1 Seated zoomorphic figure
Neolithic period, Hongshan culture (circa 4000–circa 3000 BCE)
Greenish-yellow jade with brown inclusions
14.6 x 6 x 4.7 cm

2 Pendant of an eagle standing on the heads of two human figures
Neolithic period, Shijiahe culture (circa 2500–circa 2000 BCE)
Greenish-yellow jade with a large brown stain
9.1 x 5.2 x 0.9 cm

3 Pendant of a bird with head ornament
Shang dynasty (circa 1600–1046 BCE)
Pale green jade with black marks
13.1 x 3.2 x 1.5 cm

4 Grasshopper pendant
Shang dynasty (circa 1600–1046 BCE)
Pale green jade with brown staining
8.4 x 1.2 x 0.5 cm

5 Pendant of a zoomorphic figure
Western Zhou dynasty (circa 1046–771 BCE)
Pale greenish-yellow jade with brown inclusion
8.3 x 1.5 x 0.4 cm

All illustrations courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing
A Translucent World: Representations of Nature in Chinese Jade

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JADE, THIS SUBTLE but quietly empowered stone, holds a special place in the Chinese psyche. Throughout its history, the representation of Chinese jade has embraced a wide range of themes and styles, yet the inspiration of nature has remained a potent source for artisans and connoisseurs of this unique stone. Since China’s earliest dynastic period, real and imagined creatures were endowed with special attributes, as revealed by their depiction in jade. The Tang dynasty (618–907) marked a fundamental change in the history of jade carving, when the fauna and flora of the real world became its most important subject matter. In the years that followed landscape scenes rather than isolated plant and animal motifs came to occupy a distinguished place among the subject matter of jade carving, used to decorate a wide range of objects and ornaments or sculpted into evocative jade “mountains” which embodied the universal longing of cultivated individuals to escape their quotidian world and commune with nature.

This essay looks at the representation of nature in Chinese jade from the Neolithic period to late imperial eras. Rather than presenting a broad overview, however, the discussion of the various periods focuses on a specific theme, one that had particular influence at the time. The materials that comprise the core of the exhibition held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from August 29th—November 11th, 2007, “Translucent World: Chinese Jade from the Forbidden City”, provide this author with an important objective basis for this discussion.¹

The Neolithic period—the era before the introduction of metal technologies—began in China around 12,000 years ago, when settled communities that relied mainly on farming rather than on hunting and gathering began to form. The later Neolithic periods (from circa 6000 BCE onward) represent one of the great epochs in the history of jade carving. During these periods, jade was carved primarily into objects resembling weapons, rings, pierced discs and curved arc ornaments. All seem to have had certain shamanistic qualities and been associated with rituals, most notably burials and ceremonial events. Images representing nature were either carved in relief or in the round, methods that remained common thereafter. Subjects include human figures, animals (particularly birds, fish and tortoises), imaginary creatures such as dragons, as well as zoomorphic figures, which combine human and animal forms (1). Animals were often represented as a dominating force requiring reverence, and the images of men were forcibly subdued animals. The idea and tendency is clearly seen in a pendant of an eagle standing on the heads of two human figures, from Shijiahe culture (circa 2500–circa 2000 BCE, in modern Anhui province) (2).

Shang (circa 1600–1046 BCE) marked the first historic dynasty recorded in both rich archaeological finds and surviving documents written on bronze artefacts and oracle bones—the abstract jade ritual objects were carved continuously, the people of the Shang continued to replicate the world around them in jade. These jade animals most probably played a prominent role in religion and magic, used in communicating with the supernatural realms, though some of them may also have functioned as personal ornaments. In carving such figures, an emphasis on pattern rather than individual likeness is observable, and the imagination or fantasy was clearly in command, as exemplified by a bird pendant with a magnificent crown resembling a flower bud (3). With few exceptions, objects are embellished with rich surface design. The lively exceptions are represented by a few sculptures carved in three dimensions, including the grasshopper pendant (4).

The succeeding Western Zhou dynasty (circa 1046–771 BCE) inherited a rich legacy of jade carving from the Shang dynasty, yet some new jade forms developed, including the zoomorphic figures combining human features with dragon or phoenix, as seen in a pendant in pale greenish-yellow jade (5).

