

The Harmony of Form and Meaning: A Study of the Design Evolution of Ancient Chinese Staffs

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Abstract: This article examines ancient Chinese staffs as its subject, tracing their design evolution throughout history and the rich cultural connotations they have. It explores the design philosophy of form and meaning in these ancient staffs, as well as the social significance and mission inherent in their creation. Through rich research into papers, relevant literature, and field investigations, this article employs a design studies perspective to classify the forms of ancient Chinese staffs and explore the evolution of their functions and cultural significance. By examining seven principal periods spanning from the pre-Qin dynasty to the modern era, this study traces the evolutionary period of artifact design, identifies the developmental patterns, and offers insights for translating these principles into contemporary design. Throughout the ages, the forms of staffs display distinct characteristics, whose formal evolution constitutes the process of constructing a new cultural memory. This deeply shapes social aesthetic consciousness, perpetuates ethical norms, and lays the foundation for establishing social order. Therefore, contemporary design, in its pursuit of sustainable development, must not only prioritize external formal innovation but also take root in its inherent cultural essence, whilst aligning with the present conditions of development.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; Design of Creation; Staff Culture; Design Evolution; Ancient Staff; Chinese Staff.

1. Introduction

The Rites of Zhou records: "The Yi Qi clan oversaw the great state sacrifices and provided staffs accordingly; in military campaigns, staffs were granted to those of noble rank; and staffs were also supplied according to the king's age." Su Dongpo wrote in *Dingfengbo*: "A bamboo staff and straw sandals are lighter than a horse — what is there to fear? A straw cloak is all one needs to wander through wind and rain for a lifetime," expressing a spirit of equanimity in the face of adversity. [1] On September 11, 2013, the floral and wooden walking staff of Zhangliang Temple was inscribed into the fourth batch of Shaanxi Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage. Also, in the same year, the Jianmen staff of Sichuan — also known as the "*Kongming Staff*" — was designated as part of the third batch of intangible cultural heritage items in Guangyuan City, and in 2023, it was further inscribed into the sixth batch of Sichuan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage. As defined in Chinese classical lexicography, "*Staff*" means to hold. Its Chinese character derives from the wood radical with the phonetic component *Staff*. Anything that can be held, or that a person holds for support, may be called a Staff." The staff, though seemingly an unremarkable and commonplace object of daily life, carries within it a profound historical depth; its formal design was shaped by a wide range of cultural forces in ancient China and, in turn, reflects the transformations of successive historical periods. At the same time, the staff continually evolved new functions and symbolic meanings throughout its practical application, undergoing a dynamic process of transformation. The fusion of diverse philosophies further endowed it with a complex cultural significance, establishing it as one of ancient China's pivotal cultural symbols[2]—distinguished by its unique blend of practical utility and artistic refinement.

2. Neolithic China – The Appearance of the Chinese Staff

Regarding distribution, extant archaeological findings indicate that Neolithic China staff-like artifacts are primarily concentrated in the Yellow River Basin, the Yangtze River Basin, and the Northern Steppe region. At the Ningjiazhuang site in Xihe County, Gansu Province — situated within the Yellow River basin — one painted pottery staff finial dating to the late Yangshao period was unearthed (Fig. 1); as the earliest known ceramic staff head in China, this find provides critical material evidence for the study of the culture and design of early staffs. In the northern steppe region, one stone staff head was recovered from the Hongshan Culture site at Nastai in Inner Mongolia. Within the Yangtze River basin, the Hemudu site in Zhejiang yielded a wooden fish-shaped staff (Fig. 2) — a representative artifact in the collection of the Zhejiang Museum; carved from a single piece of wood, it features an overall T-shaped structure in which a slender shaft is surmounted by a fish-form handle, while the surface of the shaft is decorated with an incised pattern combining straight and diagonal lines. What's more, two bronze pigeon-ended staffs were discovered at the Kayue culture site in Huangyuan, Qinghai (see Figure 3); and three star-shaped perforated stone implements (octagonal, with a 6 cm pore diameter) found in the Dexin and Yanbian areas of Jilin are suspected to be attachments for agricultural tools. Although the number of artifacts unearthed so far remains relatively limited, these objects are like scattered pearls in the river of history. Each one carries information about its specific period of creation, reflecting the diverse functions of staff in that era.

