



On the Development and Evolution of Neolithic Jade Culture: Taking the Xinglongwa Culture of Prehistoric Art as an Example

Yan Wang

Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, Zhejiang, China.

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*Corresponding author: Yan Wang,
Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua
321004, Zhejiang, China.

Abstract

From ancient times to the present, the Chinese have had an unspoken love for jade. The discovery of jade artifacts at Xinglongwa, a site of the Xinglongwa Culture, opened the door to China's jade civilization. The findings at Xinglongwa in the Liao River Basin are of great research significance for the origins and development of early jade artifacts, pottery, and sculpture, among other arts. The Xinglongwa jade culture is closely related to the later Hongshan Culture in northeastern China, as well as the Majiabang Culture in southern China, which is also linked to the origins of jade artifacts. Both their forms and cultural connotations have played significant roles in the history of Chinese jade civilization. This article focuses on the origins of the Xinglongwa jade culture, its transmission to subsequent cultures, and the exchange and integration of jade cultures between the North and South. Based on existing literature records, it conducts an in-depth exploration and analysis of the development and evolution of jade culture during the Neolithic era.

Keywords

Xinglongwa Culture; Prehistoric Jade Artifacts; Hongshan Culture; Majiabang Culture

1. Introduction to the Xinglongwa Site

In the early 1980s, archaeological teams first uncovered a Neolithic site in Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia, which was earlier than the Zhaobaogou and Hongshan cultures. This remains was later officially named the Xinglongwa culture. Judged by archaeologists, the Xinglongwa culture dates back 8,200 to 7,200 years. It is the earliest Neolithic culture discovered in the areas north and south of the Yanshan Mountains. As the first prehistoric settlement in China to fully reveal house sites, ash pits, and moats, it is hailed as the "First Village of China" (Tian, 2022).

During the excavation of the Xinglongwa site, the archaeological team discovered that most of the tombs used a burial custom known as the "room burial", where the deceased's body was directly buried within the indoor space. This was a special custom that had always been prevalent and uninterrupted. Following archaeological excavations, the Xinglongwa site yielded the world's earliest jade artifact, the "jade pendant", and revealed an unusual burial custom—human and pig joint burial (Shao, 2022). Additionally, the earliest known attire in China—a shell skirt—was discovered. The Xinglongwa site also preserves thousands of valuable cultural relics, including pottery, stone tools, jade and bone artifacts, and shell tools, all of which vividly illustrate the social production, lifestyle, and regional customs of that time (Tian & Liu, 2010). They offer clues to unveil the mysterious daily production and lifestyle of the Xinglongwa culture for the public.

2. The Origin of Xinglongwa Jade Articles

The use of jade artifacts in China can be traced back more than 12,000 years. In addition to the jade cong from the well-known Liangzhu culture in southern China, a jade pendant excavated from the Xinglongwa cultural site in northern China is the earliest known jade artifact in both China and the world. The Hongshan and Daxintun cultures that followed are also significant representatives of jade culture. Jade artifacts originated primarily in the hunting-fishing culture of northeastern China, or more precisely, in the microlithic tradition—a stage in human material culture marked by the use of small, chipped stone tools—that characterized that region. This refers to the micro-quarrying technique, used to produce micro-lithic flakes and tools, which first appeared in the Late Paleolithic, thrived during the Mesolithic, and had an impact on the Neolithic. In the Neolithic, the shapes and manufacturing techniques of jade artifacts still bore the strong influence of microlithic technology. Although a small number of potentially 9,000-year-old early jade artifacts have recently been discovered at the Xiaonanshan site in Heilongjiang, the Hongshan culture's jade artifacts, which have both a wide variety of types and a large quantity, formed the earliest characteristics of China's jade culture and can be traced back to the Hongshan Culture. As such, they are a key source for studying the origins of Chinese jade culture and the origins of Chinese civilization.

3. Types and Functions of Xinglongwa Jade Artifacts

The main categories of Xinglongwa cultural jade artifacts are ornaments and tools. Ornaments include jade pendants, jade daggers, and jade tubes, while tools include jade axes, jade adzes, and jade chisels (Liu, 2014). Jade pendants represent the predominant form in Xinglongwa jade artifacts, occupying a dominant position. Jade daggers, or blade-shaped objects, are also abundant, ranking second only to jade disks and constituting another typical type of Xinglongwa jade artifacts.

3.1 Jade Pendant

What is a "jade pendant"? According to Mr. Hua Yubing's article "Shuo Jue", it is pointed out that the northeastern region itself has myths and legends of snake deities and snake-handling witchcraft. Snake totems are also quite common in the Liao River basin. Based on the ancient legend of wearing snakes, it is believed that the original name of the jade pendant should be jade er, a type of earring, whose shape resembles wearing a snake. Only those of extraordinary status could wear it. In "The Classic of Mountains and Seas", wearing a snake is directly referred to as "wearing a snake". "The Sea Within the Western Classic states": The depths of Kunlun South Abyss reach three hundred fathoms. The Enlightened Beast is large, resembling a tiger but with nine heads, all of which have human faces, standing facing east on the summit of Kunlun. To the west of the Enlightened Beast are the Phoenix and the Luan bird, both wearing snakes and treading on snakes, with red snakes on their chests. "Having red snakes on the chest". It means having red snakes on the thorax. This likely refers to braids hanging down from the ears along the chest. This is also reflected in the fact that wearing jade ear ornaments was a symbol of wearing snake ear ornaments.

