ENDURING ART OF JADE AGE CHINA
VOLUME II
Chinese Jades of Late Neolithic Through Han Periods
by Elizabeth Childs-Johnson, Ph.D.

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JADE AS CONFCUICIAN IDEAL, IMMORTAL CLOAK, AND MEDIUM
FOR THE METAMORPHIC “FETAL POSE”
ELIZABETH CHILDS-JOHNSON, PH.D.

The traditional Chinese love for jade and its properties is well attested to by the commonly invoked passage from the Li Ji, Book of Rites, where the characteristics of the superior Confucian man, the junzi are equated with the properties of jade.¹ A disciple of Confucius asks, “Why does the superior man junzi (the wise and morally perfected person) prefer jade to soapstone (talc)?” Confucius replies that in ancient times jade was revered for its uniquely excellent properties and thus the stone came to be equated with those qualities desired in man (Legge, tr., Book XLV, Li Ji). A similar passage appears in the earliest dictionary of China, the Shuowen jiezi where jade, “the fairest of stones,” is defined as embodying five virtues:

Benevolence is typified by its luster that is bright and warm; integrity by its translucency; wisdom by its sonorous ring when struck; courage by its hardness; and steadfastness by its durability. (Childs-Johnson, 1998, 55-56)

Another passage from a different source, a lyrical poem of Warring States date, titled “Grieved by my Miseries,” from the Chuzi, or Songs of Chu also uses jade metaphorically to describe the properties of one who, although overwhelmed by grief remains steadfast and unyielding, moral and honest in principle:

As I passed my old home, I took one look back at it,
And sobbed till my coat-front was all drenched with tears.
I wore a countenance of white jade;
I embosomed a heart of the wan-yan jewel;
Though the breath of evil entered and troubled me inwardly,
Outwardly the jade (myself, the junzi) shone with undiminished radiance. (Hawkes, 129)

These romantically idealistic properties of human virtue describing the perfect Confucian in the Book of Rites and the Han dictionary, or the grieving morally upright man in the Chu poem underscore the longstanding reverence the Chinese have for yu, jade.

This precious stone was not only viewed as a cultural icon, a modest-yet-provocative artistic symbol of Chinese values. Jade was also revered as a spiritual and protective material. In the poem, “Li Sao” or “Encountering Sorrow,” traditionally ascribed to Qu Yuan, the author and subject of the poem, the shaman poet is on a spirit journey:

Since Ling Fen (another shaman) had given me (shaman poet) a favorable oracle,
I reckoned a lucky day to start my journey on.
I broke a branch of qiong (a hardstone, probably jasper, equateable with jade) to take for my meat,
And ground fine qiong (jasper) meal for my journey’s provisions. (Hawkes, 33)

As noted by various commentators, jasper was a precious stone, equateable with the properties of jade and in ancient Chinese myth was associated with jade and the Han immortality cult of the Western Goddess. Grinding this type of stone into fine meal for the shaman’s journey reflects the second major symbolic property of jade—jade’s connection with everlasting life. Ingestion of jade and jasper was believed to bring immortality. References to yugao, “jade grease,” derived from bayu, or white jade also amplify popular belief that jade was the food of the gods (Birrell, 232). One reads in the Shanhaijing or The Classic of Mountains and Streams:

[15]
White jade is abundant on the central flank of this mountain (Mount Secret). The River Cinnabar contains jade grease. It gushes up from its source and churns around. The great god Yellow (Huang Di) ate this jade grease and enjoyed it as a ritual offering. Jade grease creates the dark jade. The jade grease that appears here is the substance that waters the cinnabar trees on this mountain… (Birrell, 21)

As an immortal substance, jade was a spiritual source of truth and purity, the symbolic and alchemic ingestion of which guaranteed long life, the goal of religious Daoists and alchemic practice popular in Han times.

