

Four Ways Chinese Jade Became the Quintessential Symbol of Social Values

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By Marian Ang | May 17, 2023

Throughout ancient Chinese history, jade was seen as a sacred material. Although the forms and decorations of jade objects varied over time and in keeping with fashions, jade has remained the favoured in Chinese culture.

The deep-rooted significance of jade to Chinese culture is revealed by its long history. Chosen by ancient kings and chieftains as a material for ritual objects to perform ancestral sacrifices, jade's function and significance has always far exceeded mere aesthetic decoration and appreciation, becoming integral to imperial civilisation itself and the support of its social hierarchies. It is perhaps no surprise that the Chinese character for jade or *yù* (玉), symbolises the linking of heaven and earth.

As one of the most labour-intensive and time-consuming materials to work with, nephrite jade (the medium of the vast majority of jade carvings) is a harder material than bronze or iron, only exceeded by diamond and quartz. Access to this precious material was reserved for the imperial family and nobility, with jade artisans in China requiring many years of strenuous training, dedication and patience to perfect their craftsmanship. Even after the Qing court gained access to jade sources from Khotan in northwestern China after 1758, the Qianlong emperor emphasised in his poems that jade should not be wasted on common craftsmen.

Assembled over half a century, the Victor Shaw Collection of Chinese Jades encompasses pieces of exquisite taste and craftsmanship from the Six Dynasties (220-589) to the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1911). Ahead of *The Victor Shaw Collection of Chinese Jades: Online Part 2*, we look at four functions of jade across Chinese history.

Personal Ornaments of High Moral Values

Since the Neolithic period some 9,000 years ago, jade has been used for personal ornaments such as bracelets, earrings, and pendants. The association of jade with high moral values meant that the ruling classes adopted it as a means of civilising and educating ordinary people. Believed to possess talismanic properties that warded off evil, jade embodied the virtues of the perfect gentleman, the scholar-official and the benevolent ruler, representing all that was beautiful, pure and noble.

“It is softly brilliant and resplendent, as benevolence; it is dense and extremely enduring, as wisdom; it is angular but does not cut, as righteousness; it hangs as a string of beads, as in propriety and rites; it exudes radiance from every side, as faith.”

Confucius

According to an ancient Chinese proverb, "The gentleman is never without jade on his body without a reason." Up until the Qing dynasty, noblemen and noblewomen habitually wore dozens of jade accessories, including as seen in the present lots: beautifully articulated jade pendant plaques, a flower-carved hair pin, an "eight treasures" perfume holder, a white jade nail protector carved with a coin symbolising wealth ("cai") and high relief belt hooks with sinuous horned dragon heads that mimicked ones made of metal from the Warring States period. To prevent the jades from clattering against each other and becoming entangled, wearers adjusted their posture and gait.

Personal jade accoutrements were also deemed vital accompaniments for the next life and can also be found in the burial sites of the highest ranking ancient nobility, including the mysterious *cong* and *bi* of Neolithic Liangzhu culture and the famous Han Dynasty jade burial suits. Consisting of around 2,500 individual pieces of jade painstakingly created over up to a decade, they were extravagant symbols of the departed's social status.

Jade Sword Accessories a Signifier of Nobility

Dating to the Neolithic period, jade was also indispensable in the shamanistic rites of prehistoric societies and the codified rituals of imperial times. Jade was reserved for ritual and ceremonial uses, such as axe heads, blades and knives. Excavated jades dating from pre-Han Dynasty periods thus tended to feature mystical motifs and symbols such as taotie, dragons, shells and clouds. Emphasising their symbolic significance, most of the motifs were highly abstract and detached from real life.

By the Han dynasty, jades became even more closely associated with affluence and luxury, with parts of the sword made in jade for grand festivities and display. Elegant geometric scroll-carved scabbard slides and pommels provided a symbolic rather than functional use with their tactile and elaborate finishes, a tradition that continued even up to the Qing dynasty.

Illustrating the Natural Kingdom

Chinese society became more liberal during the Tang Dynasty, a golden age of Chinese cultural cosmopolitanism. Beliefs about the afterlife and the traditional rituals came under question, whilst people became more interested in worldly rather than spiritual pursuits. Jades created during the prosperous Tang period and onwards were consumed by elite society in general. While the use of jade belts and seals was regulated by the imperial court, commoners were allowed to enjoy jade cups, pendants, scholarly implements and a variety of other accessories made from jade. The usage of jade thus became increasingly secular, with designs drawn from everyday life. More realistic and varied depictions abounded throughout the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. These included auspicious organic and animal subjects — many of which held special symbolism — such as horses, elephants, birds, roosters, ducks, rams, lotuses and even aubergines carved into snuff bottles.

Song period jades were carved in the round, with simple and elegant outlines that reflected the refinement of the Song dynasty and were often carried by the literati elite for handling and appreciation. The fashion for creative re-interpretations of archaic designs showed a scholarly reverence for cultures of

the past.

Curiosity and Exotic Beasts

Compared to the simple, rounded aesthetic of Song jades, Ming jade craft was distinguished by dynamic, intricate carvings executed with energetic lines. During the Qing dynasty, ample supplies of various types of raw jade led to a rich variety of jade craftsmanship. The imperial workshops of the Forbidden City and in Suzhou achieved a distinguished degree of technical virtuosity. Exotic Qing tastes saw irregularities in colour and shape in raw jades exploited to create vivid, charming effects and to depict previously unseen subjects such as swirling winged tigers, qilins, dragons and other mythical hybrid beasts.

This interest in depicting exotic curiosities in the form of ornamental jade even extended to the portrayal of foreigners and the reclining female nude, an indication of the exposure of Chinese craftsmen to Western artistic and pictorial conventions when the country experienced a flourishing of international trade throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Explore these jades and more in [The Victor Shaw Collection of Chinese Jades: Online Part 2 \(25 – 31 May\)](#).



About the Author

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