

## **Analysis of the Ancient China's Jade Culture**

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**Abstract:** Jade culture in ancient China is a significant branch of traditional Chinese culture. With a long history and abundant contents, the profound jade culture occupies an important position in world civilization history. The essay illustrates Chinese jade culture as an independent and complete system through the textual research and analysis of cultural relics and historical data. Under the constant balance and effect of geographic history, social economy, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, it has successfully builded up a series of outstanding characteristics different from the jade culture in other area that is closely related to ceremonial culture, anthropomorphized and symbolic.

**Keywords:** Jade culture, Materials, Chinese ceremonial, Confucianism, Religion, Symbolization.

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### **THE DEIFINITION OF JADE CULTURE**

In ancient China, jade is defined as kinds of stone with shiny luster, beautiful color, tough and transparent texture and soothing voice. As Xu Shen in Han dynastystated in the book *Shuowenjiezi* [1], the jade is beautiful stone with five characters, that is, benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, brave and clean. By this standard, jade includes not only the real jade (hornblende) but also serpentine, turquoise, malachite, agate, crystal, amber, ruby, emerald and other color jade stones for the ancient Chinese. The jade is not only a kind of beautiful stone as for Chinese. In fact, it is always attached with mysterious belief and spiritual being. The development history of jade is right the Chinese history of ideological morality, religion, laws and courtesy, political economy and culture development [5].

The jade culture refers to the overall framework and the whole performance of jade wares' development and evolution in certain society, which is the normal expression of the jade materiality and sociality during the Chinese nation's form and development [10]. Mirroring the certain society's economy and politics, the jade culture acts as a social branch of the social culture in superstructure. To be specific, the jade culture can be explained as the idea and consciousness, religious belief and custom, social morality, rules and regulations, artistic style and other social cultures generating in the process of manufacturing, using and collecting jade ware year after year.

### **THE FORMING EXPLORATION OF JADE CULTURE IN ANCIENT CHIAN**

#### **A. Traced Back to the Remote Antiquity**

During the transition from "Paleolithic Era" to "Neolithic Era", nearly a few hundred thousand years the first light of human civilization slowly came into being. Around ten thousand years ago, human entered the Neolithic Age from Paleolithic Age, polishing stone implements instead of chipped stones and producing food via agriculture rather than fishing and hunting. It is the development of productivity that greatly droved the speed of social progress [11], which opened the historical door for mankind to evolve from uncivilized stage to civilized society. The earliest jade ware was born at that very time.

At the early time of the jade ware, it was once employed as a means of production. According to the literature, there were a lot of jade axes, spears, shovels, spinning wheels unearthed in the Neolithic Age sites, Dawenkou culture in the Yellow River Basin and Liangzhu culture in the Yangtze River Basin for example. The jade wares at that time usually looked like thick and rough pieces and the surfaces still kept the wide trails for production. Some even showed clear signs of use, declaring the fact that they were once used in production or warfare [12].

Secondly, they worked as decorations. The custom emerged as early as the Neolithic Age to wear jade wares as decorations. The oldest known jade decorations are those Jues, pipes, beads, and pendants etc. unearthed in Hemudu Site, Yuyao, Zhejiang Province, which were about 7000 to 6800 years ago. According to the exact unearthed position, Jues (the

penannular jade rings) were the earrings while the pipes, beads and pendants were for necklaces [13].

Then, the jade ware was also the mark of power, social estate and fortune. The phenomenon of marking power and rank turned up in the unearthed jade wares of Xinle culture heritage in the Liaohe River Basin and Hemudu culture heritage in the Yangtze River Basin. To add up, the jade wares in Zhuliang culture site even shows a tendency of serialization. It can be concluded that the society had been divided in the stage of Zhuliang culture and the dominance hierarchies had formed and begun to exercise their dominant power in politics, military, religion, family and other aspects.