The practice of eating white jade grease is comparable in purpose to the use of jade as stoppers of body orifices, or as head masks and body suits for aristocratic corpses in Zhou and Han period burials. As mentioned by Shao Wangping, it is possible that jade was used to cover the face of a corpse as early as the Shandong Longshan period (see pp. 43-54). Jade plugs for the mouth in the form of cicadas are also known during the Neolithic. In Liangzhu burials jade covered the body as a symbolic ornament and as a marker of wealth (fig. 1). In Shang times bronze, bone, and ivory were used as inlay on face masks of corpses (see discussion under catalog no. 27). Thus, there is precedent for face masks, and ultimately body suits of jade enclosing corpses during the Western Zhou, Spring and Autumn through Han eras. Mingmu in the Yi or Ceremonies and Rites, relates to a spirit mask that covers eyes and head, a mask that was most likely worn by an invoker at the time of the funeral for summoning the soul to remain nearby, that later was buried with the corpse (Childs-Johnson, 1999, 63). The climax of jade as a protective and life-giving substance and force is celebrated in the extant, reconstructed lacquered wooden coffin completely inlaid with jade pieces and by the corpse completely covered with mosaic jades stitched together with gold thread, from the Western Han royal burial of Chu in Xuzhou, Jiangsu (fig. 2).

Jade is an excellent medium for portraying metamorphic imagery of early Chinese religion. Five stellar jade examples in the Throckmorton collection constitute what I have identified elsewhere in ritual bronze imagery as “semi-human” images, part human and part animal, a combination that reflects the symbolic state of spirit metamorphosis (see catalog nos. 11, 12, 14, 23, 25, 29). I have identified chthonic Chinese religion during the Shang period as based on the belief in shamanic metamorphosis (1998), a “change from animal to human and human to animal,” or what the turn of the century religious historian, J.J.M. de Groot, described as China’s belief in zoanthropy (1969). The most illuminating literary evidence for the concept of metamorphosis is a group of graphs in oracle bone inscriptions that take the signifier, the spirit mask as their semantic root (Childs-Johnson, 1996). One of these, read yi is written as illustrated in fig. 3. This graph and its use in bone, and later bronze inscriptions is significant in corroborating the shamanic basis of early Chinese religion and the metamorphic symbolism of semi-human imagery, particularly the standardized image anthropologists describe as “displayed” (see fig. 4). A comparison between graphic and representational images visually suggests this connection, from Jade Age Neolithic through the Warring States periods.

I interpret the graph yi in Shang inscriptions to mean “to undergo spirit metamorphosis” or “to be spiritually empowered.” As with the graphs gui, “spirit ghost,” and wei, “spiritually awesome” in bone inscriptions, yi takes its meaning from the mask morpheme (Childs-Johnson, 1996). Pictorially yi represents a standing figure wearing a mask with arms upraised. 2 I interpret the latter gesture to signify something extraordinary and different (as the meaning of the character is used today). In Shang times yi is a religious reference to spirit initiation or
transformation that causes something extraordinary or different with a visionary impact. Spirit transformation must have been an awe-filled experience that, to early recorders, could be represented by the symbol of upraised arms, a gesture which, in other cultures where mask-wearing is practiced, signifies an experience tantamount to shamanic possession or ecstasy. The well-known anthropologist, Douglas Fraser, described this religious experience as one that "alters[s] the ontological status of the initiate from that of a person who has not had a profound experience with the supernatural to that

Fig. 4A: Drawings and rubbings of "displayed" images in contexts of Late Neolithic, Shang and Warring States periods. Spindle whorl. Late Neolithic period. After Rawson, 1996, no. 15.
of one who has... [and the displayed artistic image is one device that attests] visibly to [this] change of status." (Fraser, vol. III, 646 and 648).

One example of the displayed image in Shang period ritual art, illustrated in fig. 4B, may be taken as representative of related, standardized images of this type, in later Zhou times, illustrated in fig. 4C.

