XI TU YU JADE OF THE NORTHWESTERN LANDS AND THE QIJIA AESTHETIC

Elizabeth Childs-Johnson

Recent archaeological excavations have revolutionized our understanding of the Late Neolithic and early historic period of China. Previously, the cultural artifacts of this era were grouped into two pottery traditions, the "Painted Pottery Culture" and the "Blackware Culture" (see, e.g., Chang and Cheng). A flurry of archaeological excavations and accompanying scholarship has led to an awareness of the extensive use of jade in this era. There were three early but significant jade-working centers along coastal China: the earliest is known as Hongshan, the second and longest-lasting is known as Liangzhu, and the third and last is known as Longshan. These sites may be recognized as cultural periods characterizing early China from ca. 3500-2000 BCE (Childs-Johnson, 2008). Exhibits and symposia with major publications featuring these new finds of jade artifacts began at the China Institute in 1988 (Childs-Johnson). Other exhibits followed: the University of London in 1997 (Scott), the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1998 (Tang, ed.), and the National Taiwan University in Taiwan in 2001 (Liu, ed.). Late Neolithic jades were also included in the London venue "Mysteries of Ancient China" in 1996 (Rawson, ed., 52-59), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum exhibit "China: 5000 Years" in 1998 (Childs-Johnson 1998, 55-68), and Yang Xiaoneng's "The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology" in Washington, D.C. in 1999 (Yang).

Although our understanding of this pivotal phase in early Chinese civilization has considerably expanded since the 1980's, another but related set of jade artifacts has been archaeologically identified. These artifacts are a product of the Qijia culture, known to imperial collectors of the early eighteenth century as Xi Tu Yu or "jades of the western lands." To early China specialists, the Qijia culture had long been known only by scattered ceramic finds, including spouted blackware (Cheng). Qijia culture jades are completely different in style from those that served as their prototypes; jades from the second and third major jade-working cultures, the Liangzhu and the Longshan.

The Qijia culture of the Late Neolithic period is dateable to ca. 2100-1600 BCE. This period succeeds the Liangzhu culture of ca. 3200-2200 BCE, and it overlaps with Central and Shandong Longshan cultures of ca. 2500-2000 BCE, and the Erlitou culture of ca. 2000-1600 BCE. The Qijia era is closest in date to Longshan and Erlitou cultures of the Late Neolithic and Xia periods (see chronology chart). Cultural variety and multiple centers of activity suggest the ferment that gave birth to China's everlasting civilization. As has been documented by various scholars (Ye Maoli, Huang Xuanpei, particularly Yang Meili, and more recently Gu Fang (see his article in this catalogue), Qijia jades are characterized by several prominent features, both cultural and artistic.

Qijia remains are distributed in China's far northwest, where the Silk Road begins, south of the Gobi Desert, southwest of the Ordos region, and north of the Qilin mountain chain. This area is primarily steppe plains and valleys flanking the Upper Yellow River after it leaves its source in Tibet. Finds are concentrated primarily in three northwest provinces rarely featured in archaeological discourse, including Ningxia (southern), Qinghai (eastern) and Gansu (southern and eastern parts). The name of the culture derives from the type-site, Qijaping in Gansu, discovered by Johan Gunnar Andersson in the 1940's. It is well-known for its mixed ceramic types, which reflect multiple cultural influences (Bylin-Altin, 383-498; Cheng, 106-108; Andersson). Geographically, the cultural domain of Qijia lies adjacent to what is currently
identified archaeologically as the Central Longshan and Taosi cultures of primarily Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces, and is far from the southeastern culture of Liangzhu in the Lake Tai region of Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu provinces.

The Qijia culture appears unique by comparison with Longshan and Erlitou cultures because their artisans and patrons promote and sanction both Liangzhu and Longshan jades types. How can we account for this odd composition of jades from the Qijia culture? As has been discussed at length by Yang Meili (2000, 2001b), Qijia jade groups, from tombs and pits (which could be sacrificial pits or hordes), are composed not only of bi and cong types typifying the Liangzhu culture, but also include insignia blades common to the latter Longshan cultures (of primarily central northern and northeastern parts of China). (See Figures 1-6.) In Western parlance, the phenomenon may be described as "retroactive" and "reflexive." Qijia is a regional culture on the fringe of mainstream China, responding to cultural trends and digesting progressive currents characterizing earlier and still exotic Liangzhu and the contemporary neighboring Longshan jade-working traditions.