First, staffs before the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties primarily served as essential tools for survival. In terms of materials, staff-like artifacts from this period most frequently utilized stones such as marble and sandstone, which are

relatively hard yet easy to process;



Fig 1. Painted pottery staff finial, late Yangshao culture. Unearthed from the Ningjiazhuang site.

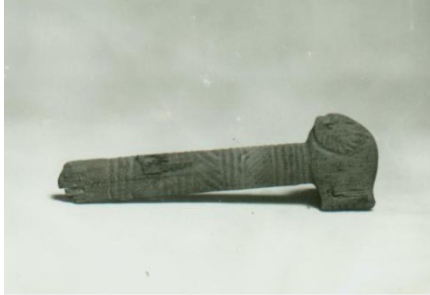


Fig 2. Wooden fish-shaped staff. Unearthed from Hemudu site.



Fig 3. Bronze staff with pigeon-shaped finial, Kayue culture. Unearthed in Qinghai; Collection of Qinghai Provincial Museum.

for instance, the marble staff head from the Dadiwan site features a fine texture that provided a solid foundation for subsequent processing techniques like perforation. Ceramics were also commonly used for staffs, with argillaceous red pottery being the most prevalent; for example, the painted pottery staff head ornament from the Ningjiazhuang site demonstrates how this material was easily shaped and decorated using contemporary pottery techniques. Wooden staffs of this era were primarily crafted from hardwood, such as the wooden fish-shaped staff from the Hemudu site; the main reason is that the choice of hardwood ensured structural durability when the staff was utilized as a functional tool. In terms of form, staff heads in this period mostly appeared in spherical or oblate spherical forms, some of which featured perforations. The reason is that spherical and oblate designs are mechanically more stable and ergonomic for gripping and

use; this characteristic is exemplified by the circular form of the Dadiwan stone staff head and the oblate design of the Nasitai stone staff head. Furthermore, the introduction of perforations was intended to ensure a secure connection with the wooden handle, thereby enhancing the overall functional utility of the staff. Consequently, analyzed through the lenses of material, form, and structure, the staffs of this period functioned as vital survival tools and practical objects, representing a classic integration of ornament and function in ancient artifact design.

Furthermore, early Chinese staff frequently functioned as symbols of primitive power. From the late Neolithic period to the Bronze Age, the staff gradually became the materialization of theocratic and regal power, with its form and ornamentation often bearing the religious narrative function of "communication between humans and divinities." A representative case is the Siba culture bronze mace head with four ram heads excavated from Huoshaogou in Yumen, Gansu (see Figure 4); standing 8.5 cm tall, it features four symmetrically cast ram heads with coiled horns around its midsection, with mouths upturned and raised ridges decorating the neck, reflecting a "ram-head worship" associated with the totem beliefs of the Qiang people. According to Professor Pang Yaoxian's research, the ram symbolized the Sun God in ancient Qiang culture; thus, this mace likely served as a ritual implement for tribal leaders presiding over ceremonies, embodying the primitive religious logic of "communing with gods through the ram."



Fig 4. Bronze scepter with four goat motifs. Collection of Gansu Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau.

Staffs in Northern China also reinforced the sacrality of power through the strategic use of jade materials. The central bi-directionally drilled hole of the Hongshan Culture "Jade Pig-Dragon" measures 2.4–3.1 cm in diameter; discovered near the abdomen of the tomb owner, it forms a combination of staff head and handle alongside the animal-mask jade plaques from the Niuheliang stone mound burials, reflecting the tribal leaders' use of jade to symbolize theocratic power. This tradition of "serving divinities with jade" evolved into a formal ritual system during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, as recorded in the *Rites of Zhou: Offices of Spring* regarding the use of "blue-green jade bi-disks to worship Heaven"; meanwhile, the perforation techniques seen in Siba Culture jade scepter heads (such as the white marble staff head from Dadiwan) already demonstrate the embryonic concept of "communing with gods via jade staffs."

