

## **Semiotic Examination of the Animal-shaped Jade Artifacts during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) in China**

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### **Abstract**

During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), artisans skillfully shaped jade into figurines inspired by animals, that fostered a profound symbiosis between humanity and the natural world. Notwithstanding the historical appreciation of these artifacts, there exists a lacuna in academic discourse: it does not provide a theoretical framework for using semiotics to analyze animal images of the Han dynasty jade. The present study bridges this gap by integrating semiotic analysis with a historical-cultural approach to probe the generation, communication, and significances of animal symbolisms in the jade craftsmanship of the Han Dynasty. This research has two primary objectives: (1) to analyses the significances of the animal-shaped jade ornaments from this epoch within the Chinese culture, and (2) to elucidate the intricate interplay between humans and animals as depicted through religious, magical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions. Our research seeks to decode the narratives and philosophy enshrined in these jade forms, tracing their development within the context of Chinese cosmological thought, philosophical paradigms, state ideologies, and enduring cultural practices. Through this research, we endeavor to demonstrate that animal-shaped jade ornaments serve as key symbols that emerged in ancient China, and these elements collectively sculpted the characters and significance of the animal-shaped jade artifacts of the Han Dynasty.

**Keywords: semiotic analysis; animal form jade artefacts; Han Dynasty**

### **1 Introduction**

Animal representations, ranging from the lifelike to the imaginary, the stylized to the symbolically abstract occupy a significant place in the ecosystem of the ancient Chinese imagination (Sterckx, 2005). Beyond the animal representations, they were perceived

as spirit media and as symbols and metaphors during both the pre-dynastic and dynastic periods of ancient China (Sterckx et al., 2018). In Chinese tradition, animal representations were not merely ornamental but served as cognitive instruments, aiding in the articulation of complex cultural concepts. This was exemplified in the sophisticated artistry of jade carving, as noted by Zuo et al. (2015). Through meticulous incision and sculpting, artisans elevated jade from a mere stone to a venerated artifact (Tian et al., 2020). These sacred objects provided a window into the spiritual life of the ancient China, intricately linked with the prevailing social structures (Lopes, 2014).

Jade objects with animal elements occupied a critical role and had a high artistic status in the Han dynasty (Tian, 2020). The styling of Han dynasty jade predominantly involved realistic or graphically depicting display the movements and postures of animal features (Sax et al., 2004). They encompassed both realistic patterns with finely detailed depictions of creatures from the natural world and imaginative patterns that incorporated elements of fantasy based on animal characteristics (Zhu, 2020). The animal modelling of Han dynasty jade had symbolic features. In other words, symbolism emerged as the predominant mode of expression within jade carvings of the Han Dynasty, the served as a visual depiction through which complex sociocultural narratives were conveyed.

Wang (2011) notes that one of the issues that has given rise to lengthy discussions among art historians is that of the iconographic significance and the symbolic values of Chinese jade objects. Although much research has been done on Chinese Han jade objects, none of these documents has provided a theoretical framework using semiotics to analyze the auspicious jade images of the Han dynasty jade. By adopting the semiotic theory and historical approach that applied typological and iconographical approaches (Lam, 2019), this paper focuses on various animal pictorial representations of jade objects during Han dynasty. The use of typological and iconographical approaches, to interpret the semiotic meanings of the animal-shaped jade artefacts to identify the semiotic characteristics of the images, that can help to untangle the rich significance embedded in their shapes.

The methodological framework of this qualitative study was iterative, following a process of induction to deduction to induction. Comprehensive literature review was undertaken to articulate the problem statement. This was followed by an empirical investigation that utilized primary artifacts from the collections of the Xuzhou and the Nanyue King Museums. Besides, significant contributions from four other museums namely the Palace Museum, the National Palace Museum, the British Museum, and the Aurora Museum were also used.

This research has three primary objectives: (1) to analysis and review relevant literature, (2) to examine the semiotic significances of the animal-shaped jade ornaments during the Han Dynasty in China, and (3) to elucidate the early relationship between humans and animals within the realms of religion, magic, aesthetics, and spiritual experiences.

The findings of the case analysis were summarized to derive the conclusions. The results of this study can contribute to the understanding of the narrative forms of the Han dynasty jade, which were dominated by mythological and natural elements, as well as the jade culture of ancient Chinese society, that revered nature.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Philosophical and Religious Foundations of Han Dynasty Jade Objects**

From the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) onward, Confucianism and Taoism held a dominant position in China (Jacobs et al., 1995). Confucianism is concerned with the shaping of ethical consciousness and reinforcing the centralized monarchy (Krzysztofik, 2020). It promotes the concept of hierarchy, the doctrine of jade virtue and the “neutralization and mean thought” (Hogarth, 1999). Central to Confucian philosophy is the concept of 'ritual'. Wu (2015) notes, underscores the importance of hierarchy and structure in both political and social spheres. The philosophy of Taoism is representative of the main tone of Chinese ancient philosophical thought which is a combination of sorcery in ancient China, Five Elements and Doctrine of Huang Lao (Zi, 2017). It provides the main theoretical basis for the Chinese understanding of the cosmos, namely there is there a correlation between all things (Wang, 2020). Taoism advocates for a harmonious cosmology, seamlessly integrating humanity, the celestial, which is consistent with the integration of people-object-environment (Dellios, 2001). Within this paradigm, human life is a microcosm of the greater natural order (Perumal, 2024), finding its truest expression in concord with nature. The collective impact of these philosophical tenets has profoundly sculpted the Chinese weltanschauung, that permeate their life perspectives, artistic sensibilities, and behavioral paradigms (Lu & Pan, 2016).




