

Forever

Jade

Exhibition texts

Chinese Jade
Miniatures from
Four Millennia

museumrietberg

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Chinese Jade Miniatures from Four Millennia

Softly translucent with a matte luster, silky smooth to the touch yet harder than steel, created by nature and crafted by man—no other material was as beloved in China as jade.

This fascinating stone is firmly anchored in Chinese culture. Jade objects served both as emblems of authority and as talismans. They accompanied the dead in their tombs and conferred health on the living. They accorded their male owners prestige and signaled their female owners' allure. They stood for erudition and the striving for social advancement. They were at once expensive trinkets and masterworks of craftsmanship

Already a thousand years ago, jade objects became popular collectors' items. Connoisseurs appreciated antique pieces as witnesses of an idealized past, and they admired new creations for their beauty, their enchanting luster, and the inventiveness and skill of their creators. Even today, countless people both in China and elsewhere are passionate collectors. Jade, it seems, has lost none of its magic.

The exhibition features around 130 jade miniatures from the collections of the Museum Rietberg and 30 large-scale photographs by the renowned Zurich photographer Felix Streuli. Together, the carved jades and the outstanding images, in themselves works of art, form a truly remarkable ensemble.

All photos in the exhibition © Felix Streuli



↑ Jade caravan from Khotan at the Great Wall, photographed in the early 1930s by John Goette. (After John Goette, *Jade Lore*, 1936)



↗ Stall outside the Jade Market near the Hatamen (*Chongwenmen*) Gate in Beijing, photographed in the early 1930s by John Goette. (After John Goette, *Jade Lore*, 1936).

The Jade Collections of the Museum Rietberg

The museum houses nearly 300 jade objects from China. More than 200 of them come from the collection of Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli (1893–1973), a Swiss physician and immunologist. During his years as a lecturer at Union Medical College in Beijing from 1929 to 1952, he acquired a wide range of jade objects at the city's antiques and art markets. His great love was for naturalistically designed miniatures of animals and plants. In 1952 he bequeathed his jade collection to the Swiss Confederation. Since 1960, it has been housed in the Museum Rietberg as a deposit of the Swiss Confederation, Federal Office of Culture, Bern.

Gret Hasler (1895–1971) of Winterthur was especially enthusiastic about antique jades and bronzes from China. She acquired the majority of her collection of 38 jade objects between 1948 and 1951 from C. T. Loo and other Paris art dealers. In 1971 the objects passed to her daughter Charlotte Holliger-Hasler, who donated them to the Museum Rietberg in 1972.

The extensive collection of Eduard von der Heydt (1882–1964), the founding donor of the Museum Rietberg, included 10 antique Chinese jades. These were most likely purchased on the European art market in the 1930s and 1940s.

Twelve 18th-century jade bowls were gifted to the museum in 1969 by Emma Streicher-Jori, the wife of Zurich architect Otto Streicher (1887–1968), who was a patron of the arts and culture.

For detailed information on the jade objects, please consult our online database:
<https://rietberg.ch/sammlung/sammlung-online>

1 Material and Technique

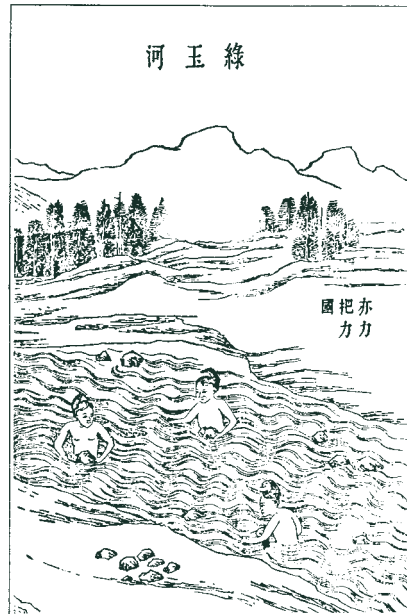
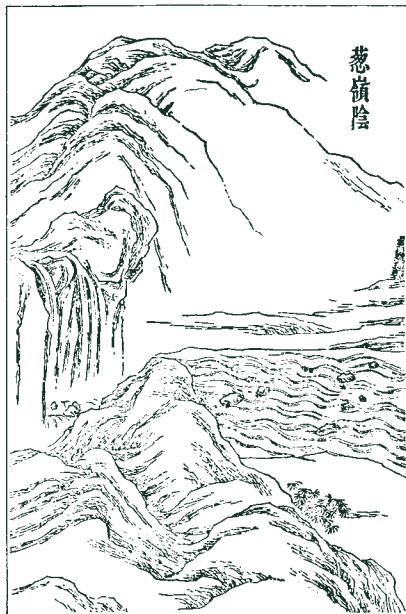


S. Howard Hansford CHINESE JADE CARVING, (Lund Humphries) Pl. IV b
Original photograph taken by the author in Peking
Apprentices sawing a block of jade with a wire saw carrying abrasive "sand"
(carborundum) mixed with water.