3. The Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties – The Evolution of the Chinese Staff

Regarding distribution, staff-like artifacts from the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties are primarily concentrated in the

Central Plains core zone, the Northwest region, and the Wu-Yue cultural areas of the South in China, with approximately 50 typical specimens excavated as follows: In the Central Plains, two ivory and bone scepters were unearthed from the Erlitou site in Yanshi, Henan[3]; one spherical stone mace head was found at Xiaotun in the Yin Ruins of Anyang; and bronze scepter heads were excavated from the West Zhou tombs at Zhuyuangou in Baoji and the Bo Hu tomb in Fufeng, Shaanxi. Bronze and stone staff heads were also recovered from the Cemetery of the Marquis of Jin in Quwo, Shanxi, and the West Zhou tombs at Beiyao in Luoyang, totaling approximately 20 pieces, all of which originated from elite burials within the royal domain. More than 10 stone staff heads were excavated from Siba culture burials in Huoshaogou, Yumen; additionally, bronze pigeon-head staffs were found at the Kayue culture site in Huangyuan, Qinghai, totaling 15 pieces concentrated in the Hexi Corridor and the Hehuang Valley. Also, in the Southern Wu-Yue region, bronze pigeon-themed staffs were unearthed from the Spring and Autumn Period tomb at Beishanding in Dantiao, Jiangsu, and Zhongzhuang Village in Shaoxing, Zhejiang; these three discovered examples feature bird-shaped finials and staff ferrules (ferrules) shaped like kneeling human figures. During this period, staff designs and decorations became more imposing, while naturalistic patterns also appeared more frequently on the staff shafts.

3.1. The Staff Designed as a Representative of Military and Political Power

During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties, staff-like artifacts became reified symbols of regal and military authority, with their cultural significance manifested through burial contexts, morphological combinations, and institutional constructions. The origin of this function lies in the gradual evolution of the scepter into a symbol of command within military scenarios. The bronze staff heads unearthed from the West Zhou tombs at Beiyao, Luoyang—decorated with boss and flute motifs—were interred alongside chariot fittings and weaponry; some feature a cylindrical socket at the lower end for attaching a long handle, suggesting their use as command instruments in chariot warfare. Professor Li Shuicheng of Peking University notes that such staff heads are typically heavy and solid, serving both ceremonial and practical functions; this forms an intertextual link with the records in the *Rites of Zhou: Offices of Summer* stating that the "Superintendent of Arms manages the five weapons and five shields," confirming the institutionalized application of staffs in military ritual. The essence of the staff as a power symbol in military contexts ultimately served the political authority of the ruling class.

3.2. The Staff Designed as an Object of Totemic and Religious Worship

Staffs unearthed from this period are no longer dominated by geometric forms; instead, zoomorphic and phytomorphic finials have emerged, alongside naturalistic motifs appearing on the shafts. The most quintessential example is the Shang Dynasty gold scepter unearthed from Sacrificial Pit No. 1 at Sanxingdui; measuring 1.42 meters in length, it consists of a wooden core wrapped in gold foil and is engraved with human heads, birds, and fish. This combination of fish, bird, and arrow resonates with the legend of "King Yufu" of the ancient Shu State, suggesting it was a "magic staff" used by shamans or leaders to communicate between heaven and earth, thereby

validating the theocratic narrative in *Chronicles of Huayang* that "King Yufu hunted at Mount Jian and suddenly attained immortality." Professor Lang Jianfeng from the School of Archaeology at Shandong University notes that the bird motifs on bronze staff heads from the Wu-Yue region share an ideological origin with the belief in birds perched on the Fusang (Sacred Tree); the flying bird atop the staff symbolizes the sun's trajectory, constituting a worship system centered on the sun and divine birds. It can thus be inferred that staff-like artifacts of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties served as material carriers of totemic and religious worship; through animal forms, decorative symbols, and sacrificial contexts, they embodied the belief systems of ancient people regarding natural deities and ancestral totems.

4. The Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods – The Transformation of the Chinese Staff

Regarding distribution, the excavation of staffs during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods was primarily concentrated in the Yunnan region and the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region. Nearly 500 staff-like artifacts emerged in the Yunnan region during this period, concentrated in the areas surrounding Dianchi Lake and Erhai Lake. Among the most representative sites is the Warring States period tomb at Hongtupo in Xiangyun, Yunnan, which yielded 160 bronze bird-shaped staffs and 37 chicken-shaped staff heads. [4] In the Wu-Yue cultural zone of the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, approximately 10 similar artifacts were unearthed. A defining characteristic of staffs during this period is the prolific emergence of pigeon-shaped (*jiu*) staff heads. [5] Simultaneously, the mass appearance of bronze staffs within the Yunnan bronze culture zone constitutes an extremely significant cultural phenomenon.

