

Semiotic Meanings and Cross-Dynastic Inheritance of *Jiao* as Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Jiao (sedan chair) is an iconic traditional Chinese luxury conveyance and a significant item of material cultural heritage. This study conducts an in-depth investigation of its cultural inheritance mechanism and semiotic meanings. Findings reveal that the *Jiao* gradually evolved from a royal-exclusive conveyance into a cross-ethnic cultural carrier via a dual-track mechanism comprising top-down institutional prescriptions rooted in the Yufu System (i.e., the imperial ritual code governing carriages, attire, and regalia) and bottom-up folk adaptive practices. From a semiotic perspective, it embodies three hierarchically progressive layers of meaning: the denotative level, which denotes the intrinsic attributes of a functional luxury conveyance; the connotative level, which signifies the indexical function of social stratification; and the mythic level, which embodies the materialization of ideological hegemony. By integrating semiotic theory with cultural heritage research, this study clarifies the role of material cultural artifacts in mediating social hierarchical order and cultural continuity, provides practical insights for the preservation, interpretation, and transmission of traditional cultural relics, and enriches research perspectives in the field of cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Jiao*; Sedan Chair; Cultural Heritage; Semiotics; *Yufu System*

1 Introduction

Jiao (sedan chair) is a wheelless, human-powered conveyance in ancient China, carried by two or more bearers who distribute its weight by placing the carrying poles securely on their shoulders. Historically known as *jianyu* (literally “shoulder carriage”), it was officially designated “*jiao*” during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE). To date, the earliest archaeological evidence of the *Jiao* worldwide was unearthed from the accompanying burial pit of the Hougudui Tomb No. 1 in Henan Province, China, dating to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods (770–221 BCE; see Fig. 1).

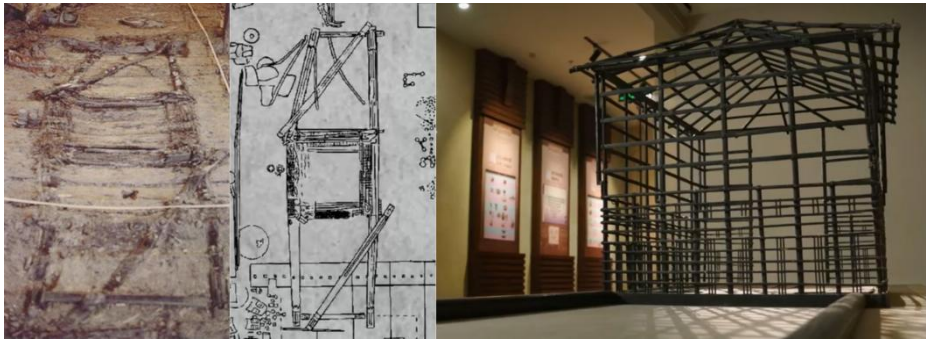


Fig. 1 The *Jiao* (sedan chair) unearthed from Hougudui Tomb No. 1 (Chronology: Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, 770 BCE – 221 BCE) [1].

As a unique human-powered luxury conveyance in traditional China, the *Jiao* constitutes a core component of material cultural heritage, embodying cross-dynastic continuity, hierarchical values, and ethnic integration. Existing scholarship on the *Jiao* has primarily focused on archaeological documentation or descriptive accounts of the Yufu System (literally “the system governing carriages and attire”), but lacks systematic analysis of its semiotic mechanisms and cultural inheritance from a cultural heritage perspective—a critical research gap that underpins the present study [2].

This research addresses two core questions: (1) How did the *Jiao* evolve from a royal monopoly and auxiliary military transport during the Qin–Tang dynasties (221 BCE–907 CE) to a popularized luxury conveyance in the Song Dynasty, and ultimately to a systematized, cross-ethnically inherited cultural heritage in the Ming–Qing dynasties (1368–1912 CE)? (2) What denotative, connotative, and mythic semiotic meanings has the *Jiao* accumulated, and how have these meanings interacted with imperial institutions and folk practices?