In the Chinese context, "jade" refers primarily to the mineral nephrite. This fascinating stone occurs in subtle shades ranging from milky white to pink and green to almost black. Harder than metal, it has a dense structure of long, interlaced, fibrous crystals that make it extremely tough. It cannot be carved with a metal blade or hewn with a chisel. Only by grinding, sawing, and drilling can it be modeled as desired.

The methods used to shape jade barely changed between the Neolithic period and the early 20th century. Craftsmen used sand from harder rocks such as quartz, garnet, or corundum as an abrasive, which, when moistened or made sticky with oily substances, would adhere to their tools. A rotating bamboo drill or wire saw could thus eat its way—indefinitely slowly—through the hard material. It took several weeks just to cut through a single hand-sized block of jade.

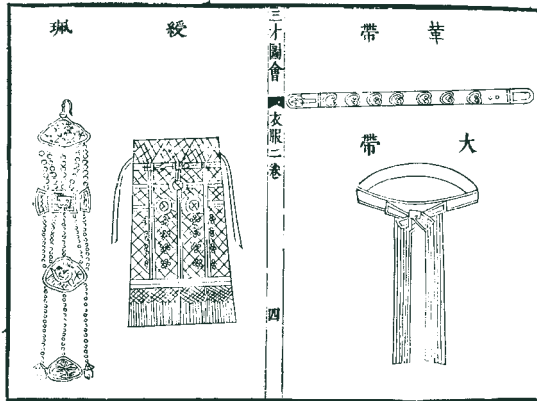
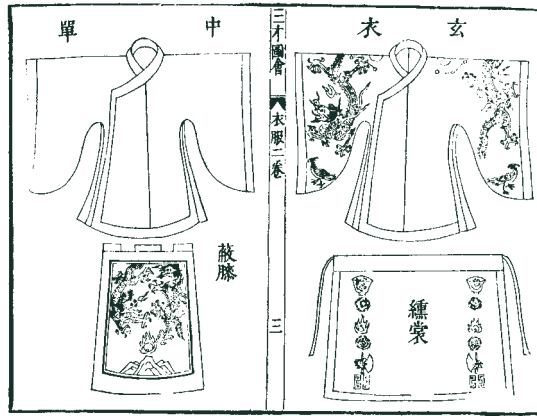
As early as the 1st millennium BCE, Chinese jade cutters imported the stone from Central Asia. Most of it came from Khotan, at the foot of the Kunlun Mountains, which has jade deposits in abundance. Extreme temperature fluctuations in the high mountains regularly burst the jade seams apart, sending rubble cascading down into the valley with the spring torrents. There, the jade pebbles could simply be harvested from the riverbeds. However, it is not easy to distinguish them from ordinary river rocks. Only when ground and polished does jade display its familiar shine.



↖ Artisans cutting a block of jade with a bow saw. Photographed in 1939 in Beijing by Howard Hansford. (© Metropolitan Museum of Art)

← Collecting jade pebbles in the rivers of Khotan. According to the 17th-century encyclopedia *Things Produced by Nature and by Human Labor*, women would attract the yang force of jade with their yin force. (After *Tiangong kaiwu*, 1673)

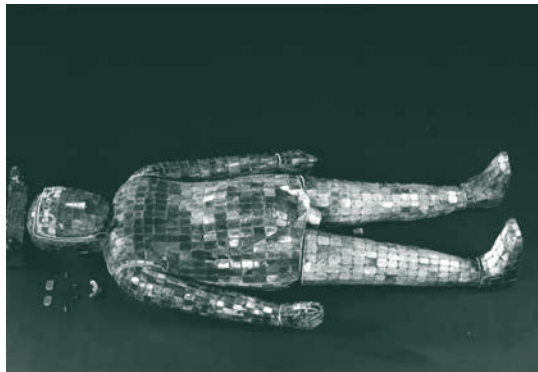
2 Power and Magic



← Dress code on the jade hangings and garments worn by the emperor at court, set out in the encyclopedia *Collected Illustrations on the Three Realms*, published in 1607. (After *Sancai tuhui*)

