a Triadic Model of Cultural Re-encoding, consisting of syntactic purification, material contextualization, and conceptual deconstruction. The findings reveal that successful redesign depends on translating deep cultural structures, rather than replicating surface symbols, thereby re-signifying ritual, materiality, and meaning for contemporary life. This model offers a transferable analytical framework for integrating indigenous cultural heritage into global design discourse.

Keywords Ming-style furniture; cultural re-encoding; design semiotics; creative transformation; artifact-to-lifestyle transition

1 Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of global design, we observe a complex duality: the accelerating force of globalization coexists with a profound revival of local cultural consciousness, often manifested as "*Guochao*" (China-chic). This juxtaposition places traditional Chinese culture at a critical juncture of modern transformation. Among the vast heritage of artifacts, Ming-style furniture stands as a prime exemplar. Its classical aesthetics serve not merely as historical treasures but as a perennial wellspring of inspiration for contemporary designers. Specifically, the round-backed armchair, often hailed as the "top-tier seating" of the Ming dynasty, has long been canonized as the definitive representative of Chinese design wisdom due to its sophisticated morphology, exquisite craftsmanship, and philosophical temperament[1].

 Article History Received: June 26, 2025; Accepted: March 12, 2025; Published: June 15, 2025. ***Chinese Culture***, ISSN 3007-2158(print), ISSN 3007-2166 (online), founded on April 2024, edited by Chinese Culture Society, and published by Creative Publishing Co., Limited. Email: cpcl@cpcl.hk, https://cpcccs.com/, https://cpcl.hk. **CPCL**® is a registered trademark of *Creative Publishing Co., Limited*.

However, the preservation of form alone is insufficient. A critical theoretical and practical challenge arises: in today's fast-paced, functionalist society, how can this masterpiece avoid fossilization—being confined solely to museums as a static object? Furthermore, how can design practice prevent the reduction of such artifacts into superficial cultural symbols or kitsch? The ultimate imperative is to decode how an ancient "seating utensil" can be organically integrated into modern living, evolving from a relic of the past into a dynamic symbol of a contemporary "lifestyle"[4].

International precedents offer valuable insights. Design paradigms from Scandinavia and Japan have successfully transmuted their vernacular cultures into universally embraced lifestyles. This success suggests that the vitality of traditional design lies not in preservation, but in translation. Taking the Ming-style round-backed armchair as a focal case study, this paper aims to chart a pathway for the inheritance and innovation of indigenous culture[6].

Moving beyond a mere descriptive analysis of furniture forms, this study interrogates the underlying mechanisms of redesign. We ask: How do contemporary designers navigate the tension between retention and modification? In the process of redesign, are the deep-seated cultural implications—such as Confucian rituals and Daoist philosophy—discarded, or are they reinterpreted through new semiotic codes[5]?

To address these questions, this paper introduces the **"Triadic Model of Cultural Re-encoding,"** a theoretical framework derived from the analysis of three distinct redesign strategies. By examining how the Ming armchair is culturally and formally re-encoded, we aim to uncover how a successful modern iteration can simultaneously command global aesthetic appreciation and unequivocally articulate its Chinese cultural roots. Through this lens, the study seeks to provide a replicable logic for revitalizing traditional culture through the medium of design artifacts.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Classical Paradigm: Aesthetic Canon and Historical Constraints

The academic discourse on Ming-style furniture is fundamentally anchored in the seminal work of Wang Shixiang. His treatise, *Studies on Ming-Style Furniture*, established the epistemological foundation for the field[1]. Wang's contribution transcends the systematic categorization of structure and joinery; crucially, he codified a rigorous aesthetic system defined by the "Sixteen Qualities" (e.g., simplicity, purity) and "Eight Flaws". This framework elevated furniture appreciation from a craft-based connoisseurship to a literati-level philosophical pursuit. Subsequent scholars, such as Wu Jiaen, have further expanded this lineage, solidifying the historical and material understanding of these artifacts[2].