To explore the *Jiao*’s dynamic inheritance, this study integrates historical texts, semiotic theories, and canonical artworks to map its evolutionary trajectory within historical contexts. It first traces the *Jiao*’s cross-dynastic evolution, focusing on shifts in regulatory policies and transformations in its functional roles, then dissects the three-layered semiotic meanings embedded in the *Jiao*. Taking the *Jiao* as a paradigmatic case, this paper aims to enrich cultural heritage research by demonstrating how material artifacts mediate power relations and cultural continuity.

2 Cross-Dynastic Evolution and Inheritance of *Jiao*

A. Qin to Tang: Incidental Military Use and Royal Monopoly

From the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), the wider aristocratic class relied primarily on two-wheeled carriages and horseback riding for mobility, both of which were better adapted to traversing open plains. By contrast, the *Jiao* (sedan chair) emerged as a preferred conveyance among royal families, valued for its comfort, convenience, and manoeuvrability within the confined spaces of imperial palace compounds. Beyond its ceremonial use within the imperial court, its structural versatility also made it a practical choice for navigating mountainous terrain during military campaigns.

For instance, the fifth scene of *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Palace Ladies* depicts Emperor Cheng of Han (r. 33–7 BCE) journeying in an 8-bearer sedan chair within the imperial palace compounds (see Fig. 2). This visual depiction not only documented the exclusive use of such conveyances by imperial rulers but also entrenched their symbolic association with royal authority in cultural discourse. Furthermore, the *Han Shu* (*History of the Former Han Dynasty*) records that during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE), in 135 BCE, when ministers proposed launching a punitive expedition against Minyue, they noted that troops would need to use similar human-powered sedan chairs rather than travel on foot to traverse the mountainous terrain of the Minyue region (roughly corresponding to present-day Fujian Province, plus parts of southern Zhejiang, eastern Guangdong, and southeastern Jiangxi) [3].



Fig. 2 *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Palace Ladies* (detail). Traditionally attributed to Gu Kaizhi (c. 344–406 CE). Tang dynasty copy of the Eastern Jin original. Colour on silk. British Museum, London [4].

The *Yufu System*, a centralized imperial code that governed ceremonial attire, transportation and regalia, constituted a core cultural feature of this period. Its regulations strictly prohibited non-royal access to the enclosed *Jiao*, which was a refined variant of the human-powered sedan chairs documented in the Han Dynasty. These rules also designated this conveyance as an exclusive royal luxury, and this legal codification thereby anchored the *Jiao*'s cultural significance as a symbol of supreme imperial status.

To further illustrate how this institutional framework materialized in visual culture, a canonical Tang-dynasty painting, *Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy* (also known as *Bunian Tu*) offers compelling evidence. It depicts Emperor Taizong of Tang (r. 626–649 CE) in an audience with the envoy of Songtsen Gampo (r. 618–649 CE), the founding ruler of the Tibetan Empire. Though the ceremony took place within the imperial palace grounds and thus made long-distance travel unnecessary, the emperor is shown on a six-

attendant *bunian*, an early open-air precursor to the enclosed *Jiao* that also serves as the direct stylistic ancestor of the Han-era sedan chairs. This visual detail constitutes a deliberate symbolic display of hierarchical privilege codified by the *Yufu System*, which standardized conveyances as official status symbols. It thereby corroborates the stratified connotations embedded in *Jiao* as defined by this institutional framework (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 *Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy*. Attributed to Yan Liben (c. 601–673 CE). Tang dynasty. Colour on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing [5].

Though the *Jiao* and its Han-era antecedents served practical military purposes, these uses remained incidental. Throughout the Qin—Tang period, its core function and cultural significance were defined by royal exclusivity. Codified by the *Yufu System* as a legal emblem of imperial authority, the *Jiao* evolved from a functional vehicle into a hierarchical marker.

B. Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms to Song: Regulatory Liberalization

The collapse of the Tang Dynasty and the *Yufu System* protocols—which had upheld *Jiao*’s royal monopoly as an imperial hierarchical symbol—paved the way for regulatory liberalization. Amid warfare and fragmentation, Tang-era restrictions on *Jiao* were dramatically loosened, allowing it to transition from a royal prerogative to a mode of transport accessible to wealthy commoners. With all available livestock prioritized for military use, acute shortages of draft animals curtailed civilian access to animal-drawn mobility (e.g., horse-drawn carriages). This constraint directly fueled the proliferation of *Jiao*, as its human-powered mechanism eliminated reliance on scarce livestock. Thus, during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907—979 CE), the *Jiao* took root in grassroots society, and its semiotic connotation shifted from a “royal-exclusive signifier” to a broader “status marker”, laying the groundwork for its widespread popularization in the Song Dynasty.

Before the Song Dynasty, the *Jiao* mainly took the form of an open bed or chair. A significant innovation in the Song Dynasty was the emergence of the enclosed *Nuanjiao* (a covered sedan chair with enhanced privacy and comfort), which enhanced the vehicle’s ornate appearance while dramatically improving passenger privacy and comfort.

Following the Song Dynasty’s national unification, Emperor Taizong of Song (r. 976—997) reinstated core *Yufu System* rules inherited from the Tang Dynasty to consolidate the upper-class hierarchy. He restricted the use of *Nuanjiao* to royalty, senior officials, and nobility. This measure reflected tension between the court’s effort to reconstruct *Jiao*’s hierarchical symbolism

and the grassroots demand from title-less wealthy gentry, who adapted strategically by renting marginally upgraded *Jiao* that complied with *Yufu System* standards, signaling status while avoiding penalties.

In 1127, amid the Jin-Song Wars (1115–1234 CE), the Song court relocated south to establish the Southern Song (1127–1279 CE), with its capital at rainy Lin'an (modern-day Hangzhou). Wet, slippery roads made horseback riding perilous for officials, especially the elderly. Against this backdrop, Emperor Gaozong of Song (r. 1127–1162 CE) liberalized public access to *Jiao* while regulating bearer numbers to uphold hierarchy. Owing to its dual appeal as a status symbol and a comfortable conveyance, *Nuanjiao* gained widespread popularity. From this point onward, the *Jiao* became the most prominent luxury transport in imperial Chinese culture. This balance between court-imposed hierarchy and grassroots popularization laid the foundation for the Song Dynasty's "popularization-hierarchy coexistence" model of *Jiao* use".

C. Ming-Qing: Regulatory Refinement of *Jiao*

Building on the Song's "popularization-hierarchy coexistence" model, the Ming and Qing refined *Yufu System* rules for *Jiao*, institutionalizing its hierarchical inheritance and fueling tensions between court protocols and grassroots adaptations. The Qing further adopted this framework to consolidate cross-ethnic cultural identity, embodying *Jiao*'s dual-track (top-down/bottom-up) inheritance vitality.

Early Ming Emperor Hongwu banned official *Jiao* use to curb indolence; Emperor Jingtai later revised regulations (1450–1456), restoring elite access and introducing granular hierarchies—classified by bearer numbers (emperor: 16/128 for funerals; princes/governors: 8; citizens: 2–4, with 8-bearer exceptions for wedding grooms), colors, and materials. Ming gentry strategically used sub-rank but above-civilian specifications to assert status, spurring a thriving folk *Jiao* rental industry. Color norms reinforced hierarchy: imperial red/gold, official blue/green, and civilian black.

The Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE), established by the Manchu ethnic group, inherited the Ming's political ideology and *Jiao*-related *Yufu System* regulations as a strategic measure to consolidate rule and advance cultural integration. This inheritance served as a tool for forging multi-ethnic cultural identity. By adopting the Ming *Jiao* regulations, the Manchu regime aligned its rule with traditional Chinese hierarchical culture, mitigating ethnic tensions between Manchus and Han Chinese. After 276 years of Ming governance, *Jiao* usage norms had been deeply internalized across all ethnic groups. Through the dual mechanisms of institutional inheritance and cultural internalization, *Jiao* evolved into a core carrier of traditional Chinese hierarchical culture, achieving enduring cross-ethnic and cross-dynastic continuity.

3 Semiotic Meanings of *Jiao* in Chinese culture

Jiao, as a traditional Chinese luxury mobility and material cultural symbol, embodies three interconnected levels of meaning in semiotics: denotative, connotative, and mythic. These three dimensions are not only interwoven but also hierarchically progressive, collectively shaping the profound symbolic value of *Jiao* in imperial Chinese culture.

A. Denotative and Connotative Meanings of *Jiao*

In semiotics, denotative meaning refers to the definitional, literal, and recognizable associations of a sign, which retains the same meaning across all cultural contexts [6-7]. Connotative meaning, by contrast, refers to the social-cultural and personal (e.g., ideological, emotional) associations of a sign [8-9], and it is contingent upon the sign-receiver's conditions (e.g., social class, age, cultural background, and ethnicity).

The denotative meaning of the *Jiao* aligns with the core objective attributes of luxury mobility in traditional China. First, in terms of physical form and power source, the *Jiao* is a human-powered passenger device, distinct from animal-powered (horse or ox-driven) vehicles. Second, in terms of functionality, it offers greater comfort (via its enclosed structure that shields passengers from jolts) and maneuverability (adapting flexibly to narrow streets and winding alleys without being constrained by animal behavior)—a key advantage tailored to the compact, labyrinthine layout of traditional Chinese urban settlements—than ordinary mobility options such as pedestrian travel or simple animal-drawn carts. Third, in terms of resource attributes, the *Jiao* qualifies as a scarce luxury mobility option unaffordable to the general public. It should be noted that the cost of human labor versus animal power varied across dynasties; the *Jiao*'s "expensiveness" was not an absolute judgment of power costs, but a relative one based on the labor and wealth reserves of ordinary people. Its acquisition and use required substantial resources. This denotative meaning fully reflects the objective characteristics of traditional Chinese luxury mobility—costly, efficient, and functionally superior. For instance, the denotative meaning of the *Jiao* in the Song Dynasty is consistent with that of the sedan chair in the 18th-century Kingdom of Great Britain, as both denote a human-powered, comfortable, and easily maneuverable luxury means of passenger transport [see Fig. 4].



Fig. 4 *Jiao* in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (Song Dynasty, 960–1279 CE) and sedan chair in *A Rake's Progress* (1734, Kingdom of Great Britain) [10–11]

The connotative meaning of *Jiao* centers on the symbolic expression of social identity differentiation, rooted in the perception that controlling human labor yields greater psychological satisfaction and a sense of identity superiority than harnessing animals. First, the functional advantages defined by *Jiao*'s denotation (comfort and ease of operation) are directly encoded as cultural signals of identity distinction. Unlike animal-powered vehicles, which rely on natural forces (animal strength and habits) and entail uncontrollable

factors, *Jiao*'s convenience and comfort stem entirely from the user's control over others' labor. This ability to "direct human labor" grants users complete autonomy, fostering a strong sense of psychological mastery. Such an experience distinguishes users from ordinary people, who either toil themselves or submit to natural forces, thus becoming an initial marker of social stratification [12]. Second, the scarcity and luxury inherent in *Jiao*'s denotative attributes further reinforce this connotation of identity differentiation. As a mobility option inaccessible to most, *Jiao* naturally became the exclusive domain of the wealthy and powerful. By using *Jiao*, individuals transformed the disparity in mobility resources between themselves and the general public into a visible symbol of social hierarchy. In essence, consuming this luxury mobility option constitutes a public declaration and confirmation of one's high social status—distinct from the utilitarian, identity-neutral meaning of pedestrian travel or animal-drawn carts used by commoners—ultimately establishing *Jiao* as a core symbol of social identity differentiation in traditional China.