✓ Tomb of a young man of the Liangzhu culture (ca. 3300–2200 BCE) at Sidun, Jiangsu Province, with 24 round *bi* disks and 33 *cong* tubes made of jade lying on and around the body. (After *Kaogu*, 2/1984)

↓ Jade suit and nine body plugs from the tomb of the prince Liu Sheng (d. 113 BCE). (After *Das Alte China*, Munich 1995)



Jade has been closely associated with power and status in China since the earliest times. Emblems of rank made from jade were already part of court etiquette in the 1st millennium BCE. These included ceremonial weapons and scepters as well as multi-piece pendants that made a melodic jingling sound as the wearer walked along. Other jade emblems were offered as tribute or presented as a sign of a political alliance.

At the same time, the material itself was alluring. No other stone was so robust and resistant, so hard and durable. As a consequence, jade was ascribed a magical, protective function. People wore jade amulets in this world as well as in the grave to ward off evil forces and demons. They even believed that jade could ensure eternal life. They placed jade disks on the chest of the deceased or a jade carving in the shape of a cicada in their mouth. Such objects were meant to facilitate rebirth into the next world. Sometimes all of the bodily openings were filled with small jade plugs in order to preserve the life force. Members of the highest elite even had suits made of hundreds of jade plaques that enclosed the entire body.

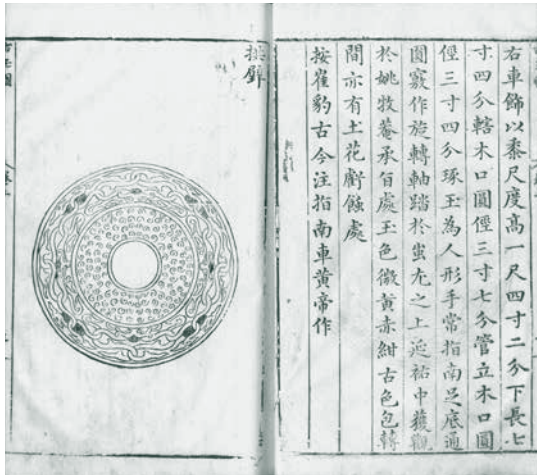
Powdered jade was an important ingredient in life-prolonging medicines. In the 2nd century BCE, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, who was obsessed with achieving immortality, is said to have drunk jade flakes mixed with fresh dew every morning.

3 The Passion for Collecting

In the 10th century, archaic jades became popular collectibles. Among members of the educated upper class, it soon became fashionable to own a personal collection of antique pieces and to show them off and pass them around at social gatherings among friends. To satisfy the growing demand, jade workshops began imitating pieces in the “old style.” They also created new forms, which were enthusiastically received in well-to-do circles. Especially popular were objects for a scholar’s desk such as wrist rests, water containers used in painting and calligraphy, and animal figures used as paperweights.

The passion for collecting jade reached its climax in the 18th century. By then it was no longer a preserve of the elite: the aspiring middle class had also fallen in love with the material and begun acquiring whatever jade objects they could afford. Stylistically, they tended to prefer playful, naturalistic depictions. This led to the production of large numbers of figurines and miniatures featuring mythical creatures, animals, flowers, and even fruits and vegetables, all of which have a symbolic but widely understood meaning. They promise their owners happiness, health, and a long life, a prosperous family with children in abundance, a swift rise to high office, harmony in marriage, and much more besides.

The jade craftsmen of this period reached a new level of mastery. In their designs, they skillfully exploited the material’s natural qualities such as color variations or inclusions. The carvers’ imagination knew no bounds, and the sophistication of their works is breathtaking.