However, the dominance of this classical paradigm has inadvertently created a methodological bias. Existing scholarship focuses disproportionately on historical verification, provenance research, and craft restoration. While invaluable for preservation, this retrospective gaze offers limited theoretical guidance on how these historical forms can be actively adapted for contemporary usage. The critical mechanisms of transforming these "classical canons" into modern design languages remain under-theorized.

2.2 Theoretical Lens: Semiotic Re-encoding and Creative Transformation

To bridge the gap between heritage and modernity, this study adopts a theoretical framework grounded in semiotics and design culture. According to Hall's theory of representation, meaning is not inherent in the object but is constructed through a system of signs[5]. In the context of the round-backed armchair, the object operates on two semiotic levels: the "signifier" (the physical syntax: the curvilinear rail, the square seat) and the "signified" (the cultural semantics: cosmological philosophy, social hierarchy).

The "creative transformation" practiced by contemporary designers can thus be conceptualized as a process of "semiotic re-encoding." As noted by Jiao and Xu in their analysis of "Redesign," the objective

is not replication but the reconstruction of value systems[6]. Designers manipulate the signifiers (altering materials or simplifying lines) to assign new signifieds that resonate with the modern zeitgeist—shifting from the functional logic of the "object" to the symbolic logic of the "lifestyle" as described by Baudrillard[4].

The evolution of the "New Chinese Style" validates this theoretical trajectory. Early market iterations were characterized by the superficial pastiche of symbols (e.g., lattice patterns), whereas recent developments pursue abstract "artistic conceptions" (*Yijing*), such as ethereality and negative space. This shift indicates a progression from mimicking surface forms to translating deep-structure cultural essence.

2.3 Research Gap and Analytical Approach

Despite the rich literature on the history of Ming furniture[1][2] and individual monographs on modern masterpieces like Wegner's chair[3], a systematic analysis of the transformation mechanisms linking the two remains absent. Previous studies have heavily documented the "what" (form) but have insufficiently explored the "how" (the strategy of cultural translation).

This paper aims to bridge this lacuna. By positioning the Ming-style round-backed armchair as a dynamic cultural medium rather than a static relic, we examine its "reincarnation" amidst the tension between globalization and localization. This study moves beyond historical appreciation to propose a generative model, analyzing how ancient cultural genes are activated and re-encoded to create design works that are simultaneously global in appeal and distinctively Chinese in identity.

3 Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Case Selection and Typological Sampling

To illustrate the issue of creative transformation clearly and construct a robust theoretical basis, this study employs a purposive sampling strategy. We selected three internationally renowned chairs that represent distinct typological approaches to redesigning the Ming-style prototype.

The first case is **Hans Wegner's "The Chair" (1949)** (see Figure 2). As a classic work by a Western master, it pays homage to Eastern aesthetics through a subtractive modernist lens, serving as an excellent exemplar of cross-civilizational dialogue. The second case, **Shang Xia's "Da Tian Di" Carbon Fiber Chair (2010)** (see Figure 3), represents an endogenous attempt by a Chinese brand. It seeks to modernize and "luxury-ize" cultural heritage by utilizing high technology, thereby embodying a synthesis of cultural confidence and business acumen. The third case is **Neri&Hu Design and Research Office's "Ming Series Chair" (2012)** (see Figure 4). Created by Chinese architects, this work signifies a pioneering deconstruction and reconstruction of the round-backed armchair, applying architectural design thinking to furniture creation. These cases operate in dialogue with the traditional Ming-style round-backed armchair (see Figure 1), which serves as the visual and structural baseline for analysis.

3.2 Analytical Framework: The Three-Layer Redesign Model

To move beyond descriptive comparison and establish a transferable analytical logic, this study constructs a **three-layer redesign analysis framework**. Rather than treating redesign as a purely stylistic operation, the framework conceptualizes redesign as a layered process in which changes in form and technique generate systematic transformations in cultural meaning.

As illustrated in Figure ??, the first layer, ***formal transformation***, examines how iconic features of the Ming-style round-backed armchair—most notably the "round back and square seat"—are retained, simplified, abstracted, or deconstructed in the redesign process. This layer focuses on observable visual outcomes, including silhouette, proportion, and structural configuration.

