JADES OF THE QIJIA AND RELATED NORTHWESTERN CULTURES OF EARLY CHINA

c. 2100-1600 BCE

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JAIDE CONG AND BI OF THE QIJIA CULTURE

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Jade cong and bi are two major types of artifacts from the Qijia culture of China dating to ca. 2100-1600 BCE. The earliest evidence of these forms appears in the imperial collection of the Qing royal house. Both types are also illustrated in Records of Ancient Jade (Guyu Tukao), written by the late Qing jade specialist, Wu Dacheng. Thus, Qijia jades were known, collected, and recorded as early as the late Qing period. Limited by the lack of archaeological or contextual data, the jades at that time were misidentified as Shang and Zhou. Before the 1980s, the Qijia culture was virtually unknown to scholars. No excavation reports or related archaeological data existed to account for this culture. Only recently, with the 2005 publication of the 15 volume study, The Complete Set of Unearthed Chinese Jades, was this culture brought to the attention of scholars. These volumes include illustrations of jades excavated and collected from throughout China. Volume number 13 currently serves as the primary source for archaeologically-documented jades of the Qijia culture. The publication has stimulated abundant interest in and outside China in cong and bi shapes that emerged from the Qijia culture.

I. Distribution

Based on archaeological data, the bulk of Qijia jade bi and cong come from tombs and site remains in Gansu, but they are also found in Qinghai and Ningxia in northwest China. Sites in Gansu include: Liugou, Zhipingxianghou, Jingning county; Chengguangliang, Shengouxiang, Jingning county; Gaoquan, Tianjixiang, Dingxi city; Siyuebashan and Qingxi, Neiquanyingzhen, Andingqu, Dingxi city; Sanshilipu, Andingqu, Dingxi city; Huangnianguanti, Wuwei city; Lijia, Lintao county; Youfangzhuang, Laoyagou, Zhongquanyi, Huining county; and Gancuo, Yuzhong county. Qijia culture jade bi and cong have also been discovered in Longxi and Zhuangliang counties. Qinghai sites include Lijia, Minhe county; Yanping, Majia, Mayingxiang, Minhe county; Qingquancaota, Zhongquanyi, Minhe county; Shangsunjiazhai, Datong county; Zongri, Bagouxiang, Tongde county; Shenna, Xinning city; and Baiyazi, Ledu county. Ningxia sites include: Shangtai, Hequanxiang, Yuanzhou district; Shatangxiang, Delong county; and Baiyazi, Xijie county. Based on excavated finds, Qijia jade are concentrated in two areas, primarily the Tianshui, Dingxi and Qingyang areas of eastern Gansu, and the Guyuan district of southeastern Ningxia. Other sites include Wuwei, Lanzhou, and Linxia in central Gansu, and the Xining area in eastern Qinghai. These areas are also characterized by the richest remains of Qijia cultural strata. It is likely that stylistically related jade bi and cong in the Qing imperial collection, and in other early collections, also come from these northwestern areas.

2. Ye Maolin, "Summary of Jades Unearthed from Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang," Zhongguo Yuqi Quanj, 15, I-IV (Chinese), with English translation by E. Childs-Johnson, V-IX.
II. Formal Properties

Jade *bi* of the Qi jia culture consist of two primary forms. The first is round and flat with a central perforation (Figure 1). These *bi* disks range in diameter from 7 to 40 cm, and a few measure as wide as 50 and 60 cm. Both sides are evenly polished and unadorned. Many have grayish-white altered (*qinse*) areas, particularly on the edges. The sections that are most easily altered are brown in color, and are often described as “sugary” (*tangse*) (Figure 2). Qi jia jade *bi* that have been passed down through the ages as collected pieces frequently have red-colored alterations. This alteration is the result of “panmo” or “panwan,” handling and fondling.

The second Qi jia disk form consists of linked *huang* or jade pieces in the shape of an arch that fit together to form a disk (Figure 3). Each jade *huang* piece is usually characterized by a perforation designed for tethering the pieces together. They are most often formed of three *huang* pieces (which are not necessarily the same size). The surfaces of the *huang* are unadorned.

Jade *cong* are primarily rectangular on the outside and circular inside (Figure 4). The central holes are straight and vertical, and rather large. *Cong* average between 2 to 17 cm in height, although some reach 40 to 50 cm in height. The four external surfaces are typically polished without décor; however, two jade *cong* unearthed in Jingning county, Gansu are adorned. One has 13 equidistant, horizontal layers of grooves (Figure 5), and the other has 3 groups of 5 string lines (Figure 6). A jade *cong* found in Delong county of Ningxia is adorned with the décor of a phoenix (*fenghuang*), but this was worked later than the Qi jia period (Figure 7).