In past analyses the yi graph has been defined with a variety of very different meanings in Shang inscriptions, ranging from "to raise up," "to wear," "to assist," to a xuzi or "empty, filler word." Other interpretations based on the semantic use of yi have been more insightful. Ye Yusen, for one, suggested that yi in Shang bone inscriptions meant "awesome" in the sense of terrifying and respectful (1934;1966.5.42,6.22).

Jin Xiangheng identified two different meanings, "to be extraordinary or strange," and "to transform for the worse," although he did not elaborate on the latter meaning in Shang bone inscriptions (Jin, 1964, 1-8).

Zhong Bosheng suggested that yi was a preparatory rite held before the Shang king went on a royal hunt (Zhong, 556-557.). All latter scholars have noted the significance of the mask morpheme written in the shape of qitou, which in later literary references refers to a ghost head mask, as identified in tracing the origins of the mask morpheme through later literary evidence of Warring States and Han times (Childs-Johnson, 1996).

Amidst some thirty-two bone inscriptions from the Shang period, it is evident that the primary meaning of yi is "to be spiritually empowered." As suggested by Zhong, yi appears to represent a rite, and as I interpret it it is a rite specifically involving mask-donning or its symbolic equivalent, as represented in three Shang representative oracle bone inscriptions, as follows:

1. [It is divined:] The King yi undergoes spirit empowerment on the mou day in anticipation of hunting wild buffalo with bow and arrow at Mu. The King will catch wild buffalo. The King will not catch wild buffalo. Jia 3636.
2. Crack-making on day dingchou: On the next day mou if the King undergoes spirit empowerment in anticipation of hunting there will be no danger; there will be no catastrophe [and] there will be no rain. XTND 25.
3. It was divined: Since the King is afflicted (with tooth ailment) he shall undergo spirit empowerment. His sickness would not heal. It was divined: [The King] is afflicted (with a tooth ailment). He would not be sick and would heal. Yi 6918.

The most illuminating divinations are those in which yi modifies the ritual bronze tetrapod, the ding, the possession of which came to be envisioned in early Chinese history as the primary imperial symbol of power. Yiding, a hewen or "word combining two graphic elements" may be translated as "spirit empowered ding ritual vessel," a combination of yi and ding (fig. 5), as used in two representative inscriptions:

[b18]
4....[with the] new (newly cast?) yiding spirvitually empowered ding [the King] will invoke spirits. Zhi xu 275.9 (see fig. 5).
5. Crack-making on the bingzi day [Diviner] Bin divined. Father Yi (the spirit of the 26th Shang king) spiritually empowered, alas bestows the ding vessel on the King. Father Yi will not be spiritually empowered to bestow the ding on the King. Bing 356.

These representative inscriptions are suggestive in documenting evidence for shamanic practice in the guise of ancestor cult worship during the Shang period. Although these inscriptions are representative and not exhaustive (see footnote 3) they serve in amplifying the overwhelming artistic evidence for the subject of shamanic metamorphosis in ritual imagery.

One of the most standardized devices of representation, more popular in jade than in bronze or other media is what I designate the “fetal pose” or pose in which the limbs of the already transformational semi-human are tightly tucked under the body, almost as if coiled. This image is commonly represented in profile on flat, thin slices of jade that were suspended on an aristocrat’s girdle or as pendants of a necklace, or formed parts of jade shrouds for burial. Whether the suspended jade functioned apotropaically, that it was popular as a suspended ornament suggests it had a talismanic role. Particularly clear examples of this fetal pose in ritual imagery also appear on several distinctive Western Zhou bronze weapons, such as the dao knife blade in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. and on the bronze yue from a Baoji burial in Shaanxi province (fig. 6A-B). Although the arms of the semi-human on the yue are replaced by an inverted feline head, the tucked in legs in fetal pose end in bird claws. In jade this image is common throughout the Western Zhou era, as illustrated in figs. 7-8. This image also originates much earlier, during the Late Neolithic Jade Age and continues through the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou eras (see figs. 11, 14-16), indicating that shamanic metamorphosis is not short-lived but rather a fixture in traditional Chinese belief (Childs-Johnson, 2002).