Figure 1: Ming-style round-backed armchair (schematic diagram)

Figure 2: Hans Wegner, *The Chair* (1949)

Figure 3: Shang Xia, *Great Heaven and Earth* carbon fiber round-backed armchair (2010)

Figure 4: Neri&Hu, *Ming Series Chair* (2012)

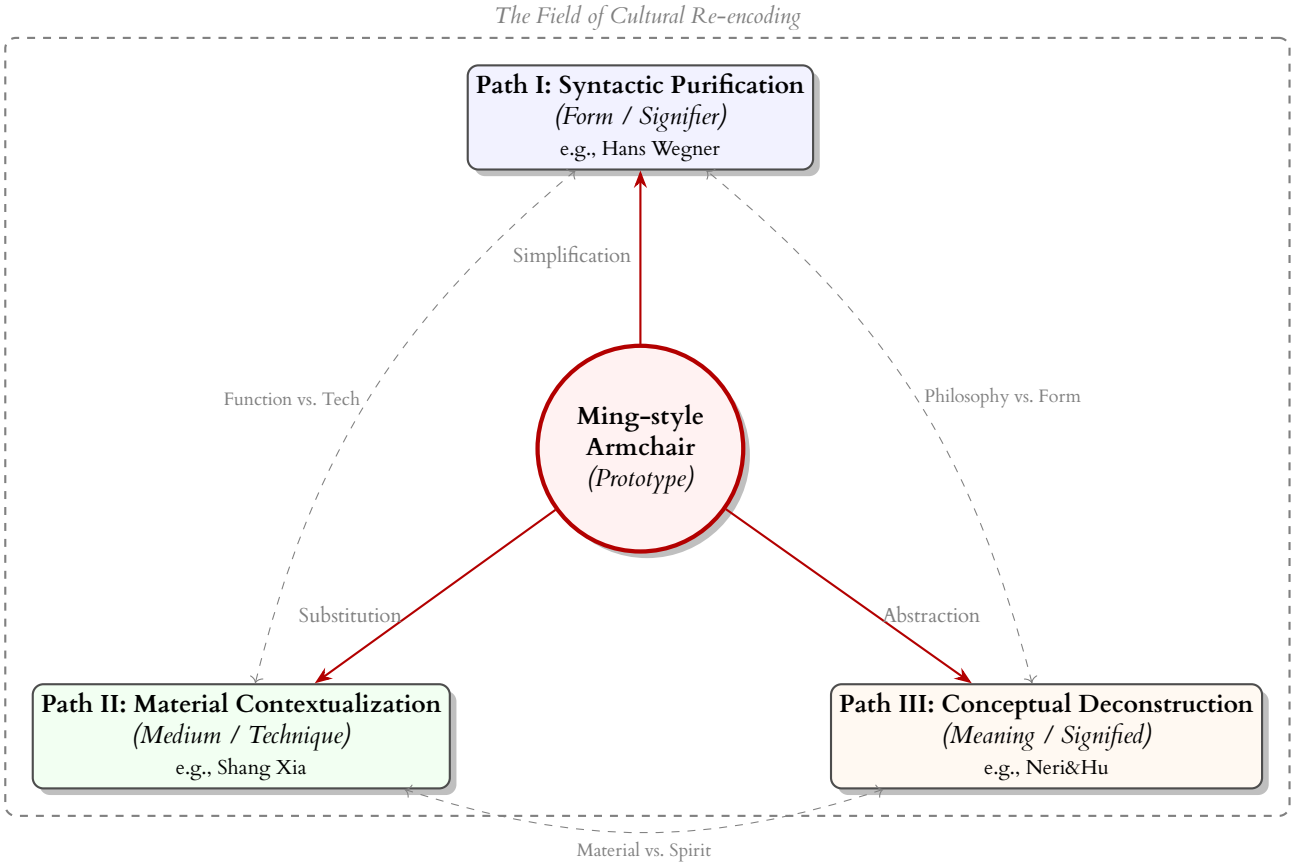

Figure 5: **The Triadic Model of Cultural Re-encoding.** The model illustrates three redesign pathways —syntactic purification, material contextualization, and conceptual deconstruction—through which the Ming-style round-backed armchair is translated from a historical prototype into a contemporary lifestyle symbol.