The aesthetic manifestations and different forms of jade carving during the Han Dynasty were profoundly entwined with the philosophical doctrines of Taoism and Confucianism (Tian, 2020). Jade carvings from this era reflected the Confucian cultural ideals, particularly the emphasis on social stratification and the “jade metaphor in the virtue of the gentlemen” thought (Hogarth, 1999). Under the influence of the doctrine of jade virtue, these artifacts transcend mere ornamental values, embodying the Confucian humanization of materials, wherein the intrinsic beauty of jade is elevated to symbolize moral rectitude and adherence to ritual propriety (Tian, 2020). Confucian aesthetic preference, guided by principles of 'moderation and equilibrium,' manifests in a predilection for symmetrical forms and restrained ornamentation. In parallel, Taoist ideology, with its veneration of naturalism and harmony with the cosmos, exerted a significant influence on both the thematic essence and stylistic choices in the Han Dynasty jade craftsmanship (Peerenboom, 1991; Queen, 1994). Taoists revered jade for its auspicious properties, ascribing to it the power to ward off negative influences and attract benevolent ones (Olson, 1992). Furthermore, the Taoist ethos of 'transmitting spirit' imbued the creative processes with a profound philosophical depth (Luo, 2007). The syncretic assimilation of Confucian and Taoist ideals engendered a secular evolution in the design and development of jade carvings. A critical analysis of

these philosophical frameworks and their aesthetic implications offers valuable insights into the foundational principles and evolution of jade carving designs in the Han Dynasty (Wu, 2015).

## 2.2 Animal Aesthetics in Chinese Cultural Context

The term ‘Dongwu’ 動物 which directly translates to "moving beings," is the predominant nomenclature for animals in contemporary Chinese lexicon (Li, 2021). Historical records reveal that as early as the Western Han period, Confucian academics recognized that animals and humans shared intrinsic behavioral patterns, such as protecting their off springs, avoiding peril, and safeguarding their lives (Sterckx et al., 2018). The Chinese cultural and aesthetic engagements with animals are often seen as involving both their tangible essence and their more abstract spiritual and cultural significances (Saito, 2007).

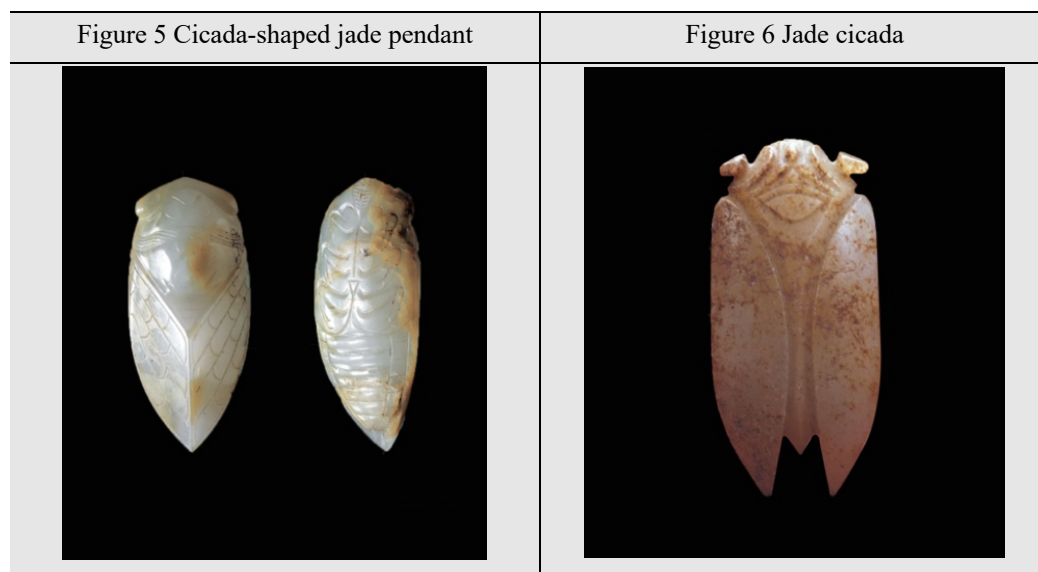
Traditional Chinese values have long been preoccupied with the dynamic interactions between humans and animals, as well as the imaginative responses evoked by the animal kingdom (Sterckx et al., 2018). Within this cultural framework, animal iconography serves multifaceted roles: as conduits for cosmological understanding, mediators linking the terrestrial with the celestial, and emblems of the concord between humanity and the natural world (Clydesdale, 2023). Certain zoological depictions are intimately intertwined with cosmological concepts, symbolizing temporal and spatial dimensions (Li, 2021). For instance, the Siling 四靈 namely “Four Spirits” known as lin 麟 (akin to the unicorn), feng 鳳 (the Chinese phoenix), gui 龜 (the turtle) and long 龍 (the dragon), exemplify such symbolic representations (See figure 1). When we examine how almost all groups used animals in their artwork within the framework of Chinese tradition, we find that the animal motifs and patterns served as both decorative elements and symbolic tools for furthering social, philosophical, and ideological meanings (Brentjes, 2000).

