



The History of Ancient Chinese Jade Culture

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Jade, regarded as the legacy of the stone age and the essence of the mountains and rivers, has occupied an important role in Chinese culture ever since the Neolithic period from B.C. 4000 onward. To a certain extent, jades reflected many Chinese beliefs and values in ancient China. In the last few decades, scientific studies done on archaeological finds in various regions of China have revealed that many prehistoric cultures existed before Hsia, Shang and Zhou (夏、商、周), and such excavated finds included jades artefacts, since the earliest bronze vessels were not made until Hsia and Shang Dynasty. In this article, I shall focus mainly on how jade culture was developed, and how the making and appreciation of jade became intertwined with the philosophy of ancient scholars and the development and governance of early kingdoms that were shaping up in ancient China. To do that, I have to walk the reader back into Chinese history itself.

The history of Chinese jades can be arbitrarily divided into three broad chronological periods:

1. The Period of Myth and Magic, B.C. 4000 - B.C. 2000

- Hong Shan Culture	紅山文化	(BC 4000 to 2500)
- Liang Zhu Culture	良渚文化	(BC 3500-2100)
- Long Shan Culture	龍山文化	(BC 3000-2000)

2. The Period of Development and Order

- Three Dynasties Hsia, Shang, Western Zhou	三代：夏、商、周	B.C. 2000 to B.C. 771
- Eastern Chou Spring & Autumn	東周 - 春秋	B.C. 711 to B.C. 475
- Warring States	戰國時代	B.C. 475 to B.C. 221
- Qin	秦朝	B.C. 221 to B.C. 206
- Western Han	西漢	B.C. 202 to A.D. 8
- Eastern Han	東漢	A.D. 25 to A.D. 220

An interim period, often called the dark ages of jade culture, occurred from the Six Dynasties (六朝) A.D. 220 to A.D. 589 to the Sui Dynasty (隋朝) A.D. 581 to A.D. 618.

3. The Period of Art

- Tang	唐	A.D. 618 to A.D. 907
- Song	宋	A.D. 960 to A.D. 1279
- Yuan	元	A.D. 1279 to A.D. 1368
- Ming	明	A.D. 1368 to A.D. 1644
- Qing	清	A.D. 1644 to A.D. 1911

The Period of Myth and Magic

From B.C. 4000 to B.C. 2000, several cultures began to develop in pre-historic China, centering in mainly three regions, where jades of intriguing design were made. During this period, jade was a reflection of the cultural beliefs prevailing of the time when people expressed and recorded their mythological and religious beliefs in jade and other artefacts.

In the Northeast i.e. the western part of Liaoning to the eastern part of Inner Mongolia, a great civilisation now called Hong Shan Culture 紅山文化 emerged.

Jade artefacts of the **Hong Shan Culture** were mostly crafted in roundish forms, though a few slab-like jade pieces have been identified more recently.

These jade artefacts reflected nature and many were in the form of embryonic dragons now called "玉豬龍", Fig. 1 or jade eagles "玉鷹" Fig. 2. The pig dragon is symbolic of fertility and wealth while the eagle is symbolic of the mythical bird, the only animal that could fly from Earth to Heaven, and hence acted as a messenger between Heaven and Men.

In the South East Yangtze river basin, another civilisation emerged slightly later i.e. B.C. 3500 to B.C. 2100, in present-day Hangzhou (杭州), Tai Hu (太湖) region, the **Liang Zhu (良渚文化)**. An abundant amount of exquisitely carved jade artefacts were excavated from several burial sites in the 1970's to 80's of the last century. Many of these jades were in the form of Cong (玉琮) Fig.3, Bi-disk (玉璧) Fig. 4, or Axe (玉鉞) Fig. 5 and were certainly used for ceremonial or ritual purposes. Others such as pendants or other ornaments Fig. 6 were for decorative function. The delicately carved man and animal motifs on these jade objects are truly astounding, and craftsmen of today using the most technologically advanced machinery would find it difficult to emulate.

Civilisation of the central plain (中原) could probably be exemplified by **Long Shan (龍山文化)** B.C. 2500 to B.C. 2000. Many elegantly carved and designed jades such as the qui tablet (玉圭) Fig. 7 used for ceremonial purposes have been discovered in the past few decades. They were precursors to the Shang and Zhou jades.

