Case 4: A Covered Jade Cup with Felines and Birds

What to drink, wine or jade?

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Fig. 1: (left and below)
Covered jade cup with fitting decorated with three felines and three crested birds
Nephrite jade and gilt bronze
2nd-3rd century BCE
Harvard Art Museums,
7.7 x 11.2 cm

Warming Up

If you have not yet seen this exquisite jade cup in person, it would be a great idea to drop by the Museum and take a close look. Get a sense of its size, decoration, and precious qualities. Perhaps imagine holding the vessel in your hands and drinking wine from it. Views of the cup from a variety of angles are also available on the Harvard Art Museums website. Check it out!

After familiarizing yourself with the cup, can you answer the following questions?

- How many legs does the cup have?
- How many kinds of surface decoration can you see?
- Do you find anything special on the lid?
- Bonus points—what do you think is on the bottom of the cup?

Problem Set:

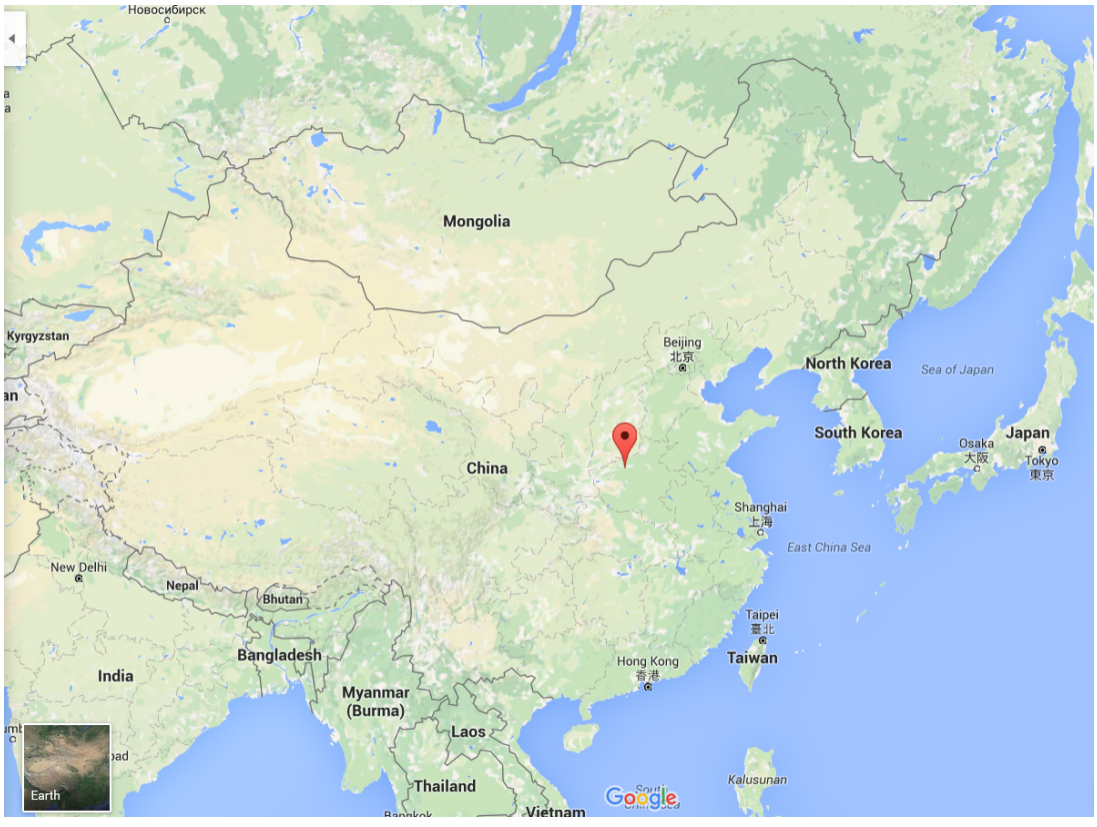
- What was the function of this jade cup?
- Why was our wine cup fashioned out of jade?
- How might we explain the design program of the piece?
- What function does our jade cup serve for the person who drinks from it?

Section One: A Jade Cup 23 Centuries Old

Treasures Unearthed

In 1928, after a record-breaking heavy rain, the local farmers of Jincun Village ("Gold Village," Fig. 1) near the ancient capital Luoyang discovered a large sunken portion of land. It was soon discovered that the dip in the ground was the result of a tomb that had collapsed beneath the ground. Moreover, it was not just one burial site, but a series of eight tombs (Fig. 2). The tombs were built at the tail end of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (roughly 475-221 BCE), and the sheer exquisiteness of the objects found within suggested an occupant of high status—perhaps even a member of the royal family.[1] Sadly, word about the underground treasure hoard spread quickly and, by 1930, grave robbers had looted nearly all the tombs. From that time on, hundreds of jade, gold, silver, bronze, and lacquer objects unearthed from the tombs were scattered across the globe.[2]