↖ Page from *Illustrated Catalogue of Ancient Jades*, printed edition of 1752 based on a picture scroll dated 1341 by Zhu Derun (active 14th century). (After *Guyu tu*, 1752, reprint)



↑ Imperial concubine with her collection of antiquities. Hanging scroll from the set *Twelve Beauties*, commissioned by Emperor Yongzheng (r. 1723–1735) around 1720. (© Beijing Palace Museum)

← Excerpts from *Picture of Ancient Toys*, a 20-meter-long scroll from 1728, showing pieces from Emperor Yongzheng’s (r. 1723–1735) collection of antiquities and handicrafts, including many jade objects. (© British Museum)

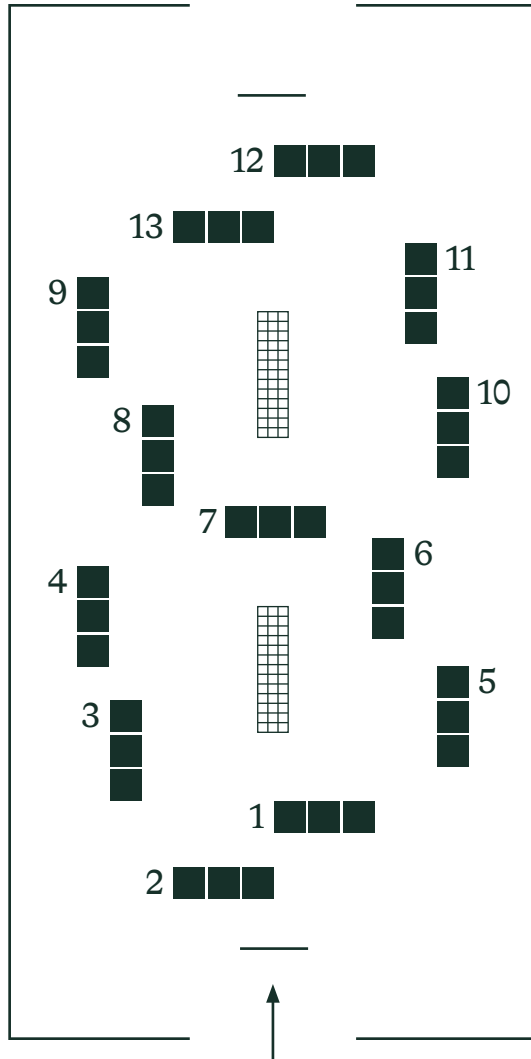
The beauty of the small jade figures does not reveal itself in passing. You have to take your time and look at them very closely to discover their tiny details. Only then do their full charm and wit unfold. Photographer Felix Streuli has taken this time. With his pictures he has brought the jade miniatures to life for us.

In 2019, Felix Streuli came to the storerooms of the Museum Rietberg in search of art objects that that would fire his imagination and inspire beautifully staged photographs. The tiny jade pieces with their minute details, the translucent material itself, and the subtle sheen of its surfaces posed exactly the kind of challenge he had been seeking. He started exploring the little figures with his camera, experimenting with different light sources, until something emerged that had been hidden within them. Under his artistic gaze, the small objects unfold a presence never seen before.

Felix Streuli is internationally acclaimed for his powerful brand of still-life photography. He works for well-known watch manufacturers and specializes in art objects. He has generously made his outstanding photographs of the jade miniatures available to the museum for this exhibition.



Villa Wesendonck



Entrance Emerald



Exhibition Objects

Bi-type ritual objects

1.1

Circular disks with a round central hole were important as funerary objects from the Neolithic period right up to the 2nd century BCE. They were often placed on the chest of the deceased or alongside the body. According to sources dating from the 1st millennium BCE, *bi* disks played a role in ritual offerings, but were also used as secular badges of rank. The earliest known *bi* disks usually have no decoration. Those from the 8th century BCE on often feature a dense spiral pattern.

Shang (16th–11th century BCE) and Zhou (ca. 1045–256 BCE) Dynasties
Gift of Charlotte Holliger-Hasler; gift of Eduard von der Heydt

Ceremonial blades and weapons

1.2

Dagger, sword, and ax blades made of jade were widespread during the Neolithic period and early Bronze Age. They imitate weapons made of hard and sharp-edged obsidian. As jade was too expensive and too brittle for real weapons, these blades must have served purely ceremonial purposes. In the 6th century BCE, members of the wealthy upper class started using the stone to decorate their metal weapons. Jade elements appear, for example, on sword pommels and scabbards.

