

30. Two Wood *Ruyi* Scepters

Length of each: 35.5 cm. (14 in.)

Qing dynasty

19th century A.D.

One scepter is boxwood and carved with a relatively straight shaft with three small *ruyi* sprigs carved and undercut along the softly gnarled stem. A fourth *ruyi* is sprouting just behind and on top of the large fungus that is realistically rendered with layers of the *lingzhi* or cloud-like mushroom. The warm golden wood has a satin surface and is lightweight. The other scepter is heavier and carved from a dark hardwood of deep chocolate color with an elongated 'S'-curved stem with numerous knots. A single smaller fungus stem, equally knotted, shares the large one's base and entwines around the handle terminating in the cloud mushroom head below the larger principal fungus head.



Ruyi, “as you like it,” is the name given to motifs or objects fashioned in the form of the *lingzhi* fungus head (fig. 1). The *ruyi* scepters here are in the form of the characteristic fungus head, actually multiple heads, supported on stalks. The scepters can look quite naturalistic, as in the present example, and range from the simpler to the more ornate and are made in such other materials as jade, cloisonné, or ivory (figs. 2-5). Such articles were a good thing to possess. In popular belief the fungus was a source of longevity or even immortality when ingested. The “wish-granting” scepters were the property of Chinese scholars and officials, as well as Buddhist and Daoist clerics. They might symbolize power, status, or, in the hands of a Daoist, detachment. They were reassuring collectables to the Chinese scholar, among such accouterment as brush pots, brush rests, small wood and jade carvings⁷⁸ acquired by the elite for display on their desks or writing tables, for use or distraction, with the belief they would bring at least a modicum of good luck to their owners. Here in a Qing-dynasty porcelain painting, a child, surrounded by paraphernalia to relate him symbolically to a successful future, is holding in his left hand a *ruyi* scepter (figs. 6-7).

The image of a *lingzhi* fungus is seen frequently in Chinese art, either as a naturalistic plant growing in the wild, the quarry of the spotted deer able, like pigs after truffles, to find the elusive fungus, or as a formalized, geometricized motif, ubiquitous in later Chinese decorative arts whether standardized and linked together to form a decorative border or dissolved, stretched and reformed to produce clouds that bring to mind thoughts of immortality. The *lingzhi* was known to have immune building properties and was used medicinally in China since at least the Han period, and if not really a “fungus of immortality,” as it was touted to be, there is at least some scientific evidence for and practical reality in its potential efficacy in prolonging life.



Fig. 1: *Lingzhi* fungus, after <https://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine/herbs/reishi-mushroom>

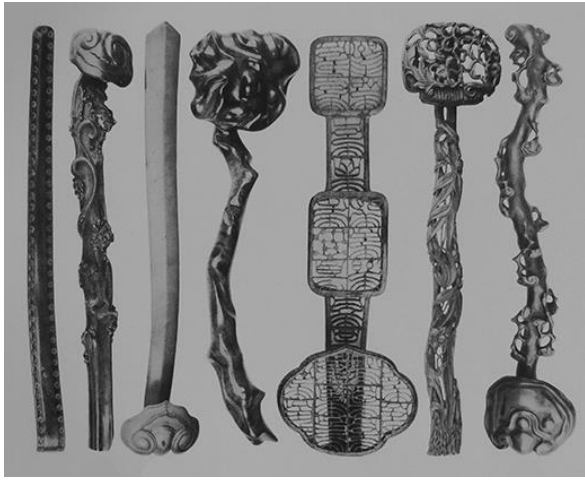


Fig. 2: *Ruyi* scepters, Qing dynasty, after Roger Keverne, *Bamboo & Wood Carvings of China and the East*, London, 1979, nos. 281-287, p. 71.

Fig. 3: Wood *ruyi* scepter, 17th century A.D., after Angus Forsyth, et.al., *Wood From the Scholar's Table: Chinese Hardwood Carvings and scholar's Articles*, Hong Kong, 1984, no. 107, p. 163.



Fig. 4: Wood *ruyi* scepter, 18th century A.D., after Angus Forsyth, et.al., *Wood From the Scholar's Table: Chinese Hardwood Carvings and scholar's Articles*, Hong Kong, 1984, no. 108, p. 163.

Fig. 5: Wood *ruyi* scepter, 18th-19th century A.D., after Angus Forsyth, et.al., *Wood From the Scholar's Table: Chinese Hardwood Carvings and scholar's Articles*, Hong Kong, 1984, no. 109, p. 163.



Fig. 6: Porcelain dish with enameled decoration, Qing dynasty, late 18th century A.D., Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, after Ann Barrott Wicks, ed., *Children in Chinese Art*, Honolulu, 2002, fig. 3.22, p. 77.



Fig. 7:

Detail of figure 6.