

Wang Wei on China's jade culture

By MING HAIYING

China has a long history of using jade, thus forming a jade culture with rich connotations. In a recent interview with CSST, Wang Wei, a Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Member, shared his views on the value of jade in the project to trace the origins of Chinese civilization.

CSST: What is the value of jade in the project to trace the origins of Chinese civilization?

Wang: Fine jade carving was a unique feature of the Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (c. 1046–256 BCE) cultures, which was absent from other ancient civilizations in the world. This is also the unique value of jade in tracing the origins of Chinese civilization.

Archaeological findings show that about 9,000 years ago, people in China had recognized and used jade. The ancient Chinese believed that jade was the height of beauty in stone. The earliest jade earrings in the world were discovered in Chifeng in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, dating back 8,000 years ago. Most of these exquisitely crafted earrings are decorated with a long jade pendant, which indicates that about 8,000 years ago, people had already been able to identify jade materials and mastered the craftsmanship of jade working. The craft of making jade *jue* [a jade ring with an opening]



A boy looking at a Neolithic dragon-shaped jade artifact unearthed from Chifeng, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Photo: CFP

and jade pendants in the Xinglongwa Culture [a Neolithic culture in northeastern China] spread south and reached the lower reaches of the Yangtze River at the latest about 7,000 years ago. It spread northeast to the Russian coast and the middle of the Japanese archipelago, becoming a representative decoration of the ancient oriental civilizations from prehistory to the Xia (c. 2070–1600 BCE), Shang, and Zhou dynasties.

With the development of handicrafts, there emerged the differentiation between the noble and the poor, and jade became a symbol of the aristocracy. Jade in

this period often took the shapes of a dragon, bird, tortoise, etc., indicating a certain level of social status. Around 5,300 years ago, the image of the dragon appeared [as a design of jade artifacts] at about the same time in the West Liao River basin, the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, and the Central Plain. Among them, the similarity between cultural relics from the Hongshan Culture [a Neolithic culture in northeast China] in the West Liao River basin and cultural remains from the Lingjiatan site [a late Neolithic site dated between 5,300 and 5,800 years ago] in southern Anhui Province is the

most prominent. Both the cultures associated jade with the aristocracy.

Later, jade was associated with auspicious omen and moral ideas of goodness. During the Xia Dynasty, jade was used to make sacrificial and ritual objects, a symbol that China entered the era of using jade as a high-level ritual object representing identity and status. The ceremonial utensils created by the Xia Dynasty, consisting of jade *ge* [dagger-axe], jade *zhang* [ancient ritual object], jade knives, and jade *yue* [axe-shaped ritual object], indicate that the jade ritual system, which symbolized the status of the nobility, had subtly affected the cultures of the surrounding areas, and was inherited by the Shang and Zhou dynasties. At the Niuheliang site [a Neolithic archaeological site belonging to the Hongshan Culture] in Liaoning Province, tombs and circular sacrificial altars were found on dozens of hilltops, where exquisite jade wares were unearthed, represented by jade figures, jade dragons, jade birds, jade turtles, and jade *bi* [a disc with a central hole cut out].

China's jade culture has evolved through several stages: Jade was aesthetically admired roughly between 9,000 and 6,000 years ago, associated with nobility around 5,500–4,500 years ago, used as ritual objects during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, and finally became an auspicious symbol in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). It can be said that the development of jade culture reflects the origin,

formation, and development of Chinese civilization to a certain extent.

CSST: What opportunities does the project to trace the origins of Chinese civilization bring to the study of jade culture?

Wang: After the launch of the project to trace the origins of Chinese civilization, we began to regard jade as a precious handicraft product that emerged when civilization developed to a certain stage. Jade was endowed with different political and cultural connotations in different eras and under different social development conditions. For example, the jade ornaments excavated at the Xinglongwa site dating back about 8,000 years ago are quite delicate, but only a few people could wear such jewelry. It suggests that signs of social differentiation began to appear about 8,000 years ago. In the era in which jade was associated with nobility, the right to a mythological connection between the mundane Earth and the transcendence of Heaven was often manifested in special jade objects. At this level, jade was different from ordinary ornaments. These jade objects with various designs were related to kingship, rank, and identity. At the same time, the raw materials, production, and use of jade were controlled by the ruling power, and gradually developed into a high-end handicraft industry. Therefore, study of jade craftsmanship has developed into research on the relationship between jade working craftsmanship, ruling power, and civilization.