4.1. The Staff Designed as a Representative of Military and Political Power

During this period, over 90% of metallic staffs were cast in bronze, such as the Warring States pigeon-shaped staff head with gold and silver inlay in the Palace Museum collection, whose finial features a long-necked, long-tailed pigeon embellished with inlaid silver-wire feather patterns; wooden staffs are only occasionally found in Warring States tombs in Qufu, Shandong, characterized by simple forms without complex ornamentation. The trident-shaped bronze staff heads unearthed from the Yanxiadu site in Yixian, Hebei, resemble war-flag emblems and feature a socket at the base for inserting a long pole; archaeological evidence shows they were mostly located at the four corners of burial outer-coffins, possibly used to mark military positions or direct formations, reflecting the staff's practical function and symbolic power in warfare contexts. The gold-and-silver inlaid pigeon staff unearthed from the Warring States tombs at the ancient capital of the Lu State in Qufu, Shandong, measures 20.5 cm in total height and 20.8 cm in length; the cylindrical socket at the lower end contains traces of decayed wood, confirming its function as a metallic handle for a wooden staff. The staff head is composed of three-dimensionally carved dragon-like beasts: the long-jawed primary dragon holds a snake-bodied, bird-beaked creature in its mouth, while another serpentine beast coils around the dragon's body, biting the beast's head and connecting to the bird's tail, forming a multi-layered composite animal structure. The entire object is decorated

with gold and silver inlay, exhibiting a complexity and refinement that reflects the superior craftsmanship of the Lu State and serves as a representative artifact of the contemporary ritual civilization. Additionally, the Spring and Autumn bronze pigeon staff unearthed from Lizhu, Shaoxing, Zhejiang, features a standing pigeon finial and a ferrule shaped like a kneeling human figure; its overall morphology echoes the record in *Zuo Zhuan* stating that "the Shaohao clan named official positions after birds."

4.2. The Staff Designed as a Representative of Regional Culture

As this period coincided with the zenith of the Yunnan Bronze Age, the large-scale emergence of bronze staffs in the Yunnan region formed a distinctive representative of regional culture, characterized by a significant number of biomorphic designs. Among the most representative examples are the bronze staffs from the Hongtupo cemetery in Xiangyun, Yunnan; for instance, the twin-pigeon bronze staff head unearthed from a tomb with a wooden outer coffin and a bronze inner coffin simulates the intertwined necks and chirping of birds through a symmetrical composition, which is linked to the local agrarian belief in "divine birds governing the rain" (see Figure 5). The peacock-shaped staff head from tomb M12 at Shizhaishan, Jinning, features tail feathers fanned out like a screen and is inlaid with turquoise; this echoes the rain-petitioning ritual motifs found on Dian culture cowrie containers, reflecting the cultural psychology of the Dian people who used the morphology of staff implements to pray for a bountiful harvest.



Fig 5. Bronze staff finial with double-pigeon motifs. Unearthed from Hongtupo, Xiangyun, Yunnan.

Overall, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods represent a pivotal era for the evolution of the staff system, characterized most significantly by the large-scale emergence of pigeon-shaped staff heads with exquisite ornamentation. In China such as Yunnan, Jiangsu-Zhejiang, and Sichuan, varying numbers of biomorphic staffs and unique branch-shaped staff heads have been discovered, embodying diverse religious meanings ranging from military-political power to sun and sacred tree worship. Meanwhile, the pigeon-shaped staffs unearthed from the Guodian Chu tombs and the Nanyue Palace site during this period exhibit a more realistic style and practical functionality. Taking the Nanyue Palace pigeon staff as an example, it measures 10 cm from beak to tail and 6.5 cm from head to the bottom of the abdomen[6]; its plump physique and structural proportions closely mirror the natural form of a real pigeon, while also being ergonomically suited for gripping. A circular hole at the bottom of the bird's abdomen, measuring 1.4 cm in diameter and 2.4 cm in depth,

suggests it was designed to be fitted onto a wooden pole (see Figure 6). As a conclusion, this era served as a transitional phase for the morphology and connotation of staffs, laying the foundation for the zenith of staff development during the Han Dynasty.



Fig 6. Pigeon-shaped staff finial. Unearthed from the Palace Site of the Nanyue Kingdom.

5. The Han Dynasty – The Golden Age of the Chinese Staff

In terms of distribution, the Han Dynasty represents the zenith of staff evolution. Staff artifacts of this period center on the pigeon-headed staff (*jiuzhang*), with 69 total specimens: 52 physical artifacts and 17 depictions on pictorial bricks. [4]The excavated pigeon staffs exhibit diverse morphologies, primarily composed of wood and bronze[7], with limited instances of gold, silver, and ceramics. The geographical distribution is concentrated in three main zones, characterized by dense clusters in the Northwest and diffusion toward the Southeast: the Northwest centers on Gansu; East China is represented by Jiangsu and Zhejiang; and North China and the Central Plains are localized in Shandong and Henan.