3.2 Jade Dagger

Jade daggers are daggers made of jade, with a long, slender body that is slightly concave on one side and curves outward on the other. A small hole is drilled near one end, usually found around the neck, chest, or abdomen of the tomb owner, suggesting they were pendant ornaments on necklaces or decorative accents on clothing during the tomb owner's lifetime. Although they share similarities in form and size, their functions are vastly different. Jade, with its soft and smooth nature, cannot achieve the hardness of bone daggers and lacks the utilitarian function for labor. Therefore, it is inferred that during the Xinglongwa Culture period, jade daggers served as symbols of social status and had both intrinsic value and aesthetic appeal, making them akin to works of art. For prehistoric civilizations, intrinsic value equated to social standing and religious beliefs. At this time, the rudimentary concept of "ritual vessels" began to take shape.

3.3 Jade Axe, Jade Adze, Jade Chisel

The characteristics of jade adzes, jade hoes, and jade chisels are relatively distinct. These forms resemble their stone counterparts, although they are significantly smaller in size. With only a limited number of excavated artifacts and scarce written records, it is difficult to determine their specific functions. However, given that they are made of jade

and that religious beliefs played an integral role in the artistic expressions of Xinglongwa culture, there are traces of shamanic life in the tribes, which leads to the inevitable association of these jade artifacts with early ritualistic attributes—symbolism.

4. Inheritance and Development of Xinglongwa Jade Culture in Subsequent Jade Cultures

To further explore the development of Xinglongwa jade artifacts and the reasons behind the transformation of their forms, this study delves into a comparative analysis of jade artifacts from the Northern Hongshan Culture and the Southern Majiabang Culture.

4.1 Comparison with Jade Artifacts from the Northern Hongshan Culture

The Xinglongwa culture, belonging to the early Neolithic period, was still in the experimental stage in terms of the use and development of jade artifacts. The Hongshan culture, representing a developmental phase of prehistoric art, succeeded the jade traditions of the Chahai and Xinglongwa cultures. It was a mid-Neolithic culture in the upper reaches of the Liao River and the Siramulin River. The culture was named after being first discovered at the Hongshanhou site in Chifeng City, Inner Mongolia. The Xinglongwa Culture and the Hongshan Culture can mainly be divided into three aspects in the development of jade artifacts: the evolution of artifact shapes, cultural significance, and agricultural production.

4.1.1 Evolution of artifact shapes

Although the Xonglongwa culture has yielded the earliest-known jade object in China, the “jade cicada-shaped pendant”, a large proportion of the other jade artifacts found in graves were types of production labor tools. These shapes still represented agricultural culture, but they expressed a primitive, rudimentary sense of the beauty and rarity of materials compared to earlier stone or shell tools. This could perhaps be expressed in today’s terms as an appreciation of “aesthetic appeal”. In the Hongshan culture, what we know and feel most about is jade. Jade artifacts became more diverse in form and were given clear functional classifications, with types used for decoration, such as pendants, carvings, rings, and ornaments, and tools such as battens, blades, and axes. Animal shapes were frequently employed in the decorative category, with jade carved into representations of birds, turtles, dragons, deer, pigs, and cranes, among other creatures, bringing them to life.

4.1.2 Cultural significance

Other artifacts excavated from the Xinglongwa culture indicate a certain degree of religious belief and divine symbolism, so I posit that jade objects also carried such meanings during that time. Jade was used in shamanistic rituals as a means of communicating with the heavens and earth. The Hongshan culture has yielded a terracotta statue of a shaman—the Xi statue—at Niuhewan, which depicts a wizard from the Eastern Yi jade culture. This discovery highlights the religious significance and emphasis on divine authority in jade objects of the Hongshan culture.

In addition, the basic form of the Xinglongwa jade pendants is a ring with a small aperture, which resembles a snake earring; in ancient times, there was a saying that “snakes were strung through the ears”, a unique ornament of the witch-god, which suggests that the jade disks may have been a “symbol of the snake”. The most typical jade artifacts of the Hongshan culture are dragon-shaped jade disks. The most typical jade artifact of the Hongshan Culture is the dragon-shaped jade disc, which symbolizes observing the heaven and earth. The Hongshan people fashioned the jade discs into the shape of dragons to facilitate diviners reading the celestial signs and communicating with the gods, thereby understanding the meaning of natural forces and acting in harmony with them to ensure the prosperity of their tribes. Due to the similarity between dragons and snakes, the jade ring in the shape of a dragon is likely to be physical evidence of the snake legend in Xinglongwa. Using jade artifacts as a tool to distinguish social status, also indicates that at this time, jade artifacts had already taken on the primitive form of ritual objects, indirectly suggesting that the tribe had already established a hierarchical system, and jade artifacts had become symbols of wealth and power. The jade culture at this time was gradually evolving towards ritual objects.