The second layer, ***technical material reconfiguration***, analyzes shifts in craftsmanship and material logic that mediate formal change. It considers whether traditional mortise-and-tenon joinery is preserved or replaced, how new materials such as carbon fiber or industrial composites are introduced, and how these technical decisions reshape ergonomics, comfort, and production logic.

The third and most critical layer, ***symbolic re-signification***, investigates how cultural meanings are reconstituted through the interaction of form and technique. Traditionally associated with social status, ritual order, and Confucian etiquette, the round-backed armchair acquires new symbolic functions in contemporary redesign contexts—such as comfort, sustainability, personalization, or cross-cultural identity.

Together, these three layers form an integrated analytical model that enables systematic comparison across redesign cases. By tracing how formal and technical transformations give rise to shifts in symbolic meaning, the framework reveals redesign as a process of cultural reinterpretation rather than mere formal modification. This model provides a methodological basis for analyzing classic furniture redesign as an evolving cultural practice embedded within broader social, technological, and ideological contexts.

4 Case Analysis: The Triadic Paths of Cultural Re-encoding

This section validates the proposed analytical model by systematically deconstructing three paradigmatic cases. These examples demonstrate how the Ming-style armchair traverses distinct semiotic pathways—Syntactic Purification, Material Contextualization, and Conceptual Deconstruction—to achieve contemporary relevance.

4.1 Path I: Syntactic Purification and Democratic Aesthetics

Representative Case: Hans Wegner's "The Chair" (1949)

Hans Wegner's interpretation represents the pathway of *Syntactic Purification*. As the most celebrated cross-cultural transformation of the 20th century, Wegner's design demonstrates a wisdom of "purification" rather than mere replication. His re-encoding strategy is characterized by a subtractive methodology. In terms of **formal translation**, Wegner captured the essential charm of the continuous horseshoe-back rail but ruthlessly excised decorative appendages. The traditional "goose-neck" posts and auxiliary connecting sticks were removed, streamlining the silhouette to align with the modernist dogma of "form follows function."

Technically, while abandoning the intricate complexity of traditional Chinese mortise-and-tenon joinery, Wegner introduced the "finger joint" technique to fuse the backrest and armrests. This innovation achieved a unity of structure and aesthetics, representing a pursuit of connection perfection analogous in spirit to traditional Chinese craftsmanship. Consequently, at the level of **cultural re-encoding**, the chair shed its feudal semiotics of "status" and "meditation." It was re-encoded as a symbol of "modern comfort" and "democratic values" suitable for Western middle-class living rooms. Its prominent usage in the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon televised debate solidified this shift, marking the chair's transition from an exclusive artifact of Eastern elites to a universal carrier of Western political and domestic values.

4.2 Path II: Material Contextualization and Technological Zen

Representative Case: Shang Xia's "Da Tian Di" Carbon Fiber Chair (2010)

The "Da Tian Di" series, co-founded by designer Jiang Qiong'er and the Hermès Group, illustrates the pathway of *Material Contextualization*. Here, the design strategy involves a high-fidelity preservation of form coupled with a subversive innovation in materiality. **Morphologically**, the chair almost fully replicates the outline of the classic Ming prototype, signaling a deliberate stance of cultural confidence and respect for tradition.

However, the **technical syntax** undergoes a revolutionary shift through the application of aerospace-grade carbon fiber. This material substitution creates a structural paradox: the chair retains a visually historic form yet possesses an incredibly lightweight physicality, reportedly liftable with just two fingers. Traditional joinery is superseded by modern one-piece composite molding technology. This material displacement triggers a dramatic **cultural re-encoding**. The traditional values of "heaviness" and "stability" —representing Confucian order and dignity—are re-encoded into "lightness" and "futurism." The design amplifies the Taoist concept of the "interplay of void and solid" through high-tech means, forming a unique "Techno-Zen" aesthetic that caters to the global luxury market's desire for a synthesis of Eastern aesthetics and cutting-edge technology.