5.1. The Staff Designed as a Symbol of Respect for the Elderly

The proliferation of pigeon-headed staffs during this period was primarily driven by the establishment of the Royal Staff System (*Wangzhang System*) centered on the pigeon motif. With "filial piety" as a national policy, the pigeon staff became the core symbol for state-promoted ethics regarding respect for the elderly. The most representative case is the wooden pigeon staff unearthed from Mozuizi in Wuwei, Gansu; it measures 1.94 m in length and 4 cm in diameter, featuring a painted wooden pigeon finial (see Figure 7). Accompanying the staff were bamboo slips titled "Decree on Royal Staffs" (*Wangzhang Shijian*), recording that recipients aged seventy held a status equivalent to officials earning 600 dan of grain and were exempt from hurrying in court; this linked the staff to official rank, transforming elderly care from moral advocacy into institutional honor (see Figure 8). Another wooden pigeon staff in the Wuwei Museum corroborates these records; the bird is depicted in a reclining pose with wings folded and contains a square mortise for joining the shaft. Its most distinct feature is a grain in its beak, symbolizing the pigeon as a "bird that never chokes," thus integrating physiological care with ethical symbolism (see Figure 9). These national-level artifacts, alongside pigeon staff imagery on Han pictorial bricks, construct a multi-dimensional vision of elderly respect, proving the staff had become a material bond for family ethics and social consensus. Furthermore, the pigeon—a totemic symbol of

theocratic power in the pre-Qin period—was endowed with secular connotations of filial piety during the Han Dynasty. The bronze staff head from the Mancheng Han Tomb retains only the head form, measuring 5.7 cm; its long beak, small eyes, and oval neck indicate a shift away from theocratic aesthetics. The feeding-type bronze staff from Yaojia Village, Liaoning, measures 11.3 cm in height and 12.5 cm in length; its "large pigeon feeding a fledgling" motif directly interprets the ethical concepts of elder care and child-rearing. This transition, combined with the narrative in *Fengsu Tongyi*—where Emperor Gaozu escaped danger due to a pigeon's cry and subsequently presented the elder with a pigeon staff—transformed the pigeon from a natural deity into an ethical symbol; the staff, through its functional grip and artistic potential for finial decoration, became the primary carrier of these values.



Fig 7. Wooden pigeon-ended staff, Han dynasty. Unearthed from Mozuizi tombs, Wuwei, Gansu.



Fig 8. Wangzhang Shijian, Han dynasty.



Fig 9. Painted wooden pigeon, Han dynasty. Collection of Wuwei City Museum.

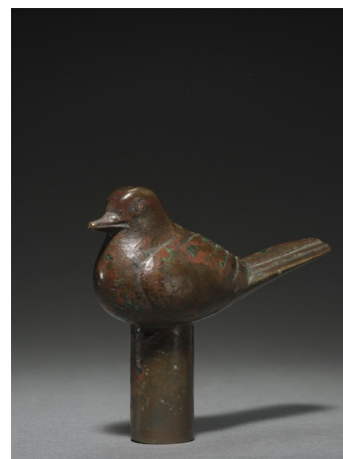


Fig 10. Bronze pigeon-shaped staff finial, Han dynasty. Collection of Confucius Museum.

5.2. The Staff Designed as a tool for Social Governance

During the Han Dynasty, the staff served as a carrier of legal privilege and identity authentication, assisting rulers in social governance. In the Mozuizi Han tombs of Wuwei, the pigeon staff was unearthed alongside pictorial bricks depicting "Loan Negotiations" (*Gaodai Tu*), reflecting that staff holders participated in grassroots economic affairs as agents of state governance. Simultaneously, the pigeon staff appears alongside elders and political officials in the "Conversation Scene" (*Jiaotan Tu*) from Feicheng, Shandong, and the "Lao Laizi Entertaining His Parents" from Haining, Zhejiang. This design, which elevated family ethics into state ideology, transformed the pigeon staff into a cultural link connecting imperial power, the bureaucracy, and grassroots society within the Han unified governance system.