4.1.3 Agricultural production

In terms of agricultural culture, the jade artifacts of the Hongshan Culture also show a certain level of development. The Xinglongwa Culture unearthed a jade sacrificial pit dating back approximately 8,200 years, which contained the skull of a wild boar and an S-shaped body constructed with stone pieces and pottery shards, interpreted as the primitive form of a pig-headed dragon. Numerous pig bones and a few deer bones were also excavated from the Red

Mountain site's tombs. These animal remains were found close to the main tomb chamber and were concentrated in their placement. Combined with the decreasing number of hunting tools, this suggests that during this period, people may have already begun to raise domestic livestock. There were also indications of a gradual shift in religious beliefs and worship towards animal worship, which indirectly reflects that people at this stage may have developed the concept of animism.

4.2 Comparison with Jade Artifacts of the Majiabang Culture in the South

The Liangzhu jade culture, one of the three main sources, was particularly associated with the jade traditions of the Songze, Majiangang, and Lingjiatan cultures in the Yangtze River basin (Sun, 2022). The Majiangzhu Culture, as the focus of the Liangzhu Culture and the source of the jade culture in the Taihu Lake region, holds a paramount position and role, equivalent to that of the Yangshao Culture in Central China. Both Majiabang and Songze cultures are distributed in Shanghai, southern Jiangsu, and northern Zhejiang. During this period, the concept of human figure art was not well developed. Although the number of jade artifacts unearthed from the Majiabang Culture is limited, their significance is extremely important, with both social implications and regional factors leaving traces on the jade artifacts.

Based on a preliminary statistical review of the literature, there are nearly 150 jade artifacts from the Majiabang culture that have been publicly displayed. Among these, jade bracelets, jade pendants, and jade tubes account for the top three in terms of quantity. This suggests that these three types of jade artifacts may be the most significant forms in the Majiabang culture. Jade pendant held a dominant position in the Xinglongwa culture, with the Xinglongwa site located in the Chifeng region of western Liaoning. However, the Majiabang culture is situated in the Nanhu River basin (present-day Jiaying, Zhejiang). The two locations are thousands of miles apart, and there is a time difference of about 3000 years between them. Why do similar jade rings appear in both cultures? What role does the jade ring play in the Majiabang culture? When studying the Honglongwa Culture, it was learned that jade disks were mostly worn as ear ornaments in prehistoric times, and the same was true for the jade disks of the Majiabang Culture. The most numerous and common type was the flat hoop-shaped pendant, the term “rings not fully closed” or “a ring with a gap” likely referring to such jade disks (Jiang, 2012).

It is evident that while the Majiabang jade pendant and Xinglongwa jade pendant share similar shapes, their materials are distinctly different. The jade artifacts unearthed from the Majiabang culture are predominantly quartz or chalcedony, the primary stone materials of the Taihu Lake region. Despite different geographical environments and raw materials, the Majiabang and Xinglongwa cultures share nearly identical jade shapes, indicating that the Xinglongwa culture in the north had a certain impact on the Ma Jia Bang culture in the south in terms of jade shapes and culture. The Ma Jia Bang culture then developed and inherited on this basis, with other jade artifacts such as jade tubes and jade bracelets also found in both cultures. The numerous similarities make this case unique in China. However, there are some differences between the two cultures in the functions of jade artifacts. In the Xinglongwa culture, jade earrings, or jade pendants, were worn as ear ornaments and were typically exclusive to those of high status, such as influential figures and shamanic priests. Besides their decorative function, they also symbolized the act of communing with the divine and warding off disasters, and seeking blessings. In contrast, the jade rings from the Majiabang culture, discovered in later excavations, were found on the lower abdomen of human bodies, clearly not functioning as ear ornaments. This indicates that the jade rings of the Majiabang culture, while also serving as ear ornaments, were not entirely identical to those of the Xinglongwa culture in their functions.

5. Conclusion

The formation and origin of Chinese jade culture stretch back to a distant past, and its historical influence runs deep, making it an intricate subject that cannot be fully explored in a short period. The discovery of "jade" in Xinglongwa culture illuminates the dawn of prehistoric civilization, while the historical transformation of jade ornaments mirrors the progress of civilization and the refinement of craftsmanship. Throughout the millennia of Chinese civilization, jade culture has almost co-evolved with regional cultures, integrating material and spiritual elements. As society has transformed, the forms of jade artifacts have continuously evolved and their meanings have been elevated. People have consistently endowed jade with new connotations and forms, making it a unique carrier and symbol of Chinese spiritual culture. In the new era, jade has been redefined, and the spiritual essence of Chinese civilization has been given a new interpretation, awaiting our discovery.

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