At the same time, another important function of jade ware appeared—the jade articles in funerary objects. There were closely relations and contributions between the prevalence of funeral activities and the spread of ghost-god thoughts. As is well known to all, it was the primal activities for human to pick out woods and stones, to make tools and continually evolve themselves at the same time. With the long-term productive labor, mankind developed deep feelings with the tools made by hand, as a result of which the objects used by him/her would be buried with himself/herself after the death. As Zengzi said, the funeral must apply the items people had used by himself in his life, especially the most precious ones for people to use in the nether world [2]. The main grave goods at that time were utensils and food. Except pottery, mussel, stoneware, grain and livestock, the burial jade wares were the most valuable and noticeable goods on account of the status remarking and its highest courtesy standard from the beginning. As is mention above, the earliest burial types were the jade tools and jade decorations according to the jade convention of funeral. Until the thought of ghosts emerging did the jades for etiquette which embodied human's blind faith in cosmic consciousness and the ceremonial jade weaponry, which stood for ancient royal politics, gradually appear on a large scale.

### **B. The Ceremonial Jade System in Shang and Zhou Period**

In the Western Zhou Dynasty, the duke of Zhou established a whole set of ruling systems by creating rituals and music. As the Zhouli. Chunguan. Dazongbo recorded, "taking jade as six devices to show courtesy to the whole world — Bi to the heaven, Cong to the earth, Gui to the east, Zhang to the south, Hu to the west, Huang to the north." Therefore, Bi, Cong, Gui, Zhang, Hu and Huang make up the six devices, also known as six auspicious. In addition to the six devices, Zhouli also set the rigid hierarchy system of the emperors' and vassals' costume. Taking the emperor's crown for example, the front and back of the crown were demanded to be decorated with twelve Qi which included totally 288 white jade beads. According to the

literature, the Qi of an emperor's crown were composed with white jade beads and black strings (they were used to connect the jade beads in strings). By contrast, princes' were black jade beads and red strings; officials' were beryl beads and black strings; princes' were Yu jade beads and black strings; scholars' were Yumei beads and ginger strings. Until that moment, Chinese jade culture had completely stepped into jade sacrificial vessel era. In a word, the ceremonial jade system has made a profound influence on scholarism and cultural life rules later in China.

### **C. The Establishment of Jade System in Confucianism**

In the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, because of the years of tangled warfare among dukes, the ceremonial jade system set in the early Western Zhou Dynasty suffered a severe strike. The value and function of jade ware were deeply discussed by hundreds of scholars. Mozi stated that one could live depend on his labor while one failed to live without his efforts. He called for frugality and strongly opposed pillage and warfare throughout his life. Meanwhile, he considered that the priceless gems like jade could neither enrich the country nor raise the population and they were not beneficial but energy and financial consuming. On the other hand, Hanfeizi advocated the punishment-centered utilitarianism integrating punishment, plot and open-trap regardless of the spiritual enjoyment the jade brought to people. He thought the jade ware as a simple material object and only those with practical value were valuable. However, Confucius suggested quite the opposite. He not only treasured the jade ware but also appealed for the reestablishment of ritual system, anthropomorphized the jade ware—liken the gentlemen's morality to jade, and made a detailed description of the jade's moral nature through humanity, knowledge, loyalty, etiquette, music, faith, heaven, earth, morality and etc. It is the description that formed the jade system in Confucianism in the end, leaving a far-reaching influence on the later generations.

As for Confucianism, the jade's physical characteristics attached with ethical ideology are named as jade morality, which had become the moral rules of human's activities for thousands of years. Zigong, a Confucius' disciple, asked Confucius why gentleman cherished jade?because of its scarcity? Confucius answered that gentleman treated jade as his morality—the mild was humanity, the strong texture was the wisdom, the sound was the pleasure.....(Liji.Pinyi) Shijing put it as'a gentleman should be gentle as jade'.Therefore, the gentleman has been treasuring the jade form the ancient times. In the ethical aspect, the jade quality should be integrated with moral personality together. The ancients comprehended about humanistic moral rule in the spiritual world from the visual beauty,

color and moist texture. Therefore, the Confucians encouraged the gentlemen to be adorned with jade at any time. As a saying goes, ‘keep the jade with gentleman without reason.’