Fig. 2:
Location of Jincun on a map of China



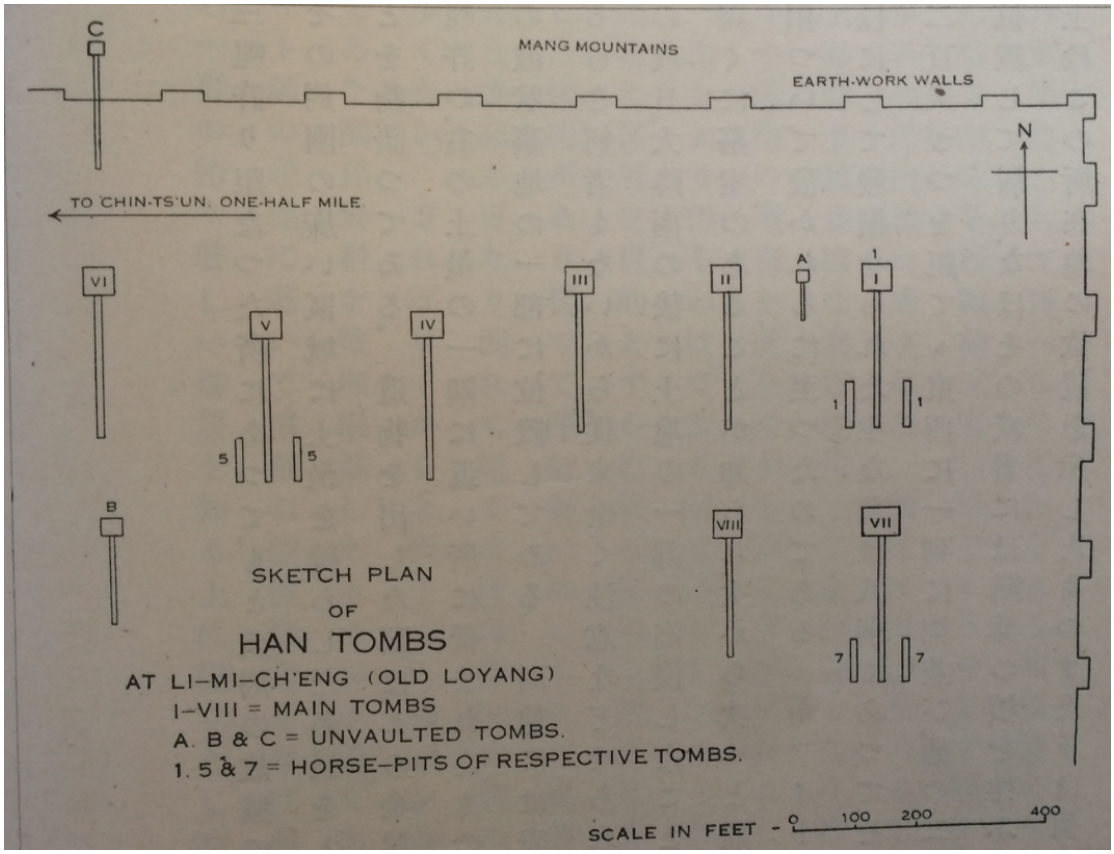


Fig. 2:
Distribution of the eight tombs from the Jincun site

Our jade cup was once a part of the Jincun burial hoard—perhaps one of the finest objects amongst all the tombs. The cup's astounding combination of gold and jade proclaims its value, while the design of its bronze rim and pattern of the lid are both attractive and mysterious. The body of the cup was carved from a single piece of nephrite jade, adorned with a finger handle, a jade ring latched in place by a beast mask design, and two bands of evenly distributed "grain-dot" bumps across the body of the vessel. Even the finest craftsmen today would have difficulty besting it.

The Mystery of the Jade Cup

Visual beauty is not the only reason for which our jade cup stands out. The vessel belongs to a category of wine cup known it ancient China as a *zhi*. As we saw in our first case study, such vessels were commonly used during the Warring States period and Han dynasty. These wine cups were typically made with a cylindrical body set atop three legs, a finger handle for lifting, and generally a lid with three vertical finials. However, most surviving *zhi* wine cups were made of lacquer or bronze (Fig. 3). Very few were carved from a single piece of jade.[3]