With the power of the Zhou court gradually diminished, the fragmentation of the kingdom accelerated. The Eastern Zhou period (circa 770–256 BCE), though marked by disunity and civil strife, witnessed an unprecedented era of cultural prosperity. The art of jade carving flourished, with pieces being produced in greater number and variety than ever before. The level of craftsmanship also reached new peaks. By this period the importance of jades as ceremonial implements had declined relatively to

other types of jades, such as the personal pendants and utensils, as demonstrated by a beautifully carved lamp decorated with floral motif (6): here the small dish in the centre of the larger dish is shaped like a flower with five petals; the upper stem represents a *yulan* magnolia with three openwork petals supporting the dish; five leaves, carved in high relief and ornamented with incised spirals, radiate from the domed base.

Following the brief but significant Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), when China became unified under its first emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) is considered within China to be one of its greatest historical eras.

The Han rulers gradually incorporated Confucian ideals into all aspects of the civil administrations, and the special qualities of jade became associated with human virtue. As the idea of immortality became a concern across the empire, jades were carved to express auspicious wishes and symbols for eternal life. Many depicted creatures of the immortal realm, including fantastic beasts, birds and winged horses. For the first time, auspicious words were carved onto *bi* discs to give blessings to those who possessed them: on this *bi* disc, a pair of openwork dragons rise from its perimeter. Between them, a pierced inscription reads *yishou* 益壽 or “beneficial for your longevity” (7).

Significant change in the history of Chinese jade carving occurred during the Tang dynasty, the Golden Age of Chinese art. With the strong secularised flavour in culture, nature was now seen as a pleasant place for men. This intense interest in the material, rather than the spiritual, world gave birth to naturalism in the decorative arts. The ceremonial use of jade died out, replaced by a new focus on representing fauna and flora. Jades inspired by nature found their most suitable abode in utilitarian objects and personal ornaments, particularly those used or worn by women. Mysterious, mythical animals such as dragons gave their dominant way, for example, to wonderfully rendered natural motifs. On a superb pale green jade cup (8), the fluently carved clouds occupy the whole exterior body and extend to the handle, which is itself a component of this fantastic cloud world of organic, living forms. Although cranes had long been associated with the idea of immortality and had been a popular subject in literature and decorative arts, on the snow white jade ornament the beauty of their form now surpasses their spiritual significance. Surrounded by curling foliage, flowers and clouds, the pair of cranes appear within the natural world, harmoniously interacting with other natural phenomena (9).
8 Cup decorated with cloud motif
Tang dynasty (618–907)
Pale green jade with brown speckled areas
6.8 x 12 x 9.5 cm

9 Ornament in the shape of birds among flowers
Tang dynasty (618–907)
Pure snow white jade
6.4 x 8.9 x 1 cm

10 Figure of an entertainer
Tang dynasty (618–907)
Pale greenish-white jade flecked with russet brown
5.7 x 2.2 cm

Meanwhile, thriving commerce attracted merchants and talented foreigners to Tang China from near and far, encouraging a truly cosmopolitan culture to develop. The influx of foreign goods, people and influences was evident in new styles of jade carving. Appearing in the jade for the first time are exotically dressed figures of foreigners (10), while quite realistic versions of lions, horses, elephants and birds joined the earlier repertoire of the mythical animals. It has been suggested that the official use of jade belts was established under a strong influence from Khotan, a small kingdom in Central Asia (present-day Xinjiang province), the source of almost all the raw materials supplying the Chinese jade industry and where the best nephrite was produced.² Although jade belts carved dur-

ing this period featured decorative motifs such as flowers, birds and animals, human figures were much favoured (especially musicians), dressed in costumes of Central Asian origin. Designs typically show a man kneeling on one leg upon an elliptical mat with his hands presenting tribute (11), or a seated male playing a music instrument. Such plaques must have stirred strong interest among Chinese artisans, who began producing jade plaques with motifs inspired by these Central Asian models.

During the Tang dynasty, and particularly the succeeding Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties,

11 Plaque from a belt carved with a kneeling man presenting tribute
Tang dynasty, 8th century
Pure white jade
6.2 x 6.5 cm

12 Openwork ornament in the shape of a goddess mounted on a phoenix
Song dynasty (960–1279)
Pure snow white jade
7.8 x 5.4 x 2.2 cm

13 Openwork ornament in the shape of a goddess in a tree grove
Song dynasty (960–1279)
Pale green jade with brown speckled areas
7.8 x 9.6 x 1.5 cm

14 Openwork brush washer ornamented with five boys playing
Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
Pale green jade
Height 6 cm, diameter 7.5 cm

15 Cup in the shape of a bamboo branch
Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
Pale green jade with areas of russet staining
Height 10.5 cm, mouth 7.5 x 3.9 cm
the immense influence of Confucianism and the spread and importance of religions such as Daoism and Buddhism are reflected in the increasing number of jades which feature motifs and themes that portray religious values and transcendent realms. Such is the character of the pure snow jade openwork ornament in the shape of a goddess mounted on a phoenix (12). The hovering goddess on a phoenix steed is generally associated with the legend of Xiao Shi 蕭史 and his lover princess Nonyu 弄玉, who lived during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE). Both skilled at playing the flute, they finally ascended to heaven after becoming immortals, riding a dragon and a phoenix respectively.