III. Material Properties

The mineral stone of Qi jia *bi* and *cong* is primarily tremolite (*toushanshi*) nephrite, but also includes serpentine group, silicates and calcites, calcites, talc, and quartz. The source of these minerals is local. Scholars maintain that the “true jade” (*zhenyu*) used in antiquity was nephrite, with the gravity weight of 2.9 to 3.1, and a hardness of 6 to 6.5. Other stones served as substitutes for jade and are frequently described as pseudo-jade. Two sources of nephrite jade are found in the area associated with excavated sites of the Qi jia culture. The two sites are in Lintao and Zoulian of Gansu province. The outer surface of jade specimens from these two sources is comparable to the surfaces of excavated Qi jia jades. Thus, it may be assumed that the origin of Qi jia jade is local. Other stones, such as the serpentine group, silicates and calcites, *calkites*, talc, and quartz are readily found. The latter stones are close to jade in sheen and hardness, and thus they were used when jade was not available.
A small number of Qijia jades carved out of Hetian jade are pure, dense, and of much better quality than the locally exploited nephrite. Given the location of Qijia in the northwest, the culture served as the "throat" which swallowed and digested the more advanced jade cultures of Central China. The appearance of Hetian jade (from Xinjiang) marks the beginning of the export of this well-known and favored jade from the far northwest through to the Central Plains. Here began the two-thousand year cultural interchange between west and east. It could be called the "jade route" of the Qijia cultural period.

The pale green color of Qijia jade cong and bi varies between dark and light hues. Lighter examples are almost greenish white, whereas darker examples are deep green. Translucency is low, and to the naked eye the material appears impure. Lighter colored examples are frequently marked by brown splotches or grains, known as "sugary" (tangie). Other cong and bi are covered with spots, popularly called "ant marks" (maya). The hardness of the silicate and calcite artifacts is quite low and the surfaces appear to be speckled and splotched (Figure 8). The sheen of silicate and calcite bi is often quite high, yet the surface of calcite bi is opaque, without luster.

**IV. Techniques of Manufacture**

Based on the remains on Qijia jade bi and cong, these jades were worked by cutting and slicing (qiege), drilling, and inlay. Cutting and slicing are common techniques in working jade. Evidence of slicing and cutting is visible on the surface of jade bi and of jade material remains (Figures 9, 10). Cutting and slicing entailed use of quartz sand that moved along the surface of the jade as it was being sawed by a blade that was most likely long and hard. The tool for sawing and slicing was probably made out of bamboo, wood, or stone. Remains of these tools have not yet been identified archaeologically. It is clear from remains of Qijia artifacts that bronze tools also existed. A flat bronze saw probably made the extremely straight cut lines on the surfaces of Qijia jades.

Two types of drills were used to work Qijia bi and cong: one that was hollow and one that was solid. Solid core drills were probably made out of flint, bamboo,
or a sharp stone. The path of the hole is quite small, and the perforation is usually “trumpet” in shape, with the upper part large and the lower part small. The small perforations made at the ends of huang pieces forming disk shapes were usually drilled from one side only. The jade piece that emerges from holes made by a hollow drill looks like a short round pillar (Figure 11). The hollow drill was probably made of bamboo or bone, and was worked with water and sand. The central opening of both cong and bi was made with a hollow drill. Holes of bi were usually drilled from one side only and their edges slope. Some interior walls of bi perforations reveal crisp and refined “snail-shell” curling lines that remain from the circular rotation of drills (Figure 12). The walls of the interior holes of cong made with the hollow drill often appear rather straight, and they take the shape of an uneven open tube (Figure 13).

A few cong have been inlaid with turquoise. Archaeological evidence comparable with the era of Qijia for this practice comes from jades of the Taosi culture.

V. Conclusion

Qijia cong and bi are quite large. The stone material used was carefully selected, and the techniques used to work the jade appear mature. Qijia jade artifacts were most likely ritual implements and social markers. Given that 384 jade bi have been found in archaeological excavations alone, it appears that ritual activities were in evidence and advanced. The production and use of jade bi and cong during the Qijia cultural period reached a cultural pinnacle. By the Shang and Zhou eras their usage had gradually diminished.

Most scholars agree that Qijia jade bi and cong originated in the Liangzhu culture since these two jade forms are the most significant artifacts from the latter culture. This view is reasonable, and is particularly well reflected in the two cong with grooved décor that were unearthed in the Jingning county of Gansu. The decorative motifs are similar to Liangzhu cong. Differences are nonetheless apparent and easy to identify. Qijia jades in general are not decorated. The consistent lack of decoration contributes to the sense that these jade artifacts were important for symbolic and ritual purposes in the Qijia culture.

Translated by Elizabeth Childs-Johnson