4.3 Path III: Conceptual Deconstruction and Existential Reflection

Representative Case: Neri&Hu's "Ming Series Chair" (2012)

The "Ming Series," designed by Neri&Hu for Stellar Works, exemplifies the pathway of *Conceptual Deconstruction*. Adopting an architect's perspective, this approach moves beyond the object itself to question the very definition of the chair. **Formally**, the design strategy can be described as "capturing the essence while abandoning the form." Neri&Hu disassembled the chair into its primal elements—"sticks" and "seats" —recombining them to outline the memory or sketch of a chair rather than a tangible replication.

In terms of **craftsmanship**, the design utilizes a deliberate contrast between wood and metal, highlighting the independence of components and their structural logic. Traditional joinery is replaced by visible metal connectors, exposing the rational spirit of construction. Ultimately, this deconstruction pushes the **cultural meaning** towards abstraction and philosophy. The chair no longer encodes "ritual" or "comfort"; instead, it serves as a cultural installation that invites reflection on "essence" and "existence." This skeletal form poses a fundamental question about the soul of the object, elevating the round-backed armchair from a piece of furniture to a medium for critical intellectual discourse on the relationship between tradition and modernity.

5 Discussion: Generative Mechanisms and Pedagogical Implications

5.1 Mechanisms of Creative Transformation

The comparative analysis of the aforementioned cases reveals that the creative transformation of the Ming-style armchair is not a random stylistic exercise but a structured process of semiotic translation. It involves breakthroughs at the level of the material "signifier" and a profound reinterpretation at the level of the spiritual "signified." Based on the Triadic Model, this study synthesizes three core generative mechanisms for contemporary design.

The first mechanism is the **Abstract Refinement of Form**. Successful transformation transcends simple replication; it requires the extraction of core aesthetic genes—such as the chair's specific curvilinear geometry, proportional harmony, and spatial void—and their re-expression through abstract languages compatible with contemporary minimalism. The second mechanism is the **Contextual Reshaping of Materials**. The introduction of new materials serves not merely as a technological upgrade but as a reshaping of cultural context. Materials function as communicative media carrying the zeitgeist; for instance, the use of carbon fiber does not just reduce weight but actively encodes a "technological sense," while recycled composites embody the modern imperative of environmental ethics. The third mechanism is the **Scenario-based Expansion of Functions**. By liberating the round-backed armchair from its specific historical confines—such as the literati study or the feudal hall—and adapting it to diverse modern environments like offices and public spaces, design completes the fundamental transition from a "ritual utensil" to a versatile "daily life tool."

5.2 The Trap of Self-Orientalism and the Path to Cultural Confidence

Despite these successful pathways, the process of creative transformation faces significant cognitive challenges, primarily the risk of falling into the trap of "Self-Orientalism." A prevalent misunderstanding in current practice is the superficial symbolization of the "Chinese Style," characterized by the stylized stacking of concrete elements like red lanterns, dragon-phoenix patterns, or exaggerated lattice motifs. Such approaches cater to an external, stereotyped imagination of the East, reducing complex local cultures to fixed visual labels. This flattening of cultural expression not only leads to aesthetic kitsch but also results in the dissipation of genuine cultural connotations.

Therefore, high-quality design transformation must be anchored in cultural confidence. Rather than relying on explicit symbols to flaunt identity, designers should prioritize the implicit transmission of cultural genes—translating the invisible "aesthetic spirit" and "form philosophy" rather than just the visible shape. This requires maintaining an attitude of equal cross-cultural dialogue, seeking global aesthetic consensus and value resonance while retaining distinct local characteristics.

5.3 Implications for Design Pedagogy

These findings hold profound implications for design education, particularly for core curriculum courses such as the *History of Chinese and Foreign Arts and Crafts*. Traditionally, such courses have faced pedagogical limitations, often emphasizing the memorization of historical facts over contemporary application, and prioritizing morphological analysis over cultural translation. The contemporary "rebirth" of the Ming-style armchair offers a potent pedagogical model to bridge this gap. By analyzing these case studies, educators can guide students to move beyond the static appreciation of antiques and engage in the dynamic re-encoding of tradition. This approach facilitates a deep integration of "historical theory learning" and "design practice," equipping future designers with the critical tools to transform heritage into living culture.