Qijia jade-working is culturally and typologically related to Taosi and northwest Longshan cultures of Shanxi and Shaanxi. Yet Qijia peoples also embraced what must have been a romantic preference for circular and rectangular shapes of the more distant, in time and place, Liangzhu prototypes long after the Liangzhu culture had disappeared. However, few large-scale Qijia sites have been excavated to clarify residential and ceramic habits (Ye 1998, 2001, 2005). Qijia jade is quixotic in that it is, on the one hand, culturally identical to the jade appearing in neighboring Shaanxi and Shanxi, yet, on the other hand, relates in type to those jades worked earlier in the southeast.

Similarities between Longshan and Qijia are represented by specific types of insignia and weapons, including the dao knife, gui adze, and yue axe. Zhejiang blades which characterize the Central and Shandong Longshan cultures are curiously not found in Qijia cultural remains. Cong and bi similarly are not as common as insignia blades in neighboring Longshan cultures. Comparisons between representative dao and gui from the recently excavated Qijia site of Lajia in Qinghai with those from Shanxi province representing the Taosi (Longshan) culture nonetheless illustrate the compatibility between the two cultures of central and northwest areas (Ye Mao lin 2001, 2005).

Dao and gui from the two cultures are similar in shape and dimensions (Figures 3-6). Both gui, for example, form long and narrow, rectangular baton-like shapes, with only a hint of a rounded blade edge and a straight end. Both are highly polished, and although the pale green white jade from Qinghai is purer in color and hue, the sugary-gray and dark green color of the Taosi gui is also characteristic of the jade material worked regionally by Qijia artisans (see Gu's discussion).

A similar typological and stylistic comparison may also be drawn between dao insignia blades from Qinghai and Shanxi (Figures 5-6). Both are slightly trapezoidal in shape, with slightly bowed blade edges and perforations drilled from one side only, as characterizes most Longshan era jade blades. They are pale green to blue, with mottling of dark blue in the Shanxi example and light yellow in the Qinghai example.
As seen in the comparison of Qijia cong and bi with classical versions from Liangzhu cultural sites, there is a marked difference in form and style. This difference can be traced to the gap in time between Qijia and Liangzhu cultural periods, as well as regional Qijia taste. A comparison between two cong illustrates these differences (see Figures 7-8). The most obvious difference is in the presence or absence of imagery. Liangzhu cong are covered with layers of what are commonly identified as semi-human and animal masks aligning four corners of the exterior. Qijia cong are plain without décor. The two cong share formal shapes of a cylinder framed by four prismatic corners vertically aligned. These four corners on Qijia cong are, however, more frequently simplified, serving more as rectangular sheaths of inner cylinders than as surfaces to be plastered with imagery.

Shape is as important as material surface for the Qijia artisan and patron. Any remnant of symbolism and significance characterizing the Liangzhu cong has been stripped entirely in the Qijia version. In the most refined examples of Qijia cultural artifacts, cong appear heroic in form. Emphasis is on the geometric shape of the cylinder and the rectangle, and on the surface qualities of the jade itself (see Throckmorton catalogue, numbers 26-27). The aesthetic values are color and form, in contrast to an aesthetic that is charged with ritual belief.

The Qijia jade aesthetic is also well represented in a variety of jades collected by Americans in the early part of the twentieth century (Childs-Johnson, 2008). Representative examples include a bi belonging to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Figure 9), a cong belonging to the J. Drummond collection in the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Figure 10), a bi type disk belonging to the Hamlin Jade Collection in the Buffalo Museum of Science (Figure 11), and another piece, the linked huang forming a disk, also in the Hamlin collection in Buffalo (Figure 12). In quality of material, whether a "sugary" color (Figures 11-12) or pale to dark green with mottling (Figures 9-10), the four examples are typical of Qijia jade. All examples conform to the Qijia taste for simple geometric forms, and for plain surfaces expressive of the color and mottling of the raw jade.