Major attributes of the fetal pose in early Chinese jade imagery are comparable to the semi-human represented in Late Neolithic Jade Age and Shang times. As discussed, the semi-human usually has attributes of both human and animal worlds, indicating that the image is metamorphic. Human attributes may appear in the shape of head and facial details (forehead, nose, ears, eyes, mouth, chin) and animal attributes may appear as sharp pairs of fangs emerging out of an open mouth of grid teeth (e.g., fig. 6A). Other animal attributes, consistently belonging to wild animal species, may be represented as the skin of a tiger, as in the related images illustrated in fig. 9A-B or as the feline animal mount of the semi-human, as represented on the bronze axle cap from the Yu State Cemetery at Baoji (fig. 10). Another related image is represented engraved on the rare ceramic shard retrieved from the Early-Middle Shang site of Zhengzhou (fig. 11). The latter is a frontal rather than profile image: the human face with grid teeth extends into a body that is bifurcated, with limbs extending out, theoretically to left and right. An animal head with distinctively open mouth in the position of “devouring” (a misreading that should read spirit possession) flanks the human, reflecting the disposition of the Shang bronze “alter-ego” image of semi-human and tiger. The feline head “devouring” the crouching semi-human on the bronze knife is the same semi-human flanked by a feline head with an open mouth on the Zhengzhou ceramic. This “devouring” mode is symbolic of shamanic metamorphosis, of a human taking on the power of the wild animal, usually the feline, in the sense of spirit contact and metamorphosis. Whether the semi-human or human mounts the feline or the feline clothes the head or body of the human, these are metamorphically related symbols, shared by their interrelated semi-human and wild animal parts. The metamorphic theme on the bronze knife and ceramic is the same image portrayed on the chariot axle cap from Baoji and on the Late Shang/Early

Fig. 7: Rubbing of the white jade huang pendant with the image of a semi-human in "fetal pose" from burial M2009, Guo State Cemetery, Shangcunling, Sanmenxia, Henan. Early Western Zhou period. After Jiang and Li, fig. 42.1, p. 47.

Fig. 8: Drawings of jade ornaments and pendants with the image of a semi-human in "fetal pose" from Western Zhou burials at Zhangjiapo (A-B) and Shangcunling (C-D). After Zhang, 1998, figs. 58.1:1, 2, 3, 6; Henan Provincial Institute, 1999, figs. 124:1; 122:1; 253:15; and Yang, 1987, pl. LXXVII:2-3.
Western Zhou attachment in the British Museum (figs. 9-10). Other variations of the same theme are reflected in the Throckmorton jade no. 25 and a comparable piece belonging to the Winthrop Collection, illustrated in fig. 25A.

What I describe as “fetal pose” is an early Chinese artistic convention used to convey spirit rebirth, the god-like state of spirit metamorphosis. It is a convention in the same sense other means of representation in Shang bronze imagery are. Shang representational conventions of spirit metamorphosis include the “displayed body,” the “cicada body extension of the animal mask,” the “devouring mode” or the “interchangeability between abstract and ‘real’ animal or abbreviated and whole animal images” (Childs-Johnson, 1998, 43-55). By “fetal” I refer to “having the characteristics of a fetus.” According to the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, a fetus is: “(used chiefly of viviparous mammals) the young of an animal in the womb or egg, especially in the later stages of development when the body structures are in the recognizable form of its kind, in man being from the latter part of the third month until birth (1966, p. 526).”

The Russian scholar, Sergei Alkin in 1995 and 1997 (as reported in Tang, ed., *East Asian Jade*, vol. II, pp. 270-274), the Chinese scholar, Sun Ji (2001, pp. 26-28), and I have independently identified the “pig-dragon” coil as a fertility symbol, and an image stimulated by a reference to a larval or fetal state (1991). Alkin described the image as an archetype of the chain: larva-embryo-soul (fig. 12). Sun also identified the image as larval in origin, and further

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**Fig. 9A:** Drawing of a bronze attachment with the image of a human wearing a tiger pelt and offering a bird. B: Drawing of a jade with a semi-human in “fetal pose” wearing a tiger pelt. After Hayashi, 1986, vol. II, pls. 3-93, p. 98 and 1960, fig. 6, p. 29.