Figure 1 The unicorn Chinese: lin 麟	Figure 2 The phoenix Chinese: feng 鳳	Figure 3 The turtle Chinese: gui 龜	Figure 4 The dragon Chinese: long 龍
			

## 2.3 Animal Images in the Han Dynasty Jade Artefacts

The iconography of animals in Chinese art, is shaped and appreciated in an ever-changing and interdependent pattern and has long served as a cornerstone in the realm of artistic expression (Krzysztofik, 2020). The figures of animals, or their stylized (more or less) patterns, once presented in sculptural representations acquire a tangible medium through which a spectrum of societal values and philosophical tenets are communicated (Łakomska, 2020). Han craftsmen utilized jades to craft figurines inspired by various animal models, which served as decorations or protective charms

for the living and the deceased, shielding them from malevolent spirits (Miller, 2016). For instance, insect-shaped figurines resembling cicadas, known as "yu chan" 玉蝉 or jade cicadas, held great significance in ancient times. The living wear cicada-shaped jade pendants to represent their virtuous qualities (Figure 5). On the other hand, the presence of a jade cicada held in the mouth of the deceased symbolizes the belief in transitioning to a new state of existence (Figure 6). Jade cicadas of the Han Dynasty are usually similar in shape to each other: The head of the cicada has a pair of protruding eyes, while the body tapers to an elongated, inverted trapezoidal shape. The body of the cicada is intricately embellished with delicately incised shaded lines, representing both the body and wing sections of the insect. The study of animals probably provided a lens which helped to understand many relationships in life, and thus to create a slightly clearer picture of the forces of nature (Łakomska, 2020).



The creation of animal-shaped jade artefacts during the Han Dynasty was derived in totem worship, ancestor worship, deity worship and nature. The common animal images in Han jade objects are divided into two categories: mythical (spiritual) animals, and natural creatures: e.g., the images of dragons and phoenix represent mythological animals, the images of tiger, bear, tortoise, eagle, and various birds representing natural creatures (Zhang et al., 2013). It is essential to recognize that mythological animals crafted in Han jade served as conduits to the ancestral and divine realms, symbolizing the bridge between humans and the supernatural (Chang, 1981). Conversely, the representations of actual animals within these jades bear symbolism intrinsically tied to their natural attributes, serving as emblems and metaphors of human behaviors (Dai, 2017; Wang, 2021).

#### 2.4 Analysis of Semiotic Theories

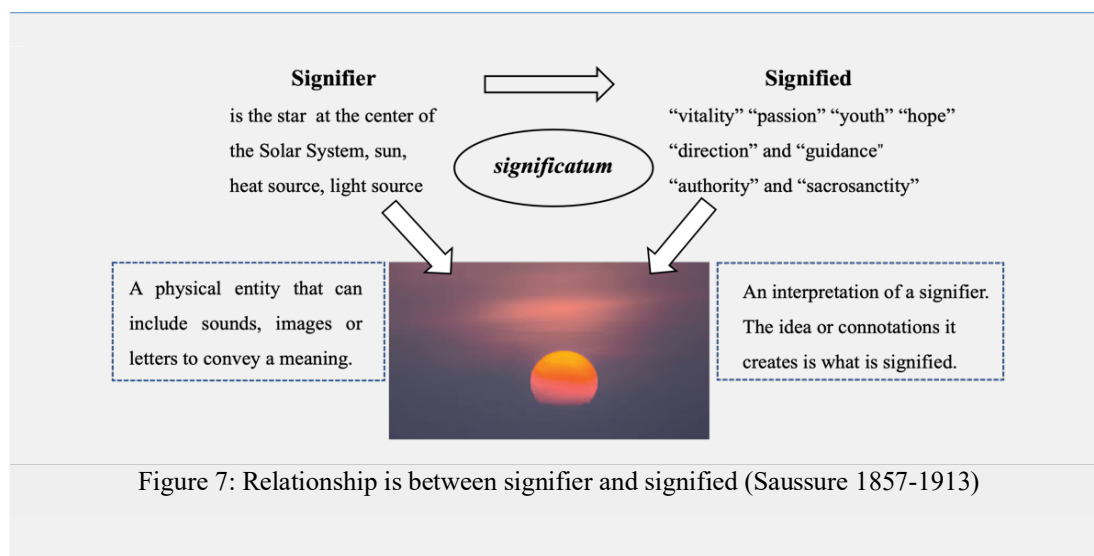
Signs and symbols constitute critical elements of an artifact, playing a pivotal role in establishing their identity and enhancing their aesthetic appeal (Verma & Gupta, 2015). The signs hold profound significance across the breadth of knowledge and human existence, serving as a universally applicable instrument in the realm of humanity,

comparable to motion in the physical world of nature (Maritain & Morris, 1937). Extending beyond mere linguistic elements, the foundation of human intellectual and social life rests upon the generation, utilization, and interchange of signs and representations (Sebeok, 2001). Indeed, the fabric of our world is intricately woven with layers of diverse signs and symbols. Within the context of the human experiences, signs assume a pivotal role in shaping cultural formations and creations (Brandt, 2010). A sign encompasses any material entity that has been conceptualized or externally fabricated (through the use of a physical medium) to embody an object, emotion, feeling, or other cognitive constructs (Sebeok, 2001). The sign is defined as perceptions that is perceived to carry meanings (Lu & Pan, 2016). Manifesting as crucial tools for human communication and cognition, a sign enable individuals to perceive and discern patterns in the surrounding environment (Sebeok, 2001). As such, the attribution of meanings to almost all signs is intrinsically tied to their relationships with humans (Ahmed & Zohra, 2020).