6. The Tang, Song, and Yuan Dynasties – The Refinement of the Chinese Staff

During the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, the distribution of staffs followed a pattern of "bamboo in the west and rattan in the east, artistry in the south and ritual in the north," with over 500 cases identified across archaeological finds and historical records, primarily concentrated in the Central Plains, the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region, and Sichuan. These regions were characterized by cultural prosperity and a high concentration of the literati class. In terms of morphology, staffs utilized diverse materials—primarily wood, bamboo, rattan, and goosefoot—featuring minimalist decoration and an emphasis on natural textures, aligning with the aesthetic preferences of the intelligentsia. Records of staffs during this period are predominantly found in classical poetry and paintings.

During this period, the primary function of the staff was as an object for literary lyrical expression. This is first evidenced by the diverse materials used—including bamboo, rattan, and wood—originating from various regions. Wood was the first material used for large-scale staff production; due to complex processing requirements, easily carvable species like *Lingshou* wood were typically selected.

In the Tang Dynasty, goosefoot staffs, crafted from the aged stems of herbaceous *Chenopodium*, became indispensable companions in the daily lives of the literati. Furthermore, bamboo staffs were common; however, despite their broad distribution, only specimens with solid textures and wide

internodes were suitable for fabrication. [8]For instance, the *Qiongzhu* staff from Qiongzhou was characterized by its hardness, lightness, nine-node structure, and aesthetic appeal. Additionally, the *Taozhu* staff from Sichuan, made from Lingshou peach branches, was popular among Tang and Song scholars. Rattan was rarer than wood or bamboo, yet a distinctive feature of the Tang and Song periods was the red rattan staff (also known as the crimson rattan staff) from Nanzhao in China. Featuring a robust, straight stem with six evenly spaced nodes, this exotic object was imbued with imaginative colors of the "tropical wilderness"; through the literary works of Han Yu and Bai Juyi, it gradually evolved into a symbol of Tang-Song elegant style. [8]The crimson rattan staff emerged in the Tang and Song but vanished during the Ming and Qing dynasties, a transition linked to the contemporary ecological environment.

Regarding decoration, poems from the Tang and Song seldom described ornamental details, focusing instead on overall morphology and underlying meaning—as seen in Zhang Ji's description of a white rattan staff: "The divine vine serves as a cane, pure and white as silver." Literati of this era frequently endowed staffs with rich cultural connotations through descriptors such as "withered," "curved," "slender," and "rustic," transforming the object into a carrier of emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. Additionally, Song poetry reveals that the staff, as a spiritual symbol, was often paired with specific attire to achieve a unified cultural persona. As in Liu Xueji's *Congratulating the Newlywed*: "Before such grace, he wanders lightly with staff and thread, clad in simple hemp and linen"; [1]or Chen Zhu's *Spring in the Garden*: "Straw sandals and bamboo staff, sufficing to satisfy his hidden desires." Common elements like headscarves and straw sandals shared a characteristic of simplicity and rusticity, aligning with the recluse spirit and intellectual freedom symbolized by the Song dynasty staff.

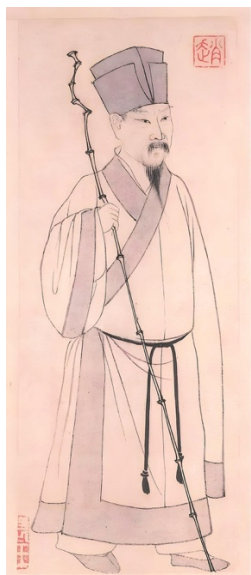


Fig 11. Zhao Mengfu, *Dongpo Holding a Staff*, Southern Song dynasty

Staffs also frequently appeared in the paintings of this period. In Tang Dynasty paintings, staffs were mainly made of bamboo, featuring minimalist and slender forms that maintained their practical function for elderly support while beginning to carry cultural significance; they symbolized the integrity and loyalty of Confucian scholars, conveying ideals

such as "Benevolence" (*Ren*) and "Rites and Music." The design of staffs in the Song Dynasty became more diverse, utilizing materials beyond bamboo and adjusting morphologies according to the subject's status and context; their function transcended utility to encompass emotional expression and spiritual sustenance, deeply integrating with the literati spirit. Meanwhile, Song paintings frequently employed extensive "white space" (*liu bai*), with the staff and figure occupying minimal space to emphasize the harmony between human, object, and landscape; this symbolized both the unyielding integrity of the scholar and a reclusive longing for nature and the "unity of heaven and humanity." (See Figure 11) In works such as Ma Yuan's *Dancing and Singing on a Potted Path* and *Moonlight over Pine*, the staff functions as a design element whose form integrates with the characters and setting, manifesting diverse meanings and further enriching the object's cultural connotations.

7. The Ming and Qing Dynasties – The Return of the Original Meaning of the Chinese Staff

Regarding distribution, staff artifacts of the Ming and Qing dynasties exhibited a pattern of "imperial centralization and regional specialization"; over 200 physical specimens and archival records from the Imperial Workshops (*Zaobanchu*) and local ateliers indicate a primary concentration in the Beijing imperial core and the artisanal hubs of the Jiangnan region.

The morphological design during this period featured archaic characteristics, most representatively exemplified by the square bamboo staff with an inlaid white jade pigeon finial and imperial inscriptions, and the square bamboo staff with Qianlong inscriptions and an inlaid green jade double-headed chi-pigeon finial in the Palace Museum collection (see Figures 12, 13). These staffs primarily utilized white jade, green jade, and Han jade, carved into pigeon forms and occasionally integrated with motifs such as chi-dragons and makara heads. Finials from the Qianlong reign typically measure 7–10 cm in height, featuring a socket (*qiong*) at the base for mounting the shaft; some finials retain the structural characteristics of tubular-socketed axes from the Eastern Zhou dynasty. The shafts were designed using southern bamboo species such as square bamboo (*Chimonobambusa quadrangularis*) and palm bamboo, ranging from 110–124 cm in length, with surfaces engraved with Qianlong's imperial poems or auspicious motifs. The emergence of these staffs was primarily due to the Qing court's re-promotion of Confucianism after establishing rule over the Central Plains; the large-scale re-introduction of pigeon-headed staffs marked a return to the original intent of honoring the elderly, ultimately serving to consolidate political governance.



Fig 12. Detail of a square bamboo staff with an inlaid white jade pigeon finial and an inscribed imperial poem, Qing dynasty.



Fig 13. Detail of a square bamboo staff with a double-pigeon finial in green jade and Qianlong's imperial inscription, Qing dynasty.

8. Modern and Contemporary China – The Innovation of the Chinese Staff

The design evolution of staffs in modern and contemporary China profoundly reflects the trajectory of social transformation and cultural integration. During the Republican period, a dual landscape of "indigenous innovation" and "Western fusion" emerged: native designs were epitomized by the *Jianmen* staff (also known as the sword staff or *Kongming* staff) (see Figure 14), which utilized natural materials like hardwood and rattan to form four categories: natural, carved, painted, and biomimetic. Following refinements by Nie Lanyuan in 1940, the staff transitioned from a functional tool to a craft collectible, evolving into a large-scale industry during the War. The Western-introduced "Civilized Stick" bypassed traditional material constraints by combining rosewood or red sandalwood with metals and gemstones; featuring a hybrid morphology of Western shafts and Chinese handles, it became a prevailing symbol for the intelligentsia and bourgeoisie to manifest gentlemanly status and Western "civilized" concepts.



Fig 14. Jianmen walking stick (Jianmen shouzhang)



Fig 15. Jianmen walking stick (Jianmen shouzhang)

From the 1970s to the 1990s, staff design shifted toward functional optimization and humanistic care; medical-assistive wooden crutches integrated traditional pigeon symbols into the finials, utilizing premium hardwoods and

incorporating ergonomics with anti-slip, adjustable structures to balance utility, auspicious symbolism, and collectibility. Meanwhile, *Jiange* staff preserved traditional craftsmanship while achieving thematic segmentation and functional expansion to adapt to contemporary demands. Overall, the design of modern walking canes has evolved from being a vessel of traditional ritual systems and literati spirit to embodying diverse identity markers, practical tools, and carriers of humanistic care. Design approaches now coexist in plurality, with value orientations increasingly aligned with individual needs. This evolution serves as a miniature history of the development of social culture, technology, and livelihood concepts, providing excellent historical reference for contemporary product design.

9. Summary

By tracing the dynamic evolution of ancient Chinese staffs across morphology, material, function, and cultural symbolism, this study reveals the underlying design logic and developmental patterns of ancient artifact creation. The design of ancient Chinese staffs followed the core principle of "interdependence of form and meaning": "Form" refers to external modalities such as morphology, materials, and ornamentation. "Meaning" refers to the cultural connotations embedded in the design of the staff, as well as the era's characteristics and spiritual essence it embodies. From the majestic motifs of bronze scepters in the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties to the pigeon-headed staffs as tools of state governance in the Han, and further to the naturalistic literati staffs as objects of lyrical expression in the Tang and Song, the "Form" and "Meaning" of the staff consistently complemented each other. This profoundly reflects the value pursuit in ancient Chinese craft: "Objects as Carriers of the Way" (*Qi Yi Zai Dao*).