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**Fig. 10:** Drawing of a bronze axe attachment with the image of a human mounting a tiger mask, BRCH1:1. Chariot burial no. 1, Ruijiazhuang, Baoji, Shaanxi, Early-Western Zhou period. After Lu and Hu, 1988, fig. 272, p. 403.

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**Fig. 11:** Rubbing detail of a shard with a frontal image of a semi-human in “fetal pose” with a tiger mask, Zhengzhou, Henan, Early-Middle Shang period. After Wenwu 1983, fig. 4, p. 8.
sought to identify this image with the legendary Yellow Emperor and dragon totem. As noted in 1991, the pig-dragon as a type is related to the earliest graph for dragon in bone inscriptions, pronounced qiu (see fig. 13), and in origin was a symbol of fertility (Childs-Johnson, 1991, 93). The concern for fertility in early prehistoric and early historic cultures is universal, and a continuous concern throughout Chinese history.

The "fetal" image is complementary to the "larval" type of coiled image, but specifically belongs to the semi-human and animal symbol of metamorphosis in early Chinese art, and thus far, is well represented in Liangzhu, Shijiahe and Shandong Longshan, Late Neolithic Jade Age imagery. All figures in fetal pose, from Jade Age China through the Warring States periods show the following standards of representation: a human head and a face with wild animal attributes, whether in the form of fangs, animal mask, or mask-headress with attributes of a feng-bird or feathers; a folded human body with legs tightly tucked and arms retracted, as in the human fetus; and lower limbs ending in bird claws. Occasionally the lower end of the body may be deleted or the headress simplified. The "fetal" body is usually proportionately smaller than the head, again emphasizing the quality of a "fetus." This convention, related to an embryonic state, here fetal, is completely intentional, in the early Chinese context, in emphasizing metamorphosis and rebirth. The cicada, as an extension of the semi-human in Shang ritual imagery, has the same function.

The Western Zhou jades illustrated in fig. 8 are exemplary of the artistic license exercised in representing this image in "fetal pose." Jade ornaments with this profile image from Zhangjiabo near Xian, Shaanxi (fig. 8A) represent the semi-human head with long locks of hair, a convention deriving from a Longshan period prototype. One tiny profile head tops another larger profile semi-human with long hair, which peaks at the top in a spiral. The latter spiral and the tinier one on top of the tinier head are simplifications of the coiled snake headress, as portrayed elsewhere in Western Zhou jade imagery, crowning the heads of the two naked male jade figurines excavated from Western Zhou burials in Baicaoba, Lingtai in Gansu province (KGBX 1977, fig. 19, p. 120). The upper body of the semi-humans takes the form of a "devouring" animal-like dragon coil and the lower body of the larger semi-human has retracted legs that end in bird claws. The other two jade handles (fig. 8B-C) are more elaborate images of the semi-human in fetal pose; a feng mythical bird crowns a simplified semi-human or animal-mask head with withdrawn upper and lower body in fetal pose, with limbs ending in bird claws. As on the bronze knife blade, an inverted feline dragon coil with open "devouring" mouth frames the "fetal" part of the lower body, intentionally closing as a frame the metamorphic image (figs. 6A, 8B). Western Zhou artisans continue the Shang convention of using animal and semi-human masks interchangeably; tiger-like heads and semi-human heads take interchangeable positions, as witnessed in fig. 8B and C. The claws of the bird are considerably simplified, as barely detectable extensions resting behind the folded legs.
These images are frequently simplified to features of a semi-human head, feline-dragon coil for an upper torso, and fetal legs ending in the abstract curl of a claw. Other interpretations may incorporate motifs related to the scale-like plaques of a snake and to the horn-ears of an owl, two further animals with metamorphic properties in early Chinese religious belief.