Shang (16th–11th century BCE) and Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE) Dynasties
Gift of Charlotte Holliger-Hasler; gift of Alfred Salmony

The Jade of the He Family

During the Zhou Dynasty, a man named Bian He found a lump of jade in the mountains. He took it to the capital and there he presented it to his sovereign as a gift. The treasurer, however, did not appreciate the jade's value, believing it to be an ordinary stone. Bian He was denounced as a liar and his left foot was chopped off as punishment. When the king died, Bian He again arrived at court to present his lump of jade to the king's successor. He, too, failed to see the stone's true worth and punished Bian He by having his right foot chopped off. Soon that king was dead, too. When yet another ruler was enthroned, Bian He took up a position at the foot of Mount Chu and wept for days until the blood was coursing down his cheeks. The new king sent his men to inquire after him. "I am not lamenting my feet," Bian He told them, "but rather the villainy that disparages an exquisite jade as a coarse stone and brands an honest man a liar." On hearing this, the new king had the stone polished and it did indeed prove to be the finest pure white jade.

This story was first related in a philosophical work of the Legalist school, the *Hanfeizi* (ca. 3rd cent. BCE), as a critique of rulers who are so easily fooled by appearances that they do not recognize truth and wisdom, even when it is standing right in front of them.

Cong-type ritual objects

2.1

Tubes with a square cross section and round bore hole first appeared during the Liangzhu culture in eastern China in the 3rd millennium BCE. The lavishly appointed graves of the elite were found to contain up to thirty of these elaborately worked objects. Their unusual form and decoration with abstract faces fascinated Chinese jade collectors and led to many speculations. Yet the meaning of these *cong* tubes remains a mystery to this day.

Neolithic period, Liangzhu culture, ca. 2500 BCE, to early Zhou Dynasty, 10th–8th century BCE
Gift of Eduard von der Heydt; gift of Charlotte Holliger-Hasler

Pendants in the shape of animals and dragons

2.2

Tombs from the 1st millennium BCE contained both individual pendants and hangings composed of a variety of beads and plaques. Many are shaped like animals, such as hares, birds, tigers, or mythical dragons. The jade ornaments were a sign of social rank, and many served the deceased as protective amulets to keep away demons and other evil influences.

Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1045–256 BCE) or later
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection; gift of Charlotte Holliger-Hasler;
gift of Eduard von der Heydt

Silkworm pendants

3.1

The cultivation of silkworms and the production of silk in China date back to the Neolithic period. The creatures' capacity to spin such fine thread and to metamorphose from caterpillar to moth lent them an almost magical significance. Little silkworm pendants were given to the deceased to facilitate their passage into a new life.

Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1045–256 BCE)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Fish pendants

3.2

Pendants or amulets in the form of long or semicircular fish are a frequent find in the graves of the late Shang period. The designs are simple, with parallel lines for fins, a circle for an eye, and a hole for a mouth. As aquatic creatures, fish may have played a role in the fertility cult.

Late Shang or early Western Zhou Dynasty, 11th–8th century BCE
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection; gift of Charlotte Holliger-Hasler

Jade Pendants

The *Liji*, or *Book of Rites*, codifies in meticulous detail the ceremonial protocol to be observed at the court of the Western Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1045–770 BCE). Pendants made up of jade plaques attached to the belt played an important role in these rites.

The “Rules of Decorum” include this admonition: “The ruler does not divest himself of his jade pendants without good reason.” High-ranking officials, moreover, were required to adjust their own jade ornaments depending on how the sovereign was wearing his: “A minister should stand bent over like a sounding stone and let his string of jades dangle. If his lord wears his jade pendants on the side, his own should be worn in front. If his lord wears his jade pendants in front, he should lay his own on the ground.”

Jade pendants made up of many pieces came into fashion in the 8th century. They were long and rather impractical. A 17th-century anecdote relates how one such jade ornament put its wearer in mortal danger:

Emperor Jiaqing was giving an audience. One of his officials, Xie Mingxing, approached him to pay homage. But while he was kowtowing, his jade pendants became entangled with those of the emperor. Poor Xie was scared to death. The emperor forgave him, however, and ordered that henceforth, officials attending an audience should first stow away their jades in a red silk purse. No longer did the audience room resonate with the pleasant clinking of jade plaques, and many regretted its disappearance.

The sound of jade was believed to have a positive effect on people. “When a man of rank sits in his chariot, he hears the harmonious sound of the bells,” says the *Book of Rites*. “When he walks, he hears the sound of his jade pendants. In this way, all bad and base thoughts are prevented from entering his mind.”