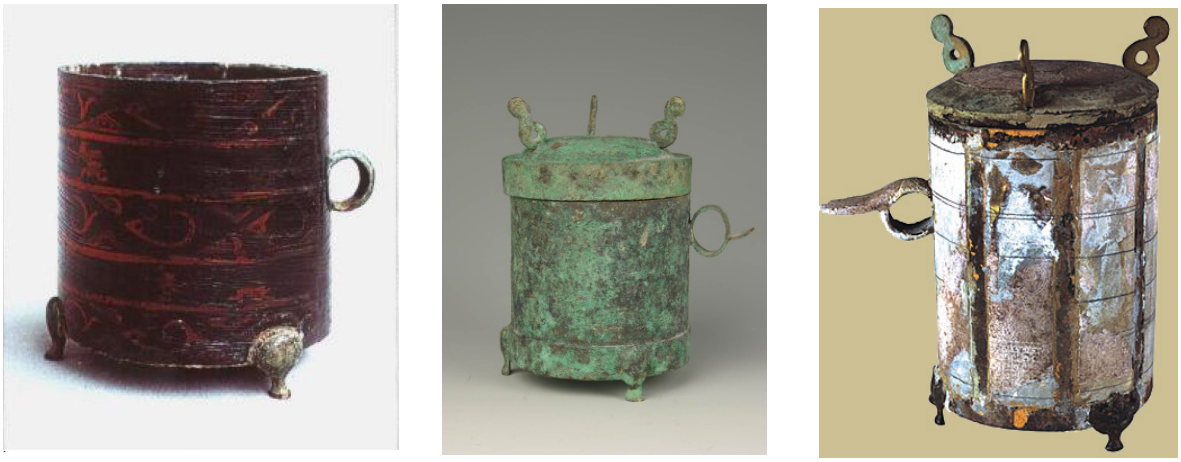


Fig. 3:
Other examples of *zhi* wine cups

Another peculiar aspect of our jade cup concerns its surface decoration. Compared with other *zhi* from the same period, our cup is much more sophisticated in terms of the design program. Perhaps the most intriguing design element was the use of a quatrefoil pattern on the jade surface. Such a pattern was carved upon the center of the lid (Fig. 4). Flipping the cup over, one finds yet another quatrefoil pattern marked with a swirl in its center (Fig. 5). The fact that a second identical pattern was applied to the bottom of the cup in a place generally hidden from the user adds to the mystery of its significance. The application of two quatrefoils certainly performed some sort of function, judging from the fact that the same design was found on two other jade *zhi* cups excavated from a Western Han (206 BCE-24 CE) tomb site (Figs. 6 and 7). Interestingly, one also finds bird and feline motifs on these pieces, making it even more likely that their design was linked to our own jade cup.

Fig. 4:
Top view of lid
of the jade cup,
Harvard Art Museums

Fig. 5:
Bottom view
of jade cup,
Harvard Art Museums

Fig. 6: (above and below)
Jade *zhi* 1
From Beishantou tomb no.1.
Chaohu Museum, Anhui

Fig. 7:
Jade *zhi* (2)
From Beishantou tomb no.1
Chaohu Museum, Anhui

Section Two: Decoding Jade, Thinking like the Ancients

The Opaqueness of Jade

Why was our wine cup made of jade? In fact, nephrite jade was probably the most favored precious material of all-time in Chinese civilization. Archaeological studies indicate that the Chinese performed rituals using jade artefacts as early as the Neolithic period (Fig.8). After China entered into the dynastic period, jade continued to be the most important material for making ritual implements (Fig.9-10). For example, an ancient text detailing the court rituals of the Zhou dynasty records:

> The Six Vessels are to be made of jade. [They are] to be used to perform rituals to Heaven, Earth, and the Four Directions.[4]

Even today, jade remains extremely popular among Chinese people. Many individuals still wear pendants and bracelets carved out of jade. However, jade is not merely a beautiful fashion statement. It has also been long believed that jade nourishes whoever wears it. This might lead you to wonder: what exactly makes jade so special?

Fig. 8: Jade *cong* (left)
ca. 3300-2000 BCE
Harvard Art Museums

Fig. 9: Jade *bi* disc (above)
8th-11th c. BCE.
Harvard Art Museums

Fig. 10: Jade *huang* (below)
3rd-4th c. BCE
Harvard Art Museums

Fig. 11:
Present day jade necklace and bracelet

Jade in Confucian Culture

One answer to this question comes from the beliefs of Confucianism—a type of cultural and political philosophy adopted by the ruling class in early China. For scholar-officials in ancient China, the beauty of jade represented the five virtues that a gentleman should possess. An early character dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi*, tells us:

> Jade is the most beautiful among stones. [It] has five virtues. Its mildness is moist and nurturing, like benevolence. By studying its pattern outside, one can know what is inside—this is like Righteousness. Its sound is smooth, clear, and travels far. This is like Wisdom. Like courage, it does not bend or fold. Sharp, clean, and humble, it is like Honesty.[5]

Along the same line of logic, jade was also used as a metaphor for the true gentleman, such as we see in an early text written by the great Confucian scholar, Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BCE)—the *Spring and Autumn Annals*:

> Jade is mild but not turbid, this is ultimate clarity. Therefore jade is a metaphor for a *junzi*— "gentleman." If there is a crack inside a piece of jade, [the crack] can always be seen from outside. This is why a gentleman does not hide his weakness.[6]

In this sense, jade was tightly associated the sagely virtues of good conduct followed by a true *junzi* gentleman. Yet the metaphorical relationship between the gentleman and jade reveals but one aspect of cultural significance. It does not explain why people would make bracelets, necklaces, and even cups of jade. We must further examine the significance attached to the material itself.

The Secrets of Jade

We have yet to fully answer the question of what precisely jade signified in ancient China. Some thoughts regarding this matter can be extracted from surviving Chinese texts. The following two stories are particularly useful for our exploration.