Alongside jades inspired by religious themes emerged a type that may be called compositional works. Characterised by their complex structures and vivid details, they feature intricate undercut openwork and a sculptural quality quite unlike the flatness of earlier jades. Technical advances during the Song dynasty and superior cutting tools certainly encouraged the creation of more complex forms, but they were also influenced by contemporary painting styles. During the Song dynasty, paintings of landscapes, flowers and birds reached new heights of realism, their carefully observed forms and meticulous detail balanced by their subtlety of expression and delicate understatement. Stimulated by these models, the visual vocabulary of jade representations of nature increased and their designs became ever more elaborate, combining human figures, animals, botanic motifs and landscape settings.

The remarkable realism of these complex composite forms is best seen in the openwork ornament in the form of a goddess in a tree grove (13). Here the pictorial elements are well organised into a two-dimensional painting: the goddess-like figure and pine tree occupying the left side, and the maiden holding a banner towards the centre. Balancing them on the right is a descending maiden. Her pleasant S-shaped sash echoes the swinging leaves above the other two figures. Their gazes are all fixed on a crane standing in the lower right corner, next to a clump of lingzhi fungus. The crane turns its head to look at its mate standing behind a lingzhi and pine tree on the other side of the piece.

From the Ming dynasty (1368–1664) China saw a boom in commerce and commodities. The economic expansion created a middle class of merchants and even labourers with money to spare on diversionary activities. The lives and tastes of the urban population became an important component of contemporary literature, art and material culture. In response, jade came to encompass a wide range of popular themes and values intermingled with references to Confucian, Buddhist or Daoist beliefs: legends, folklores, custom, historical events, or affairs such as birth, marriage and death. Many expressed blessings for weddings, official rank, or had some semi-magical and/or superstitious purpose.

Many jades bear symbols anticipating or celebrating success in the imperial civil service examination. The openwork brush washer ornamented with five boys playing (14), for instance, implies a wish for wuzi dengke wúzǐ dēngkē (“may five sons all succeed in the examination”). The story relates to the 10th century gentleman Dou Yujun, who successfully raised five sons who all passed the imperial civil service examination.

Sometimes the meanings depend upon word plays such as puns and rebuses, formed by combining a spoken word and a visual image whose name is pronounced in the same fashion as an auspicious term. Bamboo symbolises endurance as it is capable of withstanding the snows of winter. It has jie 節 (nodes) which forms a homophone of qí-jie 氣節 (moral integrity) (15).

The allusions sometimes depend upon more complex associations, and these puns become rebuses. A crab’s carapace, jia 甲 in Chinese also means the successful candidate in several classes, and the name of the reed lu 蒲 forms a pun on the word for chuānlu 卦錫—the first in the second class of contenders to pass the jinshi examination. The image of two carapaces (erji 乙甲), in this case of two crabs, combined with the reed (lu) suggests erji chuānlu—meaning the contender would be successful in the examination and achieve first place in the second class (16).

Puns and rebuses are often used in combination. During the Qing (1664–1911), the jade elephants were paired and placed in front of the imperial throne (17). Such an elephant often has a saddle fitting on its back, supporting a covered vase. Because píng 瓶 for vase has the same sound as píng (in tāipíng 太平 or peace), the image is a symbol for tāipíng yóuxiàng 太平有象 (“when the elephant presents itself, the universe is at peace”).

Emperor Qianlong’s reign in the Qing dynasty marked the most glorious period in the long history of jade production in China. The stable imperial power and unprecedented affluence created a perfect environment in which the jade carving could flourish. It was during this period, interest in incorporating the realistic depiction of living organisms into the design of jades reached an unprecedented level. Such jades were known as *xiaoshengyu* 肖生玉 or “jades emulating all living beings”.

This enthusiasm for the utterly faithful reproduction of real creatures was influenced in part by European painting styles, which had become known through the Jesuit artists at the court of Qianlong. The fashion was also partly encouraged by an increase in the supply of high-quality nephrite from the Khotan region, possibly through the regaining of control over Central Asia. The secure and abundant supply of good materials permitted judicious selection for colour, tone and texture. Also during this time, the discovery of more richly coloured Burmese jadeite added further to the repertoire.