Reclining piglet

4.1

This reclining piglet is articulated by just a few deft notches in an oblong jade with a square cross section. Such figures have been found in the hands of the deceased in Han Dynasty graves. In those days, jade was believed to have life-prolonging powers, and the pig was associated with the earth in Taoist symbolism. The combination of the two was supposed to prevent decomposition of the body.

Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Ornamental plaque with a pair of phoenixes

4.2

This openwork piece belongs to a set of six identical plaques that may have originally adorned the sides of a hexagonal wooden box or a wide belt. Their decoration depicts two mythical birds with long, elegant tail feathers. The birds are facing each other and playing among the clouds. The phoenix is considered a sign of good government in China because it only manifests itself under a wise ruler.

Tang Dynasty (618–907)
Gift of Charlotte Holliger-Hasler

Cicada amulets

4.3

Cicadas complete their transformation from nymph to insect while buried deep in the ground. This has made them a symbol of reincarnation and eternal life. In ancient China, little jade cicadas were placed in the mouths of the deceased to assist them in crossing from this world to the next. Most such jade talismans are simple in form and defined by just a few engraved lines.

Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Jade as Medicine

The English word “jade” comes from the Spanish term *piedra de ijada*, “stone of the flank,” which is what Spaniards called the material ground and carved by the peoples of Mesoamerica. The 16th-century conquistadors were less interested in its cultural importance than in its medicinal properties. In Mexico the stone was used as a cure for colic (“pain in the flank”) and for kidney pain.

Physicians in ancient China prescribed flakes of jade as a tonic and prophylactic. The body, it was believed, would absorb jade’s many positive properties. Jade was said to cleanse the blood, calm the nerves, stimulate the mind, relax the muscles, and nourish the body.

In Chinese folklore, jade jewelry also served as an omen. Lustrous, translucent jade promised good fortune while dull, cloudy jade portended disaster.

Good luck symbols: Elephant, badgers, cats, chipmunks

6.1

Many of the small jade sculptures are lucky charms. Their symbolism is based on the many homophone words in Chinese. For example, the elephant is called *xiang*, which sounds like the word for “auspicious.”

The two badgers tenderly touching each others’ snouts and paws form a rebus for marital harmony, as *liang huan* (“two badgers”) can also be read as “double joy.”

The sculpture of playful kittens with a butterfly would be the perfect birthday gift for an elderly person, because the word for butterfly alludes to a person in their seventh decade of life, the word for cat to a person in their eighth decade.

The wish for a long and healthy life is symbolized by the figure of the chipmunk as well. This small rodent is called a “pine mouse” in Chinese, and the evergreen pine stands for inner strength and great age.

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Domestic and working animals: Dogs, water buffalo, horse, camel

6.2

Dogs have been loyal companions in China since Neolithic times. They symbolize harmony in the family and society as well as prosperity and progeny in abundance.

The buffalo was rural China’s most important beast of burden. To city-dwellers, however, it symbolized the ideal of a simple, rustic life and an existence in harmony with nature.

Horses did not work in agriculture. They served as mounts for the cavalry and the elite and were therefore a status symbol. Some were so highly prized by the emperors that their names have been handed down to posterity. Wealth and prosperity were also symbolized by the camel. These pack animals brought precious goods along the Silk Road to China and soon became synonymous with their valuable cargo.

Song to Qing Dynasty, 10th–18th century
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Good luck symbols: Monkeys, lions, rams, spider

7.1

These four delicate jade figurines were crafted with extreme refinement and subtlety. Worked completely in the round, they display many details that are barely visible to the naked eye. Only a close look reveals their full wit and charm. Each one has a symbolic meaning: Two cheeky little monkeys climb around on a peach under the caring gaze of their mother. Monkey, peach, and cicada together signal a wish for long life. Two lions play with a small ball that moves freely within a net. The lions form a wish for a successful career in high office. Three rams nestled closely together augur good luck and prosperity. The spider, too, is a popular symbol of good fortune.

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Mythical beast, *qilin*

8.1

The *qilin* is a popular good luck charm because it symbolizes happiness, harmony, and peace. It typically has a single horn, seen here growing out of the back of its head. In the earliest depictions, the *qilin* was a beast with the body of a big cat and the head of a dragon. Later it was thought to have the body of a deer covered in scales. The artisans of the Ming and Qing Dynasties made use of both traditions in their representations.