#### **D. The Usage of Jade in Taoism**

The Taoism developed their particular usage mode of jade under the influence of religion, mainly for eating and funeral. The first way was to take jade as medicine from God. In ancient times, the jade was believed to have supernatural powers. To be exact, it was said that one who ate gold could live as long as gold and one who ate jade could live as long as jade. It was widely believed that people could live forever through taking jade. In Qin and Han Dynasty, wizards began to take jade as the shortcut to longevity. After Taoism emerging, the concept got strongly popularized especially in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Taoist priests all dreamed to take jade and the theories of taking jade were more and more abundant. It was also recorded in *Baopuzi.Xianyao* by Gehong in the Eastern Jin Dynasty that ‘jade is panacea but the rarest. People should take raw jade for cure while the shaped jade is useless and harmful’. *Bencaogangmu. Jinshibu. Jinyulei*, a famous medical book in ancient China, also explained that the jade can be used medicinally, for example, internal medicine, surgery, gynecology, ENT, dermatology and etc.

When it comes to funeral jade, the focus point is taking jade chips as eyes curtains, nose plugs, mouth plug, ears plugs, vagina plug, anus plug, keeping jade in the mouth and palms(that is so called nine plugs for orifices). With jades in the nine orifices, the dead was seen as immortal and had the ability to gain rebirth.

#### **THE FEATURES OF JADE CULTURE IN ANCIENT CHINA**

It is concluded from above that the jade culture in ancient China had gone through a long process of evolution [4-7]. Under the influence of diversified cultural factors, it formed its unique jade usage system and artistic connotations gradually. In sum, it can be generalized into several points below:

Firstly, the jade culture in ancient China is developed along with the traditional ceremony culture. In ancient China ceremony permeates various aspects of social life. Jade ware is always playing an important role in ceremony, mainly in "Five Rites" and other relevant etiquettes. "Five Rites", originating from the "Zhou Li", is composed of auspicious, inauspicious, fine, guest, military, sacrifice, funeral, diplomacy and other ceremony activities included. It is clear that the unique effect of jade sacrificial vessel cannot be replaced by common stone artifacts or bronze wares. In strict feudal system, monarch and official, noble and humble, seniority order and status all could be

represented through jade. The jade theories in the three Li (Zhouli, Liyi, Liji) are sufficient to gather a complete jadeware historical documents on various aspects from theory to usage. In fact, a complete knowledge about jade theory, purpose and classification has been early established in China and occupied a large proportion in national regulations. It may be quite difficult for people nowadays to imagine that such a simple stiff cold jadestone could play a great role on the maintenance and consolidation of feudal politics and orders. All in all, the jade culture drives the traditional ceremonial culture's development, and the establishment and preservation of the traditional ceremonial culture are conducted on the frame of jade culture.

Secondly, the jade culture in ancient China was anthropomorphized [8]. Jade's beauty, originated from nature, was developed from inside and then reflected out, soft and veiled, attractive and powerful. Therefore, appreciating jade usually is a process of forming special aesthetic idea and the experience of pleasure. With gentle rounded appearance and strong essence, the jade is consistent with the moral realm which gentlemen pursuit. During the Spring and Autumn Period, ghost culture and ancestors' life got further away and the nobility tended to liken objects to morality and gentleman as jade. The moral concept —“regarding gentlemen's morality as jade”, takes jade's luster, texture and shape as virtue, humanity, wisdom, loyalty and other moralities, that is the reason why jade is considered as “five virtues”, “nine virtues”, “eleven virtues”. In that case, jade is no longer a kind of materials but a well anthropomorphized image.

Finally, the jade culture in ancient China has deep symbolic meanings. To some extent, the jade culture in ancient China was deprived from simple function as decorations or tools, but turned into a unique spiritual cultural image [9]. Keen on the extraordinary features of jade, people empathized kinds of situations in society and life onto jade image, therefore, rigid and mild jade landed up as the symbolization of all life and moral beauty in people's minds. Jade flute, jade sound, jade appearance, jade palace, jade wine..... In ancient China, citizens used to describe the beautiful things with jade in everyday life. And officials and intelligentsias liked to compare their pursuit of moral's highest end to jade's rigidity and fineness, noble personality's cultivation to gem's polish. It is based on the virtue firstly and color, texture later when the ancients differentiates jades, raising jade from an accessory alone to the mark of ethical personality combining practicality, aesthetics and culture. As the prematurity characteristics, Chinese culture had achieved an amazing peak in pre-Qin period. The culture development and research later all can be treated as the extension of the pre-Qin culture. Therefore, the jade culture for thousands of years is also

around the pre-Qin thoughts as a leading culture symbol of great splendor.

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