The Story of Zhang Yu:

The first tale concerns a retired general by the name of Zhang Yu, as recorded in a 10th century compilation, the *Taiping Yulan*:

> Zhang Yu admired *the ancients who ate jade as a meal,* so he visited the Blue Field (a place famous for producing jade) and dug up the ground himself [looking for jade]. He acquired over a hundred pieces of jade, large and small, in the form of discs and other shapes. Yu then *ground 70 pieces into powder and ate them daily*…When he was about to die of illness, Zhang Yu told his wife and children: "If one is able to ingest jade and live among the mountains in seclusion, cutting off any desires, then they might gain divine power. But I had no restraint in drinking and sex, which has led to my death. This is not the fault of the medicine (jade powder). Something out of the ordinary will definitely happen to my corpse. You must not bury me quickly, so that the people [who see my corpse] will know the miracle wrought by my ingesting [jade powder]." It was in the middle of the seventh month, and the city of Chang'an was hot and humid. Yu's corpse was set out for four nights, but there was *no change to his shape or color* (signs of decay)…[7]

Although this story took place much later than the date of our cup, the idea of ingesting ground jade powder to preserve one's body is directly connected to the ancient practice of burying the deceased within jade suits, commonly known as *jinlü yuyi*—"gold threaded jade suits," or jade coffins. For example, King Liu Sheng (165-113 BCE) had his corpse wrapped in a full-body jade suit made of 2,498 pieces of jade held together with gold thread (Fig. 12). Likewise, his wife Dou Wan was placed in a coffin inlayed with jade plaques on the interior and decorated with large jade discs on the exterior (Fig. 13). This costly practice was especially popular amongst the imperial family during the 2nd century BCE and was based on the belief that jade had the power to protect one's corpse. Indeed, so strong was this belief that when rebels opened up the Han imperial tombs during the Red Eyebrow Rebellion (18-27 CE), they commented that the corpses placed within jade suits all looked as though still alive.[8]

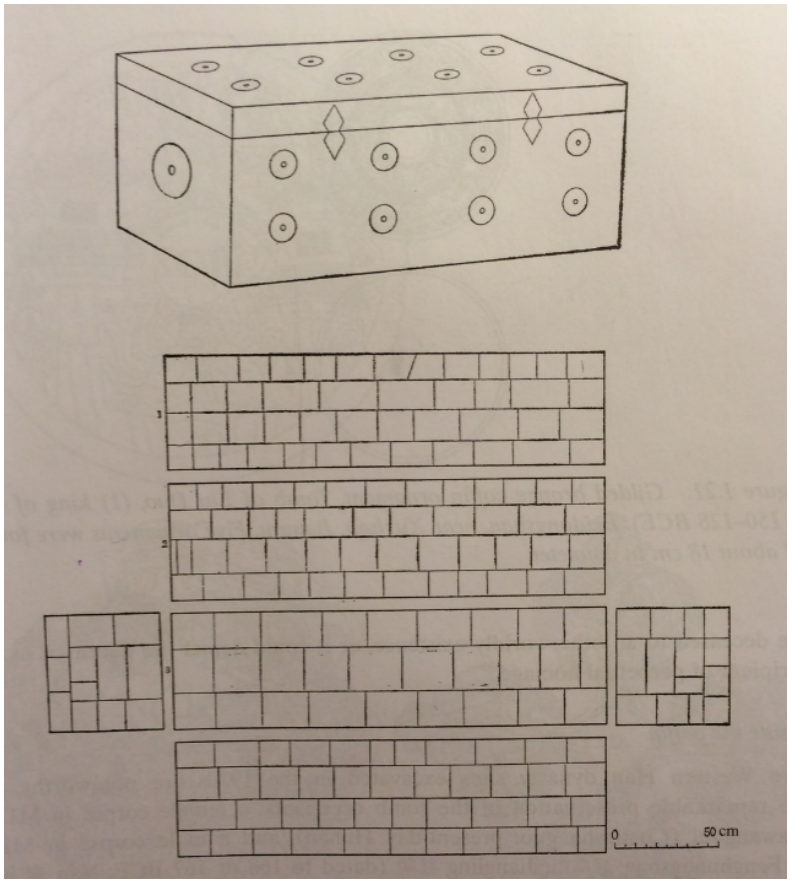


Fig. 12: (above)
The jade suit of Liu Sheng
165-113 BCE
From Shijiazhuang
Hebei Provincial Museum

Fig. 13: (left)
Diagram of the jade coffin of Dou Wan
From Shijiazhuang
Hebei Provincial Museum

From these passages, we may ascertain that both Zhang Yu's hunger for jade powder and Liu Sheng's burial suit originated from an understanding of jade's magical power—it could protect the body from decline and decay.

The Story of Emperor Wu of the Han:

The second tale comes from a period much closer to the date of our jade cup and concerns a legendary pursuit of immortality. According to the *Shiji* or "Records of the Grand Historian" from the 1st century BCE, Emperor Wu of the Han (156-87 BCE) once constructed an enormous palace named Jiangzhang Palace. In it, he built:

> ...[The Emperor] then ordered the construction of Boliang Terrace, the *Copper Pillar, [a statue] of an immortal holding up a dew plate,* and so on [within the Jiangzhang Palace]. [9]

A later annotation to the line provides us with more details concerning the pillar and statue:

> The Dew Plate [Pillar] in the Jianzhang Palace was 30 *zhang* tall…it was made of copper. On top [of the Dew Plate Pillar] there was a [statue] of an immortal holding up a dew plate (for collecting the sweet dew of the immortals). [The Emperor] mixed *ground jade powder* [in the dew water] and drank it.[10]

Fig.14:
Statue of an immortal holding up a dew plate, Beihai Park, Beijing.