A more complex mode of representing this metamorphic image in “fetal pose” is displayed by the openwork jade plaque of Early Western Zhou date from the Guo State Cemetery at Shangcunling in Sanmenxia, Henan (fig. 7). The semi-human here is formed out of a profile head with an abbreviated patch of striated hair, a trunk like an elephant, a large C-shaped bracket ear, and a bird body that extends into a lower “fetal” body part of retracted lower legs ending in bird claws. On top the image is crowned by a form of the ubiquitous feline dragon, with head reverted and mouth open.

The same semi-human forms with wild animal and bird attributes characterize jade and ritual prototypes of the Late Neolithic Jade Age through Xia and Shang periods. Semi-humans in “fetal pose” and profile derive from the regional Middle Shang sites of Xingan, Jiangxi and from Fu Zi’s and other tombs at Anyang, Henan, the Late Shang capital (fig. 14). The cubic and geometric modes of Shang style characterize the expression of these metamorphic images. The examples from Anyang burials exhibit standard features, including semi-human heads with elaborate headdresses (mostly bird feather in type) and contracted human bodies with limbs ending in claws (fig. 14A-C). Other Late Shang versions, as represented in the Western Zhou example from Shangcunling (fig. 7), show the semi-human in “fetal pose” but the upper body is winged and the head has a beak, indicating the bird species, whereas the lower body part has retracted legs ending in toes of a human (fig. 14D-E). This is also the interpretation of the linked jade image from the large royal burial at Xingan (fig. 15). Human features include body proportions of the head, torso and legs, plus certain facial features of the eye and ear, and lower legs ending in toes. The head however has a beak, the upper arms end in claws and the lower body has wings. The head is crowned by a simplified hook motif referring to feathers. This Middle Shang example is also related to the Late Neolithic Jade Age Liangzhu jade image in “fetal pose” (fig. 16). The three primary ingredients of metamorphic imagery from Late Neolithic Jade Age through Warring States eras include: 1) the semi-human, 2) attributes of the feng bird and/or long dragon, and 3) the wild animal that is mostly feline in species. Features of all three may appear in one image and be interchanged, although common practice indicates that long and feng are more commonly mutually interchangeable as symbols of mythical and metamorphic power, and animal and humans in mask or representational guises are also more commonly interchangeable.

Fig. 14: Drawings of jades of the semi-human in “fetal pose” from Anyang tombs, M1550 and M5, Anyang phase, Late Shang Period. After CASS, Institute of Archaeology, et al., KGXB 1977:2, fig. 13:1, 2, p. 82(A), (C) and fig. 17:2-3, p. 86(D), (E); and Yang, 1987, pl. XLIV:2(B).
I define shamanic metamorphosis as the basic belief underlying the chthonic religion of early China (2002), as witnessed here by the earliest written data, oracle bone script of Shang times, and by the artistic convention of representation, the semi-human in "fetal pose," preeminent in early excavated and exhibited jades of Late Neolithic Jade Age through Warring States periods. The semi-human in "fetal pose" is one convention of representation that helps to document popular Chinese religion of pre-Han times, that predates ancestor cult worship of Late Shang times, and later Confucianism and Daoism, codified by Han times.

NOTES

1 Many of these passages were quoted and discussed in an informal introduction to early Chinese jade belonging to Xuan-Ji, Inc. of Flushing, New York, "Chinese Jades of Neolithic Through Six Dynasties Periods in the Xuan-Ji Collection," Xuan-Ji, Inc., 2001.

2 As is commonly interpreted by oracle bone specialists, see e.g., Paul L.-M. Serruys, "On the System of the Pu Shou in the Shu-wen chieh-tzu," Lishi yan yan jian suo jikan no. 55 (1984), no. 65 (η).


4 Abbreviated references to oracle bone compendia follow those used by Shima, 1971.