Compositions in highly realistic and keenly observed forms were of two main types: those worked after models taken directly from the natural world, including animals and plants; and those integrating natural elements such as scenery, garden, pavilion and human activities, which were often amalgamated within a composite picture.

Jade animals in particular were appreciated for their physical liveliness and associated symbolic references. The dominance of jade animals is not only reflected in the quantity produced but also in the variety of forms, both revivals of past styles and the introduction of new species, such as the seated dog that appears in (18), a type not commonly seen in Chinese art and possibly of foreign origin. Although external appearances were portrayed in exquisite detail (see, for example, the pair of crabs, 16) even more attention was lavished on the balance or symmetry of parts within the whole. An animal’s reactions, expressions and movement were emphasised, rather than the previous focus on tranquillity of pose: a recumbent camel caught in a moment of time as if it is scratching an itch on the back with its mouth; a standing duck in an alert
16 Paperweight in the shape of crabs holding reeds
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Pure white jade
3.6 x 11.2 x 16.8 cm

17 Emperor’s throne set decorated in jade with a design of “spring swallows above a lotus pool”
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Lacquer screen height 271 cm (screen), 314 cm (overall)
Lacquer throne 115 x 91 x 127 cm
Pair of elephants carrying vases on their back
Dark spinach-green jade
19.1 x 25.5 cm

18 Figure of a seated dog
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Pale greenish-white jade with slight russet veining
16 x 13 cm

19 Figure of a kneeling camel
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1795)
Pure yellow jade
6 x 11.4 x 8.2 cm

attitude with head turned to look over its back (19, 20).

Plants and flowers were also popular xiaoshengyu subjects, particularly for jades that also served functional purpose such as cups, bowls, vases and kettles. The forms of a tree trunk or stump, flowering blossom, leaf and tendril are often seen as vases (21); sometimes a favourite plant or flower was adopted a number of times in shaping dif-
ferent objects. For instance, there were bamboo-shaped kettles, cups, candle holders, etc. The fashion for utilitarian jades in the shape of a botanic form now reached its apogee of sophistication.

In many examples, animals, birds, plants, landscape scenes and human beings appear in one composition, and a diversity of living beings were incorporated into a coherent unity. The beautifully carved figure of two boys cleaning an elephant (22) conveys the liveliness, vigour and humour of this quite humble endeavour through pose and movement. A brush rest in the shape of a bridge presents an intricate but lively scene of travellers—local farmers with their donkeys, fishermen and their boats—crossing a timber bridge (23), reminiscent of a famous scene seen in a renowned painting, Going upriver on the Qingming Festival, by the 12th century painter Zhang Zeduan.

20 Figure of a duck
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Pale greenish-white jade
17.2 x 15 x 5.2 cm

21 Brush washer in the shape of a lotus leaf
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Pure white jade
8.1 x 8.8 x 6.9 cm

22 Figure of two boys cleaning an elephant
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Pure pale greenish-white jade
Height 20.4 cm
23 Brush rest in the shape of a bridge
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Pale green jade
8.2 x 18.6 cm x 5.4 cm

24 Covered censer in the shape of a lotus flower
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Pale greenish white jade with small brown streaks
Height 10.5 cm, diameter (mouth) 12.4 cm

25 Flower vase decorated with fruits in openwork
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Agate in red and white colours
13.2 x 16.4 x 7.5 cm
Although the designs show great diversity, there are a number of features many share. One is the use of repetition within a single work to give prominence to certain botanic species and thus allow full appreciation of its beauty. The openwork censer is an exquisite tribute to the lotus blossom (24). The main body, high-spread foot and its delicately modelled domed lid are contoured on the flower’s form. While this is enough to convey the artisan’s intent, a further lotus blossom surmounts the vessel in layers of petals encircling a seed pod, and attached to both sides is a lotus handle, upon which a sparrow perches. With such intriguing design, the lotus’ pure elegance, splendour and noble associations are fully expressed and appreciated.