Emperor Wu believed that the liquid condensed upon the dew plate each morning and evening came down from heaven. By drinking it with powdered jade, he might prolong his life and eventually achieve immortality. This famous episode concerning Emperor Wu of the Han was apparently very influential in later dynasties, so much so that Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799) of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) even built a replica of the Dew Plate Pillar in his own royal garden. It still stands today in the Beihai Park in Beijing (Fig. 14).

The episode was clearly not a simple myth, since an actual dew plate survives from roughly the time of Emperor Wu of the Han. Excavated from the tomb of Zhao Mo (r. 137-122 BCE), the second ruler of the Southern Yue kingdom, the dew plate takes a three-legged bronze plate as its base. From this, three serpentine heads made of silver rise up to hold a detachable jade cup carved with three petals (Fig. 15). The presence of the dew plate within King Zhao Mo's tomb is not at all surprising, as archaeologists also discovered an assortment of minerals (Fig. 16) that were used in attempts to create elixirs of immortality. King Zhao Mo also pursued longevity and immortality along the lines of Emperor Wu.

Fig. 15:
Dew plate of King Zhao Mo of the Southern Yue, 2nd c. BCE
Nanyuewang Tomb Museum, Guangzhou

Fig. 16:
Five minerals discovered in the tomb of Zhao Mo, known as the "Five-colored Medicine Stones"

The dew plate is so exquisite and well preserved that one might easily imagine King Zhao Mo picking up the jade cup and drinking the dew collected upon the bronze plate—perhaps even mixing it with jade powder like Emperor Wu of the Han. Interestingly, King Zhao Mo's dew plate was made with a cup installed in the middle of the bronze base. This feature reemphasizes the crucial role of jade in making elixirs of immortality. In this sense, it is apparent that both ingesting jade directly and drinking with a jade vessel were closely associated with the idea of prolonging life and attaining immortality.

From these two stories and their related objects, we know that the ancient Chinese believed jade had the magical power to preserve the body, bringing longevity and immortality to the living. Yet, why was jade as a material associated with such magical powers?

Jade and the *Yang* Vital Energy

The key to unveiling the source of jade's magical power may once again be found within the cosmological schema of ancient China. As we have seen, the Chinese believed that the universe was generated by the two polar cosmic energies of *yin* and *yang*.[11] These two energies constantly interact and transform, generating the entirety of the cosmos. Therefore, everything in the world was conceived of as a blend of *yin* and *yang* energies, and the proportions of the blend determined the property of the thing. As we know, the heavens were considered the ultimate concentration of *yang* energy, while the earth was believed to be the pure concentration of *yin*. Humans and other life forms living between heaven and earth were therefore an inherent mixture of *yin* and *yang* energies.

Jade, despite coming from earth, was considered the essence of *yang* energy. This mode of thinking is born out in numerous surviving texts. For example, in Zheng Xuan's annotation to the term "jade" in the *Zhouli*, he notes:

> Jade is the essence of *yang* vital energy. It blocks the vital energy of water (*yin*). [12]

In another important early text, the famous *I Ching* or "Book of Changes," jade is associated with the heavens:

> The *Qian* (the sign of utmost *Yang* in hexagram symbols) is *Heaven*…it is Lord, it is Father…it is j*ade.*[13]

Importantly, *yang* energy was closely associated with youth in the minds the ancient Chinese people. Many surviving medical texts from the early period include discussions on how to nurture and prolong one's life. According to these texts, proper sexual intercourse, the ultimate bodily manifestation of the unification of *yin* and *yang,* was thought to stimulate the circulation of vital energies within the body—guiding one to longevity. However, the texts also recommended that the male practitioner avoid ejaculation so that his *yang* essence would not escape the body.[14] In doing so, a man could conserve and accumulate his *yang* energy within his body, ultimately causing him to achieve longevity or return to youth.[15] In other words, taking in *yang* energy from the circulation of *yin-yang* within one's body was considered to be the key to youth and immortality. As the pure essence of *yang*, jade was one key to achieving youth, longevity, and immortality in the minds of the ancient Chinese.[16]

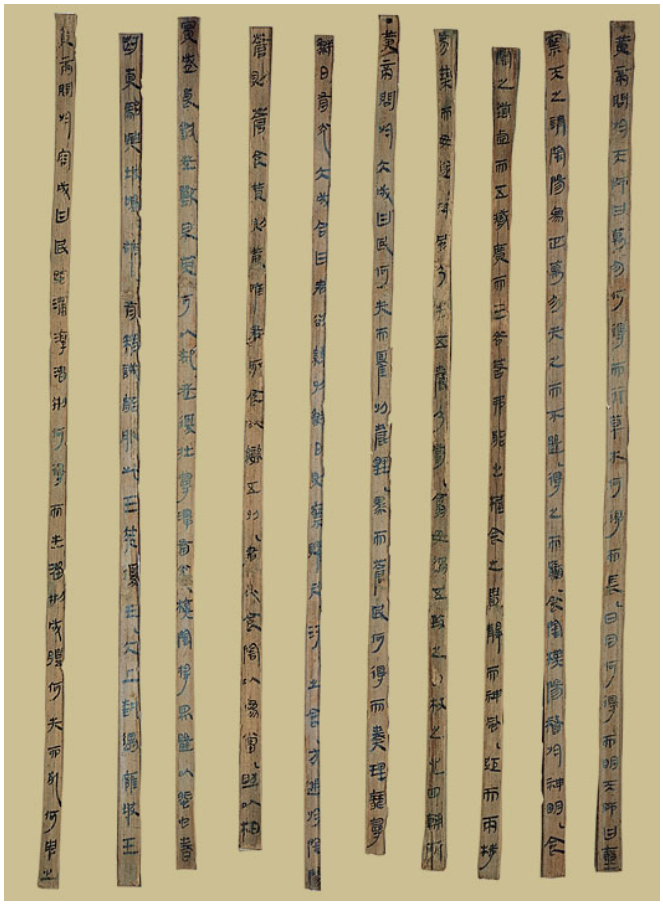


Fig. 17: Bamboo strips from Mawangdui Tomb No. 3
This text referred to as the "Ten Questions" contains an extensive discussion on sexual intercourse
Hunan Provincial Museum, Changsha

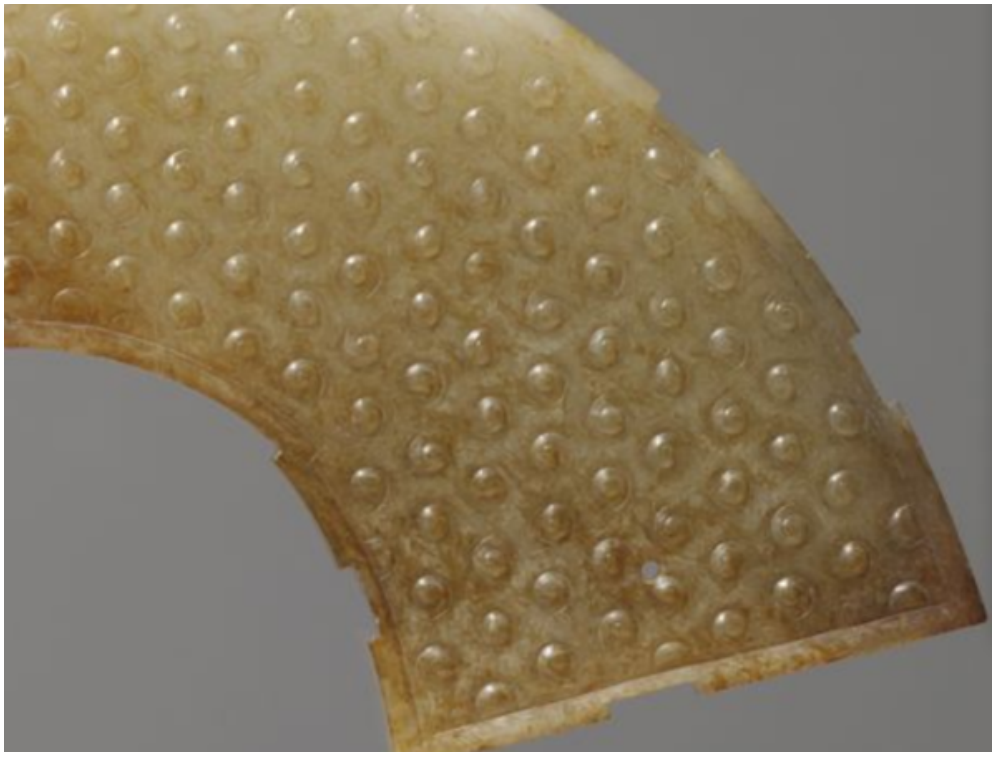
Visual Program of the Jade Cup

So far we have examined ideas concerning jade in the minds of the early Chinese. Let us now see how this information might guide our understanding of the visual program of our cup.

First, the link between *yang* energy and jade dictated the selection of jade as the medium for creating the wine cup. By using jade, the wine cup was clearly connected to the idea of ingesting jade and prolonging one's life. Secondly, the fact that jade was considered the essence of *yang* also helps us decipher the function of the "grain-dot" bumps applied to the surface of the jade cup. If we look closely at the bumps, they were in fact made in the shape of small swirls, as if trying to show the condensation of *yang* vapors (Fig. 18). The "swirling dot" is but a visualization of the *yang* essence captured within jade. It may be for this reason that the swirling motif was also commonly used on other ritual jade pieces (Fig. 19).

Fig. 18: Detail of grain-dot bumps on the Harvard jade cup

Fig. 19: Detail of grain-dot bumps on a jade *huang*, Harvard Art Museums



Jade's association with *yang* energy may also help us come to terms with the role of the bird finials and feline motifs upon the lid. Thinking back to our first case study, we know that the motif of "phoenix and tiger" was often deployed on the artworks of ancient China (Fig. 20), particularly in southern China. An old interpretation of this paired motif was that the bird was a totem of the southern state of Chu, while the tiger was a totem of the rival Ba people situated adjacent to Chu. The two peoples were constantly at war, though Chu eventually won out. Thus a phoenix standing upon a tiger may have been a symbol for the triumph of Chu over Ba. However, we know that this pairing can also be interpreted using *yin-yang* cosmology: the bird as the symbol of the south and *yang*, and the feline as a representation of the west and *yin*. To have a bird standing atop a feline could then indicate the union of *yin* and *yang* energy, while also proclaiming the superior position of *yang*. This interpretation seems more suitable when considering the function of the jade cup: ingesting *yang* energy to prolong one's life. Therefore, the bird and the feline motif on our jade cup, as well as those found in other excavation sites (Fig. 7), may be understood as manifestations of the cups' inherent *yang* properties—as well as the *yang* liquids that they held inside.