The Period of Development and Order

Shang, Zhou and Spring and Autumn saw a rapid development in jades, and it is evident that members of



the noble class valued jades highly. Confucius was quoted as saying: " A gentleman always carried a jade pendant 君子無故，玉不去身。", as a symbol of class and to remind him the virtues of a gentleman, since those virtues were found in jade. One type of jade pendants was thought to be representative of the golden rule (金科玉律).

According to Shu Wen (說文) compiled by Hsu Shen of the Eastern Han (東漢許慎), the five virtues of jade were: benevolence, integrity, intelligence, bravery, trustworthiness (仁、義、禮、智、信) which were exactly those expected of a gentleman.

It was the Duke of Zhou (周公) who chronicled the Zhou Rites (周禮) and put things in proper order.

The six ritual jades (六玉六瑞) were dedicated for ritual ceremonies:-

Bi-disk	玉璧	用以祭 For	天	Heaven
Cong	玉琮		地	Earth
Gui	玉圭		東	East
Zhang	玉璋		南	South
Tiger	玉虎		西	West
Huang	玉璜		北	North

During this period, the kings and nobles liked to show off their authority using ritual jade weapons: **gui** tablets, jade **axe** and jade **zhang** to represent their high position. The mythological divine power that people in the new Neolithic period revered and awed now began to shift to those with military power. The mythical bird came in handy as the bird, Figure 8, was revered as the predecessor of the Shang. According to the Book of Poems, Ode to Shang, the Bird (詩經、商頌、玄鳥), the sacred bird was sent down from Heaven, and gave birth to the first Shang King (天命玄鳥,降而生商). The King thereby justified his authority by proclaiming that he had divine right to rule over his people.

Politics assumed even more importance during this **Period of Order**, epitomising in the Warring States and the Han Dynasty, when the Phoenix and Dragon became the emblem of the king and the royal family, Figure 9. The propensity of the Dragon and Phoenix motifs, amidst the abundance of cloud (雲紋)and cereal (穀粒紋) designs on jade artefacts probably reflected the spiritual culture (Taoism) of the time, and reinforced the popular belief of the Yin and Yang (陰陽) and the FIVE ELEMENTS (五行) of this particular period), and this signified that people of the Han Dynasty tried to strike a balance between earthly and cosmic order, via achieving harmony with nature.

Backed by the teaching of Confucius, Han Wu Di 漢武帝 was able to assume absolute power, expecting his people to be loyal to their Emperor. Indeed, the Han Dynasty enjoyed over four centuries of stability and rapid growth. Jades of this period became a symbol of authority for the nobles, and wealth for the rich upper class.

Jade artefacts of the later period, from Tang - Five Dynasties, through Song - Yuan to Ming - Qing reflected the ways of life of the particular period, and were mostly used for ornamental purposes. They will be dealt with under separate cover.



Figure 1 Jade Pig-dragon 玉豬龍
紅山文化 B.C. 3500 to B.C. 2000 Hong Shan Culture



Figure 2 Jade Eagle 玉鷹
紅山文化 B.C. 3500 to B.C. 2000 Hong Shan Culture



Figure 3 Jade Cong 玉琮
良渚文化 B.C. 3000 to B.C. 2100 Liang Zhu



Figure 4 Jade BiDisk 玉璧
良渚文化 B.C. 3000 to B.C. 2100 Liang Zhu



Figure 5 Jade Axe 玉鉞(斧)
良渚文化 B.C. 3000 to B.C. 2100 Liang Zhu



Figure 7 Jade Gui 玉圭
龍山文化 Long Shan
B.C. 2500 to B.C. 2000

Figure 8 Jade Bird
玉鳥(雙人首在下)
龍山文化 Long Shan
B.C. 2500 to B.C. 2000



Figure 6 Jade Ornament 玉冠(形器)
良渚文化 B.C. 3000 to B.C. 2100 Liang Zhu



Figure 9 Jade Decorative Plaque
(with 11 dragons and 2 phoenixes) 玉牌飾
戰國 B.C. 475 to B.C. 221 Warring States

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