Ming (1368–1644) or Qing (1644–1911) Dynasty
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Lions

8.2

The lion was a common symbol of rulership in India and the Near East. With the spread of Buddhism, it was also incorporated into Chinese imagery. However, sculptors in China had never seen the animal and gave it a unique appearance. That is why the Chinese lion has a dragon's snout and a coiffure of luxuriant curls.

Qing Dynasty, 17th–18th century
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Monkeys

8.3

The monkey is a popular subject in jade art. If it carries a peach, it symbolizes the wish for long life. Such depictions play on the popular tale of the cheeky and invincible monkey king Sun Wukong. While working at the court of the celestial Queen Mother of the West, he secretly gobbled up all the peaches – fruits that conferred immortality but ripened only every 3,000 years.

Since the word for monkey is a homophone of the word for prince, the monkey became a symbol of social advancement. The little monkey on the massive horse would be a flattering gift for an aspiring government official. As a pun on horse (*ma*), on (*shang*), and monkey (*hou*), the sculpture expresses the wish “*mashang fenghou*,” which means “May you be appointed to high office immediately.”

Ming (1368–1644) or Qing (1644–1911) Dynasty
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Zodiac animals

9.1

Each of the Chinese zodiac animals represents one year in the twelve-year cycle. Since the 8th century, zodiac animals have been depicted as celestial functionaries with human bodies and animal heads. The craftsman's loving attention to detail is evident in this pig's dignified facial expression. Even its curly tail can be seen poking out from under its robe.

Qing Dynasty, 18th–19th century
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Jade for the Imperial Offering to Heaven and Earth

In 1008, Emperor Zhenzong (r. 997–1022) of the Song Dynasty decided to hold the highest state ritual, the Fengshan offering to Heaven and Earth, on Mount Tai. The ceremony had great political significance, since Zhenzong had just suffered an ignominious military defeat at the hands of the Khitan, a nomadic people from the northern steppes to whom he was forced to cede territory. He desperately needed to repair his damaged prestige. Performing the ritual would ensure the goodwill of Heaven and Earth and thus boost his legitimacy.

Only the finest jade could be considered for such a supplication to the higher powers. But the emperor was impatient to begin, and his courtiers were afraid the jade slips could not be sawn and inscribed in time. Fortunately, the emperor's treasury was found to contain some slips that had already been finished, and the ritual proceeded as planned.

Dragons and *bixie*

9.2

The dragon is a symbol with many meanings in China. It is associated with water, rain, and fertility; it is held to be a bringer of sons; and it is worn as a badge of power and status. Dragons adorned the robes of the Chinese emperors and are a popular motif in the decorative arts. This dragon's slender scaly body, long straight horns, artfully curled whiskers, and angular snout are all typical of the 18th century.

The mythical beast with the body of a predator, horns, and wings is called a *bixie*, which literally means “to ward off evil.” Such figures served as apotropaic talismans both in life and in death. They became widespread from the 2nd century onward, and in later times were made in a deliberately archaic style using artificially discolored jade.

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Mythical *qilin* with jade book

9.3

The *qilin*, a mythical creature, is a good omen auguring a benevolent and wise ruler. According to legend, the birth of the Chinese philosopher Confucius was heralded by the appearance of a *qilin* who spat out a book made of jade. This explains why such a jade figurine was considered a suitable gift at the birth of a male heir.

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Plants and vegetables

10.1

Collectors in 18th-century China loved naturalistic representations of vegetables, fruits, and plants like these.

The small sculptures are worked completely in the round and have no standing surface. Connoisseurs enjoyed turning the objects in their hands and discovering unexpected details. In these examples you will find mice among the vines, a small bat on a lotus, cabbage leaves being nibbled by caterpillars, and a tiny insect on a persimmon.

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Cicada

11.1

When designing this cicada, the artisan followed the round shape of the jade pebble and cleverly used the natural reddish coloration of the stone's surface. Inscribed in tiny characters on the upper part of the head is a poem lamenting the transience of all things:

At the riverbank lined by willow trees
I heard the sound of the drums,
Moved by the beginning of summer, already
proclaiming autumn.
From the east the stream flows by,
detached and endless.
Who would not be touched by this scene?

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Birds and ducks

11.2

Birds and ducks are frequently depicted in the art of China. Since ducks spend their entire lives in a committed partnership, they are emblematic of marital fidelity. Songbirds, too, were a popular motif since they were traditionally kept as pets in China and delighted their owners with their varied melodies.

Bird figurines can also carry a complex symbolic meaning. The phoenix with a lychee plum and bamboo branch, for example, is associated with a family's desire for social advancement. The red bird stands for the yang element and thus for plentiful male progeny. The lychee is a play on the word for talented sons, while the bamboo represents moral fortitude.

Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Bamboo shoot with praying mantis

11.3

In China, the praying mantis symbolizes endurance, patience, and hidden power. Famed for its ability to stay absolutely still for hours at a time before closing in on its prey, the praying mantis even inspired a particular style of Chinese martial arts. The bamboo shoot symbolizes abundant offspring. The two motifs together are a wish for many sons and grandsons who are blessed with a noble character and professional success.

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

Fish and aquatic animals

11.4

Fish promise wealth and prosperity, as the word for fish is a homophone of the word for abundance. The two intertwined catfish form a special rebus. The doubling of their name, *niannian yuyu*, can be read as, “May you live in abundance year in and year out.”

The toad also has a positive connotation. As the companion of the immortal Liu Hai, the god of coins, it represents wealth and longevity. With the branch of a pomegranate tree in its mouth, it alludes to many children.

Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

What Children Should Know

The *Three Character Classic* by Wang Yinglin (1223–1296) was the most important reading primer in Ming and Qing China. It also taught the fundamentals of Confucian knowledge. This is what it says about jade: “If jade is not polished, it is not usable. If a person does not learn, he will not know the rules of correct behavior.”

Cup and saucer

13.1

This set represents the ideals of Chinese literati culture: elegance, noble restraint, simplicity, and absolute perfection. Emperor Qianlong extolled the gleaming, slightly translucent, pure-white jade imported from northern India and the Kunlun Mountains, describing it euphemistically as “mutton fat” or “cut lard.”

Qing Dynasty, Jiaqing period (1796–1820)
Gift of Emma Streicher

Leaf-adorned bowl with inscription

13.2

Immaculate, pale-green jade from northern India was accorded an especially high value during the reign of Emperor Qianlong. This bowl, with its dense pattern of leaves and a foot in the form of a stylized flower, is typical of Indo-Islamic jade art from the Mughal Empire. The emperor was so entranced by these pieces that he composed poems about them. One such poem is inscribed on this bowl.

Qing Dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1795)
Gift of Emma Streicher

Objects for the scholar's studio: Seal, wrist rest,
water dropper

13.3

Many jade objects were made for use on the scholar's desk. These included seal stones, brush stands, wrist rests, water droppers, and paperweights. The wrist rest in the shape of a stalk of bamboo made it easier for artists and scholars to maintain absolute control over their brushes. The small leaf-shaped water dropper served to drip water onto the ink stone, part of the process of making the ink needed for writing, calligraphy, or painting.

Qing Dynasty, 18th century
Reinhard J. C. Hoeppli Collection

The Perfect Man

The *Shijing*, or *Book of Songs*, is an anthology of poems and odes from the period before the 8th century BCE. In one hymn of praise to a nobleman, the object of the author's adoration is compared to jade:

Delicately fashioned is my lord,
as a thing of bronze, a thing of white metal,
as a scepter of jade, a disk of jade.

How free, how easy
he leant over his chariot-rail!

How cleverly he chaffed and joked, and yet was
never rude!

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Confucius on Jade

The wise men of old found all the most excellent
qualities united in jade:
Warm, soft, and shiny, it stands for humanity;
Fine, dense, and resilient, it stands for intellect;
Angular and incisive but not sharp, it stands for
righteousness;
As a necklace or belt bowing down to the ground,
it stands for etiquette;
With a sound that is clear, sonorous, and soon gone,
it stands for music;
With a luster that neither conceals nor is concealed
by imperfection, it stands for loyalty;
With inner properties that are visible from without,
it stands for faithfulness;
With a radiance that resembles the splendor of a
rainbow, it stands for Heaven;
As the embodied inner forces of mountains and
rivers, it stands for Earth;
As ritual objects of special significance at audiences,
it stands for virtue;
As there is no one on earth who does not value jade,
it epitomizes the way of perfection.

(from the *Book of Rites*)