Another feature common among jades produced during this period is the ingenious exploitation of the stone’s natural colour. In the openwork vase (25), carved from a single piece of agate, the maker has used the natural red areas to form two pomegranates, three peaches and a small finger citron or “Buddha’s hand”, and the white area as a larger finger citron and a bat. Through the tradi-

26 Hanging screen with the scene of Canglang Pavilion
Mid-Qing dynasty, 18th century
Jade sheets of various colours
74 cm x 106 cm (overall)

27 Ladies in the shadow of wutong trees
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1795)
White jade with russet brown patches
15.5 x 25 x 11 cm

28 Pair of decorative screens carved with scenes of the “four pleasures”
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1795), dated 1764
Dark spinach-green jade with light green veins
18.7 x 26.7 x 1.2 cm
tional inlay technique, stones of different colour were incorporated into a picture to realistically depict the subject. This ingenious use of natural colour is nowhere better illustrated than in the hanging screen with the scene of Canglang Pavilion 满桑亭 [26]. Jade sheets of various colours, shaped and inlaid on a black lacquer ground represent a panoramic view of the landscape: dense trees, partitioned courtyards shadowed by bamboos, buildings with latticed windows and huge rocks as well as river banks and a bridge are all meticulously featured.

Although China’s great tradition of painting dates back to ancient times and had reached its apogee during the Tang dynasty, it was not until the late Ming dynasty that jade carvers began to look seriously at the content and form of literati painting for inspiration. Such “painting in jade” brought new possibilities and diversity to the repertoire of jade carving. By the mid-Qing period, the pursuit of the picturesque in jade had become the height of fashion, for the most part as a result of the Emperor Qianlong’s advocacy, who esteemed the picturesque quality of the jade, calling it huayi 畫意 or “mood of painting”.

Ancient paintings collected in the court often provided models for designated jade pieces, and in some important cases, renowned court painters were called upon to provide designs. In the case of Ladies in the shadow of wutong trees [27], carved from “leftovers” (the moon gate was where a bowl had been hollowed out), the carvers used an oil painting in the imperial collection as model.

Landscape paintings were a profound source of inspiration for jade carvers. The two major forms used to represent landscapes are jade mountains—roughly shaped lumps of jade carved with scenes in low or deep relief—and screens. The adaptation of model landscape painting in carving the jade screens contributed to endow these works with a refined picturesque quality. Sometimes the craftsmen had exploited the retention of the pebble’s “skin” and manipulated the natural colours to enhance the effect of the landscape. On the pair of table screens carved in dark spinach-green jade with scenes of the “four pleasures”: fishing, reading, ploughing and woodchopping [28], the stone’s veins of lighter green had been cleverly employed by the lapidary and transformed into the effect of slanting rain. The result is a vivid countryside scene of Jiangnan region in thin drizzle.

No doubt the most literal representation of the landscape, jade mountains first appeared in the literary record during the Jin dynasty in the 12th–13th centuries. During Qianlong’s rule, huge blocks of fine nephrite mined in Yarkand were available to the court from the second half of the 18th century, and the political stability and unprecedented prosperity permitted costly carving of huge jade mountains for the amusement of the imperial house. Qianlong insisted that all carved panels on jade mountains should carry the spirit of the works of famous painters, a demand that applied equally to miniatures carved out of small, water-smoothed pebbles taken from river beds to “mountains” carved from the bulky masses quarried in the hill slopes.4

The carved jade mountain with the scene of *The Nine Elders of Huichang* (29) commissioned by Qianlong and completed in 1786 is one of the best examples of the painted landscape theme represented in jade. The theme refers to the great Tang poet and scholar-official Bai Juyi (772–846) and his eight fellows, who indulged in the practice of literature and a life of leisure, and sought spiritual freedom in the mountains away from the restraining burdens of society. Like a landscape painting, the jade mountain is composed using the atmospheric perspective which allowed an entire range to be encompassed in a single sweep of the eye. One feels convinced by the effects of space, height and volume. As viewers follow the scenes upwards, they are caught and amazed by the detailed descriptions of topography, vegetation and human activity. While the image alone is enough to convey an intimacy between the jade mountain and landscape painting, the seal and the inscription carved on the mountain enhance their affinity.

The close ties between painting and jade carving of the Qing period is further enhanced by the successful adaptation of the flower and bird theme into jade composition. This can be seen on the 18th century throne-set (see 17). The three-fold lacquer screen and throne are lavishly decorated with inlaid jade pictures of elegant lotus and flying swallows. Seen on the screen panels, clusters of lotus
leaves, flowers and seed pods rise gracefully from the pools covered with circular lotus leaves and other water weeds. Elegantly rendered, as though dancing in a breeze, they evoke literary and religious connotations associated with the lotus: its noble purity and endurance (or unflinching courage) parallels the virtues of the respected gentleman.

Whether used to decorate implements and ornaments, screens or sculpted into evocative mountains, these jades share the same longing of the cultivated individual to escape the quotