

CHINESE JADE

Colorful Decorative Patterns and Magnificent Decorations

Decorative patterns were those carved on the jade surface. During the labor process, Chinese ancestors developed aesthetic and psychological needs like body guarding and warding off evil spirits, which were further satisfied with jade's decorative means. They expressed their wishes and pursuits through the patterns on jade surfaces. The origins of such patterns were related to either nature or the gods. Some of them were closely associated with people's lives, including patterns that were grain-shaped or resembled budding seeds, protruding round-shaped patterns resembling nipples, and patterns that were rush mat-shaped, with three parallel lines in different directions. Some decorative patterns were related to natural phenomena, such as cloud and bird patterns. Others were those of imaginary animals created by ancient humans. For example, the dragon, a combination of beast's head and snake body, was later developed into one incorporating such elements as cattle head, antlers, shrimp eyes, fish scales and eagle claws to form typical mythical totem image. The glutton pattern described a greedy and ferocious beast that



Octagonal jade cup with honeysuckle patterns, Tang Dynasty

White and crystal, it is an octagonal- and elliptical-shaped cup with its outer surface featuring honeysuckle patterns.



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Jade saucer with double hornless dragon design, Ming Dynasty

was one of the nine sons of the dragon. The hornless dragon pattern described a gecko-like monster in ancient folklore that could be found in forests. These imaginary beasts all reflected the ghost and god worship consciousness in the minds of ancient Chinese people.

Patterns with Auspicious Meanings

The Chinese, who have a unique passion for jade, typically make them symbols of virtues, rituals, power and luck. Most Chinese jade have patterns implying auspicious meanings. Such patterns involved extensive themes and were developed into relatively fixed figurative symbols. For example, dragons,



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phoenixes, elephants and goats implied auspicious signs and were incorporated into such sayings as “Dragon and Phoenix Showing Auspice,” “Elephants Bringing Peace” and “Three Goats Bringing Good Luck,” and so on. Peonies, lotuses, crab apples, apples, roosters and persimmons symbolized wealth and were incorporated into such ideas as “Wealth and prosperity fill the hall,” “Richness, nobility and peace,” and “Glory all one’s life.” Bats, bergamots and kettles meant good luck and were shown in such expressions as “Luck descend from the sky,” “Five blessings in a row,” and “Great happiness.” Monkeys, fishes, roosters and ducks implied fame and fortune and were displayed in sayings like “Monkey on the Horse,” “Carp jumping over the dragon gate,” and “Five sons in glory.” Pines, cypresses, peaches, tortoises and cranes symbolized immortal life and were incorporated into ideas like “Living as long as the tortoise and the crane,” “Pine and crane,” and “Presenting flat peaches for birthday celebrations.” Badgers, pied magpies and spiders implied festive occasions and were shown in such expressions as “Happy together,” “Joys on the brows,” and “Happiness comes from heaven.”

From generation to generation, the Chinese express their feelings and hopes through such concepts and characters.

Fruit of the Chinese Civilization— Chinese Jade Culture

Chinese jade culture is a cultural phenomenon carried by jade and reflects both the material and spiritual cultures of the society. Jade culture runs through the whole history of Chinese civilization. It has its origins in the early period of the Neolithic Age, appearing in the middle and late periods of the Neolithic



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Age, and developed through slavery and feudal societies. Jade culture penetrated every aspect of social life and took root in the minds of all the Chinese people, playing an important role in Chinese civilization.

Jade Was the Medium between Humans and the Gods

In antiquity when nature worship prevailed, humans felt awed by the magical, magnificent and rare jade, but were unable to identify the true origin of jade correctly. So, jade was considered

“something magical” that integrated the souls of heaven and earth, as well as mountains and rivers, just as Confucius said, “Jade is the essence of mountains.” In the eyes of the ancient people, jade should have their magic roles reasoning they were gifts from the gods, and hence fantastic functions were endowed in the jade.

In ancient China, people tended to resort to the blessings of the gods when faced with uncertainties of nature or fortunes or misfortunes in life. Thus, jade ware was considered as the medium used to connect humans with the gods, to ward off evil spirits and pray for good luck. Wishes were expressed through the patterns and auspicious words carved



Changle (eternal happiness) jade *bi*, Eastern Han Dynasty
Featuring “changle” in *zuan* script and double hornless dragons on the upper part of its surface, it is currently in the Palace Museum collection in Beijing. The jade *bi* was once deeply loved and cherished by the Emperor Qianlong and had long been used for decoration in the imperial court.



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on the jade surfaces, such as *changle* (“forever happiness”) jade in the Eastern Han Dynasty and “Having both happiness and longevity” jade pendants in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Meanwhile, jade was also used to protect their owners from evil spirits and disasters, and the “Evil oppression” jade pendants were a case in point.

Jade Was the Symbol of Power and Status

The concept of jade representing power and status appeared in the late Neolithic Age, which showed the shaping of social differentiation and ruling clique that exercised ruling power in political, military and religious aspects. Since the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC), rulers had many jade ritual ware and ornaments to serve as symbols of power and hierarchies and thus further safeguard their feudal ritual system. Ancient literature like the *Rites of the Zhou Dynasty* detailed the names, forms, specifications and purposes of jade ware, symbolizing hierarchies in the Zhou Dynasty, which showed the rigid and complex system for jade use. Afterwards, all dynasties in Chinese history strictly specified the proper ritual ware and jade ornaments for people with different statuses to avoid confusion and transgression of hierarchies. The jade belts used since the Tang Dynasty (618–907), and quills and palace beads were all cases in point. Only emperors could use pure jade, and those at lower hierarchies were only permitted to use inferior jade that was equivalent to their social statuses.



Jade group pendant, Western Zhou Dynasty

Unearthed from the tomb of a Marquis of the State of Jin in Quwo County, Shanxi Province, it consists of 282 pieces of jade in different shapes.