Although Qijia jades from tombs typically form a standardized burial grouping or variation of the grouping, of cong prismatic cylinders, bi disks, linked huang forming disks, and dao and gui type blades, it is difficult to speak of any Qijia ritual. There is a lack of written and corroborative cultural data. Liangzhu cong and bi, and classical Shandong Longshan gui and dao, clearly functioned as either meaningful symbols of wealth, rank, or ritual. These jade artifacts were tied to the needs of their respective and proto-Chinese cultures. The Qijia culture, in contrast, was dependent, and, although unique in expression, relied on mainstream tradition for inspiration. If there was a ritual, it was a practice unique to the Qijia, a people who developed a jade-working tradition distinctive in style and form from both Late Neolithic Liangzhu and Longshan cultures.

Qijia jades were favored by the Qing emperor and collector, Qianlong (1736-1795). The scholar and curator at the Palace Museum, Yang Meili, who has relentlessly documented the cultural context and character of Qijia jades, recently put together a novel exhibit and catalogue titled, Prehistoric Jade Artifacts from the Yellow River Valley in the National Palace
Museum's Collection (Huanghe Liuyu Shiqian Yuqi Tezhan Tulu). Based on her analyses, Qijia jades were held in high esteem by Emperor Qianlong. In unravelling the identity of these enigmatic early jade art works filling the coffers of the imperial collection, in part currently on display in the Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, Yang introduced over 50 pieces, previously undocumented by archaeological and stylistic comparison.

As was common with so many of the art works collected by the Emperor Qianlong, the Qijia jades were also reworked and reused to accommodate his personal needs and preferences. Two Qijia jades in his collection, for example, include a bi mounted on a lacquered wooden frame and incised on both sides with his imperial seals and poetry (Figure 13). A second example is a Qijia cong painted with an ink inscription recording the piece's provenance, and mounted with an insert of a bronze cylinder with base and perforated lid for holding brushes or other literary implements (Figure 14). Emperor Qianlong's esteem for Qijia jades is matched by the interest of the Throckmorton collection in the new archaeological finds of northwest China.

References


FIGURES

1. Jade bi, diameter: 27.8 cm, inner diameter: 5.9 cm, thickness: .7 cm. Excavated at Houliugoucun, Jingning, Gansu, Qijia culture, Jining Museum. After The Complete Set, vol. 15, pl. 3.

2. Jade cong, height: 12.8 cm, width: 8.3 cm. Excavated at Houliugoucun, Jingning, Gansu, Qijia culture, Jining Museum. After The Complete Set, vol. 15, pl. 38.

3. Jade gui, length: 15.8 cm, width: 4.8 cm, thickness: 1 cm. Collected from Lajia site, Minhe, Qinghai, Qijia culture. After The Complete Set, vol. 15, pl. 155.

4. Jade gui, length: 16.6 cm, width: 4.3 cm, thickness: .3 cm. Tomb 22, Area II, Taosi, Xianfeng, Shanxi, Taosi culture. After The Complete Set, vol. 3, pl. 45.

5. Jade dao, length: 41 cm, width: 6.5 cm, thickness: .8 cm. Collected from Lajia site, Minhe, Qinghai, Qijia Culture. After The Complete Set, vol. 15, pl. 148.


7. Jade cong, height: 5.7 cm, width: 5.7 cm. Tomb 12, Yaoshan, Yuhang Zhejiang. After The Complete Set, vol. 8, pl. 108.


10. Jade cong, Qijia culture, height: 7 cm, width: 5.3 cm. American Museum of Natural History, Isaac Wyman Drummond Collection, 70.3/3235.

11. Jade bi, Qijia culture, diameter: 18.4 cm, inner diameter: 10.5 cm. Buffalo Museum of Science, Hamlin Jade Collection, J88.


13. Jade bi, Qijia culture, diameter: 28.4 cm, inner diameter: 5.3 cm, thickness: 1.9 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan. After Huanghe Liuyu, no. 3-1, pp. 23, 25.