Semiotics, an ancient field of study that examined signs and semiosis, originated in the late 19th century within the Western academic community (Ahmed & Zohra, 2020). Its primary aim was to explore the inherent ability of species to create and comprehend signs (Lu & Pan, 2016; Yang & Hsu, 2016). Presently semiotics encompasses the study of signs and their significance in diverse contexts, encompassing all entities that can be regarded as signs (Chandler et al., 2001; Hjelm, 2002). The discipline strives to unravel the intricate process of signification, with a particular focus on the historical development of meaning (Meissner, 2006). The aim of the discipline extends beyond deciphering the singular intent behind a sign; it seeks to explore the progression and principles governing the multiplicity of signifying systems (Mayya, 2016). Semiotics demonstrates how the matrix of cultural values that inform our worldview is sustained and disseminated by the bearers of culture, thereby molding our collective consciousness (Schroeder, 1998). Therefore, applying semiotic analysis to jade carving designs that-encompass imagery, design elements, and forms-yield significant insights into cultural symbolism (Tian, 2020).

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a seminal figure in linguistics, contributed foundational principles to semiotics (Chandler et al., 2001). According to Saussure, a sign consists of the 'signifier' and the 'signified,' which are as inseparable as the obverse and reverse sides of a sheet of paper (Munro, 1987). The signifier represents the physical form of a sign, including its sensory attributes—detectable by sight, sound, touch, smell, or taste—commonly referred to as the sign vehicle. Conversely, the signified encapsulates the sign's rich cultural connotations, its conceptual domain, and the shared understanding it embodies. It represents the mental concept or idea that is conveyed by the "signifier," which, in contrast, does not possess material existence (Chandler et al., 2001; Hjelm, 2002) (See the figure 7). Throughout history, from Antiquity to Modernity, it is crucial to differentiate between the "signifier" and "signified" of any phenomenon that carries a significant function. Firstly, such a phenomenon can be perceived, capturing our attention through its sensory attributes,

which include its form and appearance. Secondly, the phenomenon can also direct our focus towards an idea or a deeper meaning, acting as a "representamen" that stands for or represents an "object" in a broader sense (Brandt, 2010).



Ancient Chinese people created many visual artistic symbols rich in content and diverse in diverse forms (Wang, 2022). Ethnic art is regarded as a symbolic form of communication and a platform for the tangible expression of human thoughts, desires, religious beliefs, and cultural values (Perumal et al., 2023). The analysis of semiotics plays a crucial role in the study of folk-art sign systems, which involves both linguistic and visual-associative elements that may serve ceremonial, functional, or ornamental purposes (Solomentseva, 2015). Drawing from the semiotic theory developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), this research systematically interpreted the forms of animal imageries found on jade objects from the Han dynasty. By doing so, it aimed to elucidate the visual formats and symbolic meanings of these images and provided insights into the practices and perceptions of Chinese jade culture during the Han dynasty.

### 3 Research Method

This research was done using a semiotic method, that used a descriptive-analytical approach with a historical-cultural method. Information was collected using library sources (documentations & authentic scientific documents) and museum resources (cultural artefact observations) and categorized. The selected examples of Han dynasty animal-form jades were from the Xuzhou Museum, the Nanyue King museum, the Palace Museum, the British Museum, and the National Palace Museum. There were 85 samples of Han dynasty animal-shaped jades, according to the shapes of designs, ceremonial significances, and the use of environment. They were divided into five major categories: decorative jades, ceremonial jades, funerary jades, jades for symbolic functions, and miscellaneous pieces. The Han dynasty animal-shaped jades contained mythical, wild, and domesticated animals.



### **3.1 “Signifier” of the Jade Animal Images**

Scholarship by historians and sinologists converge on the premise that animal motifs are a defining characteristic of jade artifacts from the Han Dynasty (Xia, 1983). These motifs have been interpreted as expressions through which Chinese artists have conveyed insights into human culture and the rhythms of the natural world (Clydesdale, 2023). From the early Western Han era, Confucian scholars posited that animals possess a consciousness akin to humans, capable of deep intra-species bonds and emotional affiliations (Sterckx et al., 2018). Throughout the Han Dynasty, jade carvings were intricately adorned with a variety of animal depictions. There are five different categories into which the animal imagery might be divided. Firstly, there are representations of dragons and phoenixes (Lam, 2019). Secondly, there are depictions of wild animals like tigers, bears, and tortoises. Thirdly, there are images of insects and birds. Fourth, abstract animal-face images. Lastly, there are artistic renditions of domesticated animals (畜 畜) such as pigs, sheep, horses, etc (Jones, 2004).

### **3.2 “Signified” of the Jade Animal Images**

According to Saussure's semiotic theory of Saussure, the "signified" representing the rich cultural connotation with both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. The signified not only shape contemporary social dynamics but also forge enduring links with historical and future contexts (Yakin & Totu, 2014). During the Han dynasty, animal species and animal behaviors provided images and analogies. They were strategically employed to elicit emotional responses, convey impressions of the natural world, or articulate ethical principles (Sterckx, 2005). The animal-shaped jade artifacts in the Han dynasty reflected wealth and power, expelled evil, longevity, happiness, good fortune, auspicious omen, promotion to a higher position, self-cultivation and completeness of life.

## **4 Analysis and Finding**

### **4.1 Description and Interpretation of Jade Animal Images in the Han Dynasty**

In a highly anthropomorphic literary and philosophical tradition, animals are regarded not only as material culture but also as spiritual entities and symbols of the harmony for mankind and nature. The depiction of animals in jade serves three primary purposes: it signifies a desire for biological creation, engages in the analysis of animals in relation to human morality through analogy, and involves the imitation and symbolism of auspiciousness.