B. Mythic Meaning and Ideological Construction of Jiao

When the connotative meaning of the *Jiao* (social identity differentiation) is further solidified and elevated, it evolves into a higher-level "mythic or ideological order"—a dimension transcending the connotative cultural coding to enter the realm of ideological naturalization [13]. This order, distinct from the sign's literal denotation and extended connotation, is not merely a materialization of cultural concepts but a power-laden construct that serves the ruling class by masking exploitation [14]. Roland Barthes defines myth as a tool of hidden cognitive hegemony: through state-enforced rules and daily ritualization, it erases the artificiality of oppressive structures, thereby naturalizing ideology into an unconscious consensus actively endorsed by the oppressed. The *Jiao* epitomizes this deceptive logic [15].

Anchored in the *Yufu system*—a state-mandated system governing dress and carriages—the myth of *Jiao* imbued tangible symbols with power. Specifically, emperors were entitled to 16-bearer *Jiao*, officials to 8- or 4-bearer *Jiao*, and commoners to only 2-bearer *Jiao*. Gold and yellow were reserved exclusively for the imperial family and strictly prohibited for both officials and commoners, while dragon-phoenix embroidery remained a royal monopoly. These regulations translated abstract class oppression into tangible constraints, rendering hierarchy not only visible but also seemingly inevitable.

Reinforced by millennia of daily interaction, including the ritualized use of *Jiao* by the upper class and the instinctive deference of commoners as recorded in Ming literati notes stating that "ordinary people must stand aside silently when officials *Jiao* pass," these rules gradually lost their human-made traces and evolved into self-evident social norms. Transgression of these norms constituted not only a violation of state law but also a breach of a "natural" social order. Crucially, the lower classes did not aspire to dismantle this hierarchical system; instead, they strived to ascend within it, pursuing the very *Jiao*-based privileges that perpetuated their exploitation.

Ultimately, the myth of *Jiao* naturalized privilege into a moral order, obscuring its essence as an instrument of class exploitation—one whose luxury was built on the backbreaking and underpaid labor of bearers. This myth functioned as a dynamic mechanism of cognitive control: by transforming the oppressed into unwitting upholders of the hierarchical system, it reproduced imperial dominance without resorting to brute force. For the study of cultural

heritage and brand semiotics, *Jiao* serves as a paradigmatic case of how material objects are encoded with multi-layered meanings, from tangible utility to invisible ideological power.

4 Conclusion

This study examines *Jiao*'s cultural evolution, cross-dynastic inheritance, and semiotic meanings as a key cultural heritage artifact. Core findings reveal that *Jiao*'s development from Qin to Qing was shaped by a tension between "popularization" and "hierarchy," sustained through a dual-track model of top-down institutional mandates and bottom-up folk adaptations—enabling its endurance across dynastic and ethnic boundaries. Semiotically, *Jiao* exhibits a hierarchical progression: denotative attributes (human-powered, comfortable, scarce) define it as luxury transport; connotative meaning encodes social identity differentiation; mythic meaning, naturalized via the *Yufu System*, reinforces imperial hegemony by masking class exploitation as "natural order." Across dynasties, this dual-track model manifested as imperial *Yufu System* regulations (top-down) and folk adaptive practices (bottom-up)—from the Qin-Tang royal monopoly to the Song's grassroots popularization, and finally to the Ming-Qing's refined hierarchical integration.

This study fills gaps in existing research by combining semiotics with cultural heritage analysis, offering a framework for the study of traditional material artifacts. Limitations include a focus on elite/imperial contexts; future research could explore *Jiao*'s modern cultural preservation. Overall, *Jiao*'s multi-layered meanings and adaptive inheritance highlight the vitality of Chinese material cultural heritage, providing insights for relic preservation and interpretation.

DECLARATIONS

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