From a design perspective, the evolutionary trajectory of ancient staffs provides multiple insights for the study of traditional Chinese artifact design. First, the dialectical unity of function and decoration persists throughout: for instance, the painted pottery decorations on pre-Three Dynasties staff heads remained integral to their gripping function; the "withered, slender, and reclusive" forms of Tang and Song bamboo staffs met portability needs while embodying literati aesthetics. This confirms the design logic of "interdependence of form and meaning" in traditional artifacts, avoiding the decoupling of ornamentation and utility. Second, cultural contexts profoundly influence artifact design, which in turn indirectly propels the evolution of contemporary culture: for example, the Han Dynasty policy of "ruling through filial piety" gave rise to the Royal Staff System, transforming the pigeon staff from a totemic symbol into a carrier of national ethics. Similarly, the rise of the literati class in the Tang and Song shifted material preferences toward natural bamboo and rattan while abandoning redundant decoration, demonstrating that artifact design consistently resonates with the political and cultural trends of the era. Third, regional cultural diversity fosters design innovation: the biomimetic forms of Yunnan bronze staffs and the localized motifs of Wu-Yue pigeon staffs showcase differentiated design styles shaped by local natural resources and cultural beliefs, providing empirical models for the diverse development of traditional artifacts.

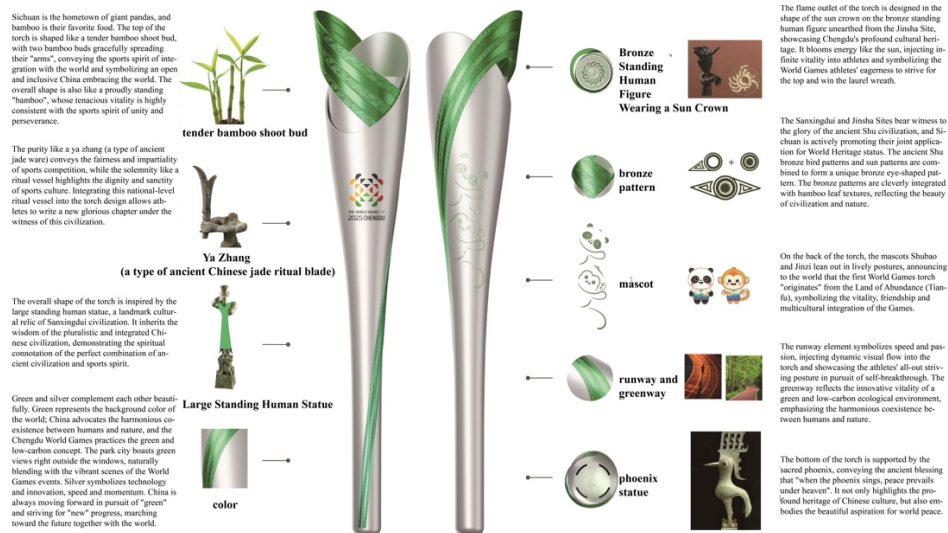


Fig 16. Torch design for the Chengdu 2025 World Games

The staff, an artifact utilized across diverse temporal and geographical contexts, possesses profound historical origins. Having undergone generations of evolution in ancient China, it has ultimately become one of the most common tools in contemporary society. The evolution of the Chinese staff—from its origins as a mobility aid, to its gradual association with divine authority, then as a political symbol and vehicle for emotional expression, and finally returning to its original purpose of honoring the elderly—reflects the aesthetic sensibilities, lifestyles, ethical norms, and even social policies of different eras. At the same time, shifts in the social environment impose new demands on design. Nowadays, staffs primarily manifest as functional artifacts; their symbolic "power" has diminished, aligning with social values such as "equality" and "democracy," while reflecting the functional priority of daily implements in modern society. Given the richness of Chinese traditional culture, contemporary cultural product design should avoid mere replication of traditional forms or the total abandonment of indigenous characteristics. Instead, it should integrate contemporary features and regional distinctiveness, draw upon the finest elements of traditional culture, focus on user needs, and imbue design with cultural depth—thus invigorating cultural innovation in the new era.

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