In the context of the Han Dynasty animal imagery jade artifacts, as signifier can be delineated into four distinct categories: indicative symbolic value (Sterckx et al., 2018), homophonic magic, metaphor (Zhang, 2023), and analogy (Xia, 1983). The term "symbol" denotes concepts or emotions associated with the physical characteristics of an object. For instance, the eagle (鹰 yīng), emblematic of transcendence, was an ancient totem of freedom, strength, courage, and victory—qualities aligned with its



celestial flight. The implied meaning related to homonyms plays a pivotal role in Chinese art, where homophonic associations infuse objects with auspicious intent. A salient example is the "Bixie," whose name echoes the phrase for "warding off evil," positioning it as a talismanic figure against misfortune. Metaphor is a linguistic device typically employed to establish a comparison or suggest a likeness or connection between two distinct entities. During the Han Dynasty burial practices, the deceased holding animal-shaped jade artifacts symbolized the optimistic aspirations of individuals for abundant provisions of food in the afterlife (Tian, 2016). The analogy involves linking an animal image with a specific symbol, significance, or concept. For instance, the cicada, an underground insect, undergoes metamorphosis through the processes of molting develops wings for flight (Xia, 1983). This process symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, encompassing both transformation and resurrection. In the burial beliefs of the Han Dynasty, it was believed that upon death, individuals would hold a jade cicada in their mouths. The corpse would undergo a metamorphic process akin to that of a cicada, ultimately undergoing a celestial transformation (Wang & Xie, 2017).

On the signified of the Han dynasty animal-shaped jade artifacts were divided into political stratagems, philosophical tenets, and psychological imperatives. Politically, these animal-shaped jade artifacts were more than mere symbols of status; they were strategic instruments in the consolidation of political power, played a pivotal role in social governance and ritualistic observances to bolster the authority of the ruling elites. Philosophically, the artifacts reflected a syncretism of beliefs—echoing Huang-Lao Taoist principles of human-nature synergy, the Confucian ideal of 'Jade Virtue,' and animistic practices that sought to 'convey spirit through form.' Psychological needs pertain to requirements associated with mental well-being. They materialized the desire for longevity, epitomized the pursuit of happiness and prosperity, and served as objects of meditation that connected individuals to the wider cosmic energies.

#### **4.2 The images of Mythological (Mystical) Animal**

The primary objective of studying animal images is to understand them as biological entities, they nevertheless have a significant relationship to mythology and folklore (Sterckx, 2005). In the Chinese tradition, mythological beasts are not merely figments of the imagination; they embody newly conceived semiotic representations, rich with cultural and spiritual significance (Tian, 2020). These creatures serve as conduits, bridging the mundane with the divine, linking human being with the ancestral and the sacred (Chang, 1981). The creative process, inspired by the philosophical doctrine of 'man-nature unity,' endowed these mythological representations with an array of supernatural attributes, thus transcending their naturalistic origins to assume a more abstract and symbolic forms (Tian, 2020). In essence, these mythological animals are archetypes derived from natural phenomena, yet they exist beyond the tangible world (Childs-Johnson, 2021).

The dragon (lung 龍) image: The first Chinese dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* (說文解字) defines the dragon as the most important mythological animal mentioned in ancient

texts which was the chief of all scaly beasts. There has been much speculation about the zoological characteristics of the Chinese dragon, linking them to paleontological findings such as the ichthyosaurus, or to embellished recollections of serpents and crocodiles indigenous to the Yangtze River basin (Yetts, 1912). As mythic entity, the Chinese dragon is a hybrid of many animals, sporting fish-like scales, avian wings, and horns similar to deer or water buffalo (Lopes, 2014). Symbolically, the dragon is synonymous with aquatic virtues, emblematic of springtime, associated with the azure hue, and representing the Confucian virtue of propriety (Zhao & Kim, 2020; Jones, 2004). Its mythical role as harbinger of rain underscores its vital importance to an agrarian society, venerating it as a pivotal agent of seasonal change and fertility (Whitlock, 1934). In contemporary China, the dragon persists as an icon of might and sovereign authority, testament of enduring legacy within the cultural and spiritual tapestry of the nation.

In the realm of ancient Chinese art, a diverse array of dragon types and their metamorphoses are discernible, with each exemplifying distinct natural forces and embodying individual deities. These artistic representations extend beyond mere ornamentation, imbuing the dragons with profound elemental and divine associations. Among these, the Ch'ih lung (螭龍), also known as Ch'ih hu (螭虎), occupies a storied place in the Han dynasty lore, as detailed in the literary work 'Selections of Refined Literature: Xidu Redemption' (文選·西都贖). The Ch'ih's iconography borrows from the visage of the tiger-scaled and majestic—with round, piercing eyes, a defined snout, and ears characteristic of the felid, while its tail undulates akin to billowing clouds. The Ch'ih lung is not merely an artistic subject; it encapsulates divine vigor, symbolizing the might and authority inherent of sovereignty. Its representation underscores the regal virtues ascribed to rulers, serving as an allegorical figure of imperial power and celestial order.