However, one question remains with regard to the visual program of the jade cup: what is the meaning of the quatrefoil patterns on the top and the bottom of the vessel (Figs. 4-5)?

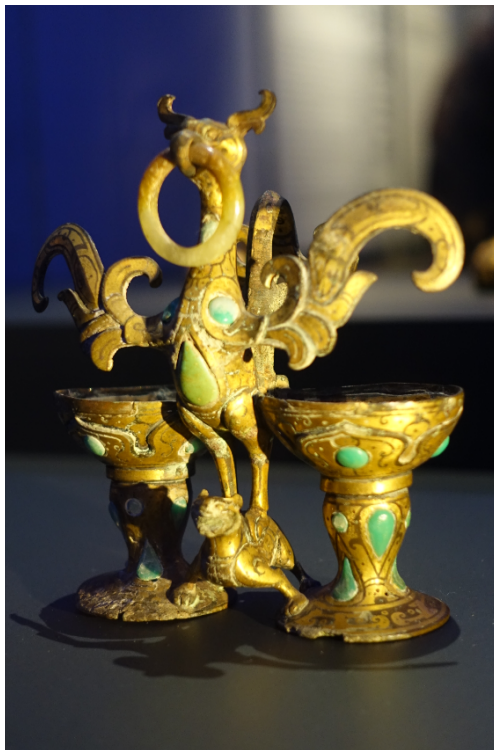


Fig. 20:
(left) Drum stand with two birds and two tigers, 3rd-4th c. BCE
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
(right) Gold object in the form of a phoenix and a feline
Shijiazhuang, Hebei Provincial Museum

Fig. 21: (above and below)
Bronze mirror with quatrefoil design and inscriptions
Warring States Period

The Mystery of the Quatrefoil

As it would happen, the quatrefoil was one of the most commonly used motifs in early Chinese art—particularly during the period between the Warring States and the Han Dynasty. Yet, its significance was lost to history. Scholars have hotly debated the symbolism of the quatrefoil pattern. A more recent study based on early bronze mirror inscriptions has argued that it was a cosmological pattern representing the four cardinal directions (Fig. 21).[17] Indeed, the quatrefoil pattern does appear to have a close connection with the four directions. Its directional associations are clear on a bronze ornament from the Han period—a piece decorated with the animals of the four directions, inscribed within the petals of a quatrefoil (Fig. 21).[18]

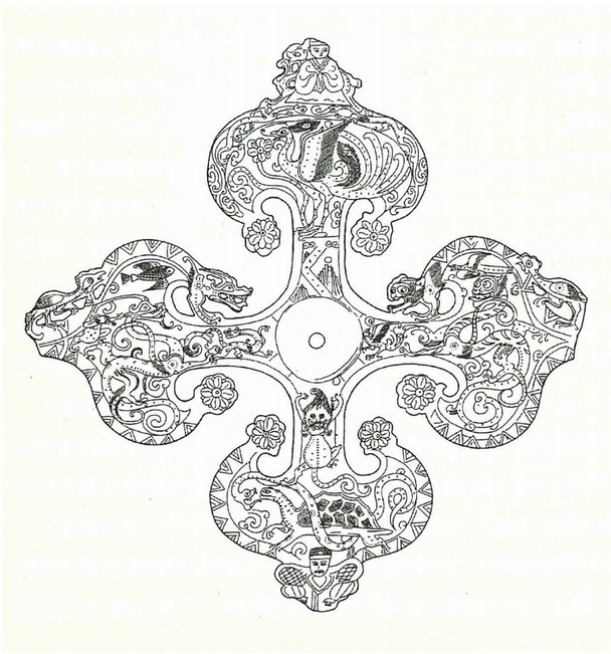


Fig. 22:
Eastern Han bronze ornamental plate
with motifs of the four directions
Excavated from Wushan tombs, Chongqing

Building upon the explorations of our case study, another possible way of interpreting the quatrefoil pattern is as a representation of "jade flowers" from the immortal realm. Early Chinese texts discussing the realm of the immortals located atop the mythical Mount Kunlun often mentioned that jade flowers grew on the *qiong* "jade tree" atop the mountain and were eaten by the immortals as a delicacy. For example, a Western Han poet, Sima Xiangru (179-117 BCE), wrote that after visiting the Queen Mother of the West, the goddess of immortality atop Mount Kunlun, he attended a feast with the immortals. He stated:

> Breathing and sucking the evening dew, my meal is the morning mist. Biting and chewing on the *lingzhi* fugus (of immortality), I will eat the blossom of the *qiong* jade flower.[19]

It is remarkable how the couplet echoes Emperor Wu of the Han's practice of drinking the morning and evening dew. Eating the "jade flower" is also extremely suggestive. We can recall that King Zhao Mo's dew plate had a jade cup installed in the center, which had a detachable flower blossom surrounding it (Fig. 23)! Whether this flower blossom was meant to represent the jade flower served at the immortal's dinner is unclear. Yet, it is sufficient to show that the jade flower was closely connected with the practice of ingesting jade and prolonging one's life. It is perhaps for this reason that the quatrefoil flower appears most frequently on cooking utensils, wine containers (Fig. 24), and wine cups—they are all associated with the notion of ingestion. In this sense, we might understand the quatrefoil motif as representative of the "jade flower," further linking the object to the immortal realm.

Lastly, we might also extend the symbolism to explain the interplay of two different quatrefoil patterns on the top and the bottom of our jade cup. If the quatrefoil on top suggested that the jade cup, along with the contents inside, belonged to the realm of the immortals, then the entire cup may have been a transformative "device" that converted wine (or dew mixed with jade powder) inside the cup into a magical elixir that prolonged the life of the drinker and helped them attain immortality. In this sense, the quatrefoils on the top and bottom symbolized two different stages of this transformation, visualizing a bottom to top increase of *yang* energy within the cup.

Fig. 23:
Detachable jade flower from
King Zhao Mo's dew plate.

Fig. 24:
(left) Wine container, Western Han Dynasty, Xi'an City Museum
(right) Cooking utensil, Warring States Period

Rethinking and Reflecting

Thinking back over our case study journey, we have covered quite a bit of ground. Once again, we have seen the cosmologies of ancient China in action on material objects. We have also learned how these cosmologies worked in conjunction with the question for longevity and immortality. Considering what you have learned, can you now better answer the following questions:

- What roles did jade play in Chinese civilization?
- Why was our wine cup made of jade?
- What did the bird motif on the lid and the "grain-dot" bumps share in common?
- How should we understand the quatrefoil motifs on the top and bottom of the jade cup?
- What function did our jade cup have for the person who drank from it?
- Can you explain the overall design program of the jade cup?

When you have time, please go to the Museum and pick a jade piece to your liking. Do you see anything new in light of this case study?

Tools for New Discoveries

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End Notes

[1] The dating of the tombs is still debated, theories vary from 6th c. BCE to the very end of the 3rd c. BCE. However, the stylistic features of some objects from the tomb suggest that they were possibly made from the 2nd-3rd c. BCE.

[2] See Umehara Sueji 梅原末治, *Rakuyō Kin-son kobo shūei.* 洛陽金村古墓聚英 (Kyoto: Kobayashi Shashin Seihanjo Shuppanbu, 1943). Umeda made a catalogue for some of the objects excavated from Jincun.

[3] *Zhi* wine cups were most popular during the Warring States period and Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). They are frequently discovered in tombs from this period.

[4] Original text: http://ctext.org/pre-qin-and-han/zhs?searchu=%E5%85%AD%E5%99%A8

[5] Original text: http://ctext.org/shuo-wen-jie-zi/yu-bu/zhs

[6] Original text: http://ctext.org/chun-qiu-fan-lu/zhi-zhi/zhs

[7] Original text: http://ctext.org/text.pl?node=388609&if=gb&remap=gb

[8] The episode is recorded in the *Latter Book of Han* 後漢書.
Original text: http://ctext.org/hou-han-shu/liu-xuan-liu-pen-zi-lie-zhuan/zhs

[9] Original text: http://ctext.org/shiji/xiao-wu-ben-ji/zhs

[10] The annotation was added by Yan Shigu (581-645) during the Tang Dynasty.

[11] The list goes on for many other things. Please refer to the diagram in our first case study.

[12] The annotation was added to a record in the *Rites of Zhou*.

Original text: http://ctext.org/rites-of-zhou/tian-guan-zhong-zai/zhs

[13] Original text: http://ctext.org/book-of-changes/shuo-gua/zhs

[14] One example is the bamboo strips discovered in Mawangdui tomb No. 3 (Fig.17.) Known as the *Shiwen* 十問 "Ten Questions," the text includes an extensive discussion of sexual intercourse for medical purposes. It recommends that men resist the urge to ejaculate during sexual intercourse. Restraining yourself was believed to bring enhanced clarity of mind and the senses, eventually leading to youthfulness. See Donald Harper, "The Sexual Arts of Ancient China as Described in a Manuscript of The Second Century B.C.," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 47.2 (Dec. 1987): 539-593.

[15] See Douglas Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber: the Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics Including Women's Solo Meditations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). The period from infancy to puberty was considered abundant in *yang* energy. Thus, by accumulating the *yang* energy, one could return to a youthful state. It should also be noted that women, who

belong to the *yin* category, were also able to accumulate *yang* energy. Lacking the *yang* essence of the men (semen), female practitioners resorted to nurturing the small amount of inherent *yang* energy inside their own body through meditation.

[16] It is for this reason that jade was prominently featured in legends concerning the Queen Mother of the West—the goddess of immortality residing in a jade palace atop Mount Kunlun. Immortals on Mount Kunlun were said to feed only upon "jade flowers and sweet dew."

[17] The inscription states: "The directional flower flourishes, this is to be called prosperity." There are also scholars who interpret the quatrefoil as the symbol for aristocratic rank of marquis.

[18] Please refer again to the cosmological diagram from case study one.

[19] For the particular poem, please see: http://ctext.org/shiji/si-ma-xiang-ru-lie-zhuan/zhs