6 Conclusion

6.1 From Artifact to Lifestyle: The Semiotic Shift

Through the systematic analysis of contemporary transformation paths, this study asserts that the successful modernization of the Ming-style round-backed armchair is not merely a stylistic update of form but a profound process of cultural symbol re-encoding. The transition from a classical "seating utensil" to a modern "lifestyle symbol" relies on a fundamental axiological shift. The core mechanism lies in translating the relatively elitist and localized philosophical codes of traditional culture—such as "harmony between man and nature" and "literati elegance"—into globalized values widely embraced by contemporary society. Through the generative mechanisms of morphological abstraction, material contextualization, and functional expansion, ancient concepts of ritual and hierarchy are successfully transmuted into modern narratives of "minimalist comfort," "technological sustainability," and "existential reflection"[70].

6.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

The primary theoretical contribution of this paper is the formulation of the **"Triadic Model of Cultural Re-encoding,"** which provides a structured analytical lens for research on heritage activation. By moving beyond descriptive case studies, this model reveals the internal logic required to maintain the value of traditional utensils in a modern context. It establishes that cultural vitality relies on the dynamic interplay between the stability of the *signifier* (form) and the fluidity of the *signified* (meaning)[71].

In terms of design practice, the findings offer a strategic roadmap for Chinese brands and designers seeking to promote culture "going global." The study suggests that balancing "localization" and "internationalization" requires avoiding superficial symbol stacking. Instead, designers must engage in a deep-structural translation of cultural genes to achieve a synthesis where the product is distinctively Chinese in spirit yet universally intelligible in function.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

While this study establishes a foundational framework through the analysis of three paradigmatic furniture cases, the applicability of the Triadic Model extends beyond seating. Future research should test the universality of this framework by applying it to a broader spectrum of traditional Chinese material culture, such as ceramics (tea sets), spatial elements (screens), and lighting. By expanding the scope of analysis, scholars can further refine this theoretical model, thereby depicting a more comprehensive picture of the innovative development and global integration of the Chinese cultural context.

References

[1] Wang, S. X. *Studies on Ming-Style Furniture* (《明式家具研究》, *Míngshì Jiājù Yánjiū*). SDX Joint Publishing Company (Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian), Beijing, 1985.

[2] Wu, J. E. *Ming-Style Furniture: Twenty Years of Connoisseurship* (《明式家具：二十年经眼录》, *Míngshì Jiājù: Èrshí Nián Jīngyǎn Lù*). The Palace Museum Press (Gùgōng Chūbǎnshè), Beijing, 2015.

[3] Olesen, C. H. *Wegner: Just One Good Chair*. Hatje Cantz, Copenhagen, 2014. Chinese edition: Olesen, C. H. *The Way of the Chair: Hans Wegner* (《椅之道：汉斯・瓦格纳》, *Yǐ Zhī Dào: Hàn Sī・Wǎgé Nà*), translated by Long Tao (Lóng Tāo). Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, Nanning, 2016.

[4] Baudrillard, J. *The System of Objects*. Translated by Benedict, J. Verso, London, 1996.

[5] Hall, S. (Ed.). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications, London, 1997.

[6] Jiao, Z. T., & Xu, M. M. Contemporary Reconstruction of Traditional Classics Based on the "Redesign" Method (《传统经典的当代再造——基于"Redesign"设计方法的视觉传达设计》, *Chuántǒng Jīngdiǎn de Dāngdài Zàizào——Jīyú "Redesign" Shèjì Fāngfǎ de Shìjué Chuándá Shèjì*). *Zhuangshi (Decoration)*, no. 2, 2017.

To Cite This Article Renbin Wang, Mingming Xu(2025). From Artifact to Lifestyle: A Triadic Model of Cultural Re-encoding in the Contemporary Redesign of Ming-Style Round-Backed Armchairs. *Costume and Culture Studies*, *2*(1), 12-19. https://doi.org/10.6914/cc.020102

Editor: Lingjiao SUN cpcl@cpcl.hk