The phoenix (feng 鳳) image: In the Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shan hai jing 山海經), there is a record that states, "There is a bird, resembling a chicken, with five colors and adorned patterns, named Feng Huang (鳳凰)." The phoenix is a fabulous bird which is the chief of all feathery species. This mythic bird is an emblem of auspiciousness that graces the world only in times of eminent prosperity, during summer, with vibrant red color, and the abundance of the harvest (Jones, 2004). Historically, the feng has been intimately associated with female imperial authority, serving as a distinctive emblem for the Chinese Empress (Yetts, 1912). The phoenix has inspired a plethora of mythical birds, such as the Zhuque, Luan Niao, Chire, Changli, Peng, and Chao.

### **4.3 The images of Mystical Beasts**

The zoomorphic device: The beast-face pattern, also known as taotie motif. Far surpassing its decorative role, the taotie reflects the sophisticated ancient Chinese practice of combining diverse zoological elements into a singular, emblematic design. Described by Zhu (2020) as a composite image evoking elements of the dragon, tiger,



and bull, the taotie represents a fusion of formidable animalistic traits. The taotie serves both as an emblem of authority and as a totem, symbolizing the interplay between art and governance, between the tangible and the sacred (Chen, 2008).

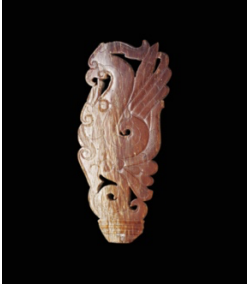
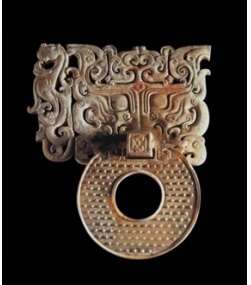


The bixie (辟邪) image: The Bixie is a mythological figure in Chinese lore, initially derived from the Griffin-like creatures of Western Asian origin (Zhang et al., 2013). This winged unicorn, empowered to convey divine edicts, underwent a cultural metamorphosis to be venerated as the tianlu (天禄) and bixie (辟邪), symbols of good fortune and protection in the Chinese pantheon (Liu & Liu, 2020). It is favorable symbol and is defined as an amulet (Xia, 1983). Ancient Chinese people believed that it could attract wealth, fortune, and bring good luck.

The Jade Pegasus (tianma 天馬) image: A mythical creature endowed with wings in ancient Chinese legends, possesses distinctive divine attributes and spirituality (Wallace, 2023). The 'Classic of Mountains and Seas,' depicts it as a chimera with a canine body and a dark head, which soars upon encountering humans. In the cultural background of Han Dynasty, the celestial horse further assumed symbolic significance as an emblem of power and governance within the imperial court and aristocratic circles. Its imagery frequently adorned the decorations of palaces, mausoleums, and noble tombs, and aristocratic sites that exalted stature and sovereign grace of the ruling elite.

Semiotic significances of the animal images in Han jade mythology. Source: authors

Table 1: The sign system of mythological animals

Signifier	Signified	Significations		Jade description	Animal images	Category	Source
		Functions	Mentation				
Jade Dragon	Perfection, bravery, excellence, determination, dignity, and divinity.	Symbol	Political stratagems	The dragon was depicted in an S-shaped posture, featured as elaborate patterns on scroll works, and further enhanced by stylized cloud motifs		Ornament	Xuzhou Museum
Ch'ih lung	Magnificent, good fortune, divine might, and authority.	Symbol	Political Stratagems	The Ch'ih lung is characterized by round eyes, a prominent snout, a serpentine body, and a tail that is coiled into a thread-like shape.		Ornament	National Palace Museum

Phoenix	Benevolence, dignity, beauty, drive away evil and bring good prospect.	Symbol	Political Stratagems	A phoenix is depicted upright with outstretched wings, positioned on a pedestal, which is underscored by three linear designs.		Ornament	Xuzhou Museum
Beast-headed jade pendants	Mystery, horror, ferocity, and protects from evil.	Metaphor	Philosophical Tenets	The zoomorphic item features a square-shaped animal head paired with a jade Bi inscribed with a 'valley' motif. A chi dragon is intricately etched on the left side of the head, resulting in a deliberate asymmetry.		Ornament	Nanyue king museum
Bixie	Benevolence, auspiciousness and repels negative spirits.	Homophonic	Philosophical Tenets	The sculpture portrays a winged, line creature in an elevated stance, adorned with low-relief flame patterns above its back, and its limbs reveal pronounced muscular tension.		Sculpture	National palace museum
Horse	Auspiciousness, good fortune, and tranquil happiness.	Symbol	Philosophical Tenets	The horse is sculpted with its head modestly elevated, mouth agape showing the teeth, and a mane cascading from the back of the head. A pair of wings extending from its body. The muscular physique of the horse is well-defined, conveying a sense of strength.		Sculpture	The palace museum

#### 4.4 The images of Wild Animals (Birds of Prey, Beast of Prey and Insects)

A salient image on Han Dynasty jade iconography is the representation of animals that figured prominently in daily existence. These carvings are categorized into four principal groups: terrestrial mammals, aquatic fauna, avian species, and insects (Xun, 2017).

The tiger (hu 虎) image: The tiger occupies a preeminent position among the fauna of the mountains, it is frequently depicted as the most superior animal in these habitats (Sterckx, 2005). This empirical observation of real tigers likely contributed to the interest and subsequent portrayal of tigers within the realm of mythology (Zhang et al., 2013).