Jade working in ancient China

By XU LIN

To study ancient Chinese jade ware, it is necessary to understand ancient jade working crafts. The heyday of jade working art is always inseparable from the innovation of tools.

'Jieyu' sand

There are very few records about ancient jade working tools in documents. The *Book of Songs* [the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry] mentions the method of jade working—carving and polishing with “stones.” The “stones” refer to an indispensable medium for working at jade—*jieyu* sands.

The early *jieyu* sand was ordinary sand, which contained many quartz particles with higher hardness than jade, playing a key role in overriding the abrasiveness of jade and subduing it to molding. Chipping and polishing jade with *jieyu* sand finally separated jade working procedures from stone processing and became a unique fine handicraft industry.

Metal tools

The use of bronze tools is a major

change in jade working. Traces of using bronze tools [in jade working] can still be found during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE). By the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), however, jade working had been dominated by iron tools, and since then, the history of ancient Chinese jade working craftsmanship has been mainly based on iron tools.

The most important carrier of the progress of tools is the development of the *tuoji* [a grinding machine powered by hand or foot-treadles and grinders; by adding quartz and water between the grinders and jade, artisans can grind and process the mineral].

In the Neolithic period, there might have been primitive *tuoji*, which were powered by hand and operated jointly by several people. The grinders might have been made of natural materials such as stone, wood, bamboo, bone, or pottery.

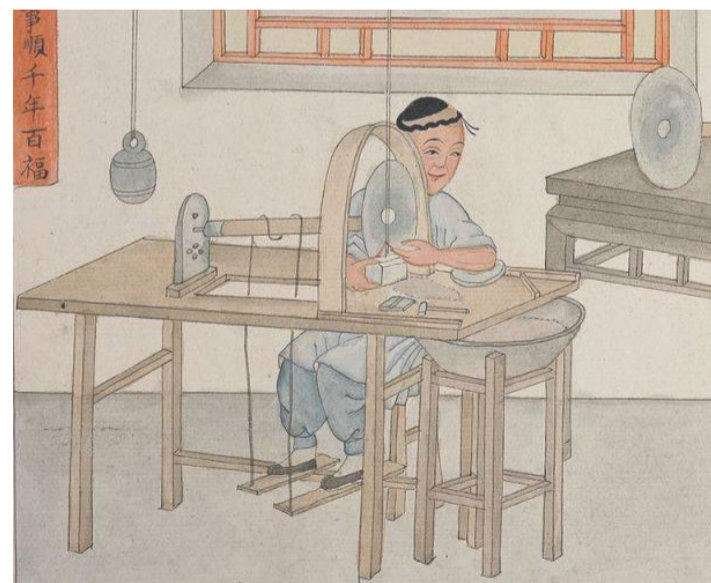
The low-table-style bronze *tuoji* were mainly used from the Xia (c. 2070–1600 BCE) and Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE) dynasties to the late Spring and Autumn Period. At that time, people were in the posture of kneeling and sitting when

using the low-table-style *tuoji*. The *tuoji* was powered by hand, and the operation became increasingly mature. Later, the application of bronze tools accelerated the speed of jade working.

From the Warring States Period (770–476 BCE) to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589) was the era of the low-table-style iron *tuoji*. Since artisans were still in the posture of sitting on the ground, the *tuoji* remained in a low-table style. Due to the improvement of iron smelting technology, the grinders of *tuoji* were made from iron. Iron is harder than bronze, which further improved the speed of jade working.

The high-table-style iron *tuoji* was used from the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties to the early 1960s. At that time, the *tuoji* was developed into a high-table style, operated by one person and powered by foot-treadles. It was also known as *shuideng* during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Since the *tuoji* was powered by feet, which provided more power, the speed of jade working was faster.

The era of modern jade working



FILE PHOTO: A painting from the *Yuzuo Tu* album, painted by the Qing Dynasty artist Li Dengyuan in 1891, illustrating an artisan polishing jade with a *tuoji*

is from the 1960s to the present. During this period, the material for the frame of the *tuoji* changed from wood to iron, and the grinder was made from steel. Electricity replaced the foot-treadles, and the speed of jade working is far faster.

Jade is a hard stone and working it [with primitive tools] would have required a great deal of time and effort, [which, of course, only added to its value]. “The jade uncut

will not form a vessel for use; and if men do not learn, they do not know the way in which they should go” (trans. James Legge). Just as the saying goes, jade working and personal cultivation cannot be achieved overnight.

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