The Leopard (bao 豹) image: The leopard in traditional iconography encapsulates the dual attributes of swiftness and physical might. Bao (豹) sounds very similar to the Chinese character "bao"(保) in Chinese pronunciation. This form of homophonic which connotes protection, endows the leopard with symbolic qualities of guardianship, defense, and the confers blessings on its possessor. Furthermore, it embodies the quality of fearlessness. This agreement in meanings is frequently represented in jade, where solitary figures of leopards are crafted with meticulously, to serve both as aesthetic objects and as talismans.

The bear (xiong 熊) image: The bear holds a prominent place in the annals of Chinese iconography, recognized for its formidable presence and regal bearing. The 'Chu Ci · Tian Wen' contains a verse, '焉有虯龙,负熊以游?'. Historically, creatures with horns were termed 'lung', while those without were known as 'qiu'. The portrayal of a 'qiu' being carried by a bear and frolicking suggested that bears were companions and defenders of kings. In the ceremonies of the Han Dynasty, bears were endowed with human strength and valor, become embodiments of courage and valiant spirits. Carved jade bears were considered auspicious symbols that prevented evil and brought good fortune. The bear was a recurring image found in the tombs of Western Han dynasty emperors and nobles.

The camel (luotuo 駱駝) image: The camel venerated for its indomitable spirit, emerged as a symbol of resilience in the face of the harshest desert climates, endured intense heat without water. It had remarkable fortitude in bearing heavy burdens over vast and treacherous journeys was emblematic of its endurance and steadfastness. The camel was depicted with the virtues of strength and courage. As such its image is celebrated as a harbinger of good luck and is fondly regarded as an emblem of fortitude by the people.

The elephant (xiang 象) image: The elephants in Chinese tradition are paradoxical, characterized by immense physical power yet tempered by a gentle and faithful nature. Culturally, the elephant embodies peace and good fortune, a meaning derived from the identical pronunciation between 'xiang' (象) and 'xiang' (祥), which signifies auspiciousness. Moreover, the similarity in pronunciation of 'xiang' (相) suggests promotion to high office, signifying a prosperous career trajectory and the attainment of great success. Consequently, the elephant is venerated in the ancient East's cultural of the East.

The tortoise (gui 龜) image: The tortoise is associated with veneration and joy, an interpretation supported by its phonetic linkage to 'jiu' (舊), meaning 'old' (Yetts, 1912). The tortoise stands as a symbol of the earth, represented by the color black, corresponding to winter, and is associated with the virtue of fidelity (Jones, 2004). The significance of the markings on its shell, used historically in religious practices, conveys the belief that tortoises, by virtue of their longevity, harbored prophetic insights (Sterckx, 2005).

The eagle (ying 鷹) image: The eagle is depicted as the sovereign among the avian species, is distinguished by its formidable nature, expansive wingspan, and unparalleled aerial prowess. It is the epitome of avian majesty, ruling the skies with its capacity to ascend to extraordinary heights and surveil vast expanses with acute perception. It also demonstrates its predatory mastery. Symbolically, the eagle embodies vigor, bravery, and sagacity. Within the traditional cultural context, it also signifies a protective spirit, safeguarding individuals, and families.

#### **4.5 The Images of Insects**

The cicada (chan 蟬) image: The distinctive noise of the cicada, a resonant and persistent chirp, is significant achievement realized through singular effort. In Chinese phonetics, the term 'zhiliao', associated with cicadas, reminds the phrase 'to know' (zhi dao), thus symbolizing the swift attainment of knowledge and academic advancement. As previously mentioned, adorning oneself with a jade cicada, whether at the chest or waist, is believed to bring extraordinary success or the accumulation of wealth, respectively. Beyond adornment, jade cicadas serve as poignant funeral emblems, intertwined with life-death cycles and the powerful mythos of death leading to rebirth. These insects are thus emblematic of metamorphosis, mirroring the transformative journey of human existence (Lopes, 2014).

#### **4.6 The Images of Domesticated Animals**

The horse (ma 馬) image: The horse in Zhouli (周禮) delineates a taxonomy of horses based on their designated uses, such as breeding, combat, ceremonial functions, transportation, hunting, and labor. The lexical interpretation of 'horse' encompasses the concepts of 'nu' (怒) meaning 'fury', and 'wu' (武) indicating 'martial prowess', reflecting the integral role of horses in the military contexts (Sterckx, 2005). Horses were a major sculptural form during the Han Period and first appeared at this time (Jones, 2004).

The bovine (niu 牛) image: The bovine is deeply embedded in the fabric of Chinese cultural tradition. Cattle, alongside pigs and sheep, were considered the most esteemed offerings in ancient sacrificial rites (Tian, 2020). In jade form, bovines are venerated, symbolizing hardwork, patience, and humility, virtues highly valued in Chinese ethos.




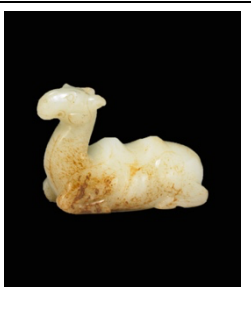
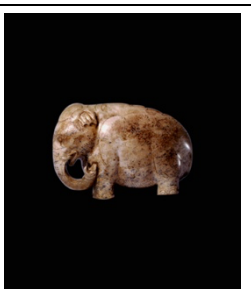
The pig (zhu 豬) image: In ancient Chinese lexicon a variety of terms was used for pigs, namely 'shi' (豕), 'zhi' (彘), and 'tun' (豚) being the most common. Jade pigs, frequently discovered in Han Dynasty tombs, were often placed in the hands of the departed, serving as a 'jade grip' in funerary customs. Pigs were emblematic of wealth and prosperity; thus, a jade pig signified copious financial resources and success.

The ovine (yang 羊) image: The ovine (Yang) indicates good fortune, as its pronunciation closely mirrors that of an 'auspicious omen' in Chinese, a testament to the prevalent use of homophonic meanings in Han dynasty jade iconography (Tian, 2020). Historically, 'sheep' have been associated with benevolence, civility, external



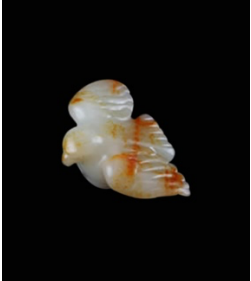


gentleness, and internal resilience. The jade sheep is an emblem of beauty and purity and is revered as a symbol of happiness and success.


Semiotic significances of the wild and domesticated animal images in the Han jade. Source: authors

Table 2: The sign system of wild and domesticated animals

Signifier	Signified	Significations		Jade description	Animal images	Category	Source
		Functions	Mentation				
Jade tiger silhouette	Strength, majesty, courage, and royalty.	Symbol	Political Stratagems	The profile of the tiger silhouette is intricately pierced and carved, featuring a tapered ear, circular eye, pronounced snout, and open jaws with visible fangs.		Sculpture	British museum
Leopard shaped Yuzhen	Power, resilience, individuality, and perseverance.	Homophonic	Political Stratagems	The leopard is rendered with circular, prominent eyes fixed ahead, upright ears, and is adorned with a collar inlaid with seashell fragments. The sculpture's fat and sturdy forms simultaneously embody vigor and tameness		Sculpture	Xuzhou Museum
Bear	Courage and immense strength.	Symbol	Political Stratagems	The jade sculpture captures a bear in repose, that is big size. The eyes are crafted to convey a lively and endearing demeanor, complemented by a shell ornament encircling its neck.		Sculpture	Xuzhou Museum
Jade camel	Steadfast willpower and courageous spirit.	Symbol	Psychological Imperatives	The camel figure is sculpted with anterior limbs folded in a kneeling position and posterior limbs drawn to its belly. It is characterized by round eyes, an elevated bead, and pronounced pectoral muscular structure.		Sculpture	National palace museum
Elephant	Peace, promotion, and good fortune.	Homophonic	Psychological Imperatives	The standing elephant sculpture, that is round, showcases narrow eyes, large ears, an elegantly arched trunk, legs with a soft droop, and a voluminous belly.		Sculpture	The british museum



Cicada-shaped pendant	Purity and nobility.	Analogy	Psychological Imperatives	The jade cicada is distinguished by its bulging eyes and subtly elevated at the tail, with wings clearly shown. The legs and abdominal segments are also intricately executed, lending the piece an appearance of reality.		Ornament	Xuzhou Museum
Cicada-shaped mouth ornament	Good reincarnation, transformation, and rebirth.	Analogy	Philosophical Tenets	A simple and unadorned jade cicada is characterized by its simple design, capturing the essential forms of the insect's body, head structure, two eyes, and dorsal wings.		Burial piece	Xuzhou Museum
Jade eagle	Power and freedom.	Analogy	Psychological Imperatives	The jade eagle is depicted with outstretched wings suggestive of flight, featuring round eyes, a curved beak, and wings that are intricately marked to represent feathers, which conveys a sense of full-bodied features.		Sculpture	Xianyang museum
Jade bull	Diligence, patience, and humility.	Symbol	Psychological Imperatives	The Jade Bull presents a dynamically twisted silhouette with its left forelimb joined to the abdomen, standing on a base with three feet that enhances the vigor of its muscular structure.		Sculpture	Aurora Museum
Jade pig	Good fortune	Symbol	Philosophical Tenets	The morphology of the pig resembles a round shape, with the body, the front end of the snout, the snout disk, and the buttocks all exhibiting rectangular or square forms.		Burial piece	Xuzhou Museum

Jade goat	Auspicious omen	Homophonic	Psychological Imperatives	The sculpture portrays a dignified sheep in a kneeling position with symmetrically curled horns and triangular facial features. Its body is robust and rounded, with limbs gracefully tucked underneath.		Sculpture	The palace museum
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## 5 Conclusion

Within the purview of the craftsmanship Han Dynasty jade craftsmanship, the depiction of animals serves as a crucial element. The representation of animals on jade artifacts reflects a dichotomy: the tangible, intricately linked to their inherent wildness and complex forms, and the intangible, encompassing inspiration for emotions and cultural interpretations. An analysis of animal motifs in jade craftsmanship not only acknowledges the aesthetic qualities, signifying their visual charm, but also probe into their esoteric meaning, underscoring the interplay of engagement and creativity in their symbolic interpretations. Thus, the incorporation of animal designs transcends mere ornamentation, functions instead serve as a conduit for imparting ideological, philosophical, and societal meanings.

The representation of animals in the Han Dynasty jade artifacts significantly encapsulates the folk life and spiritual beliefs of the Han people, enriched them with profound cultural meanings. For the Han dynasty populace, animal-shaped jade objects were imitations and symbols of auspiciousness. Animals held an integral role within their vision of harmony, which permeated their daily lives. Analyzing the animal depictions on the Han Dynasty jade within the cultural and societal context of the era allows for a deeper exploration of the origins of these representations and provides a means to unearth the profound socio-cultural and ideological implications of the era. Investigating the influences of animal-shaped jade during the Han Dynasty stands as a crucial key to unlocking insights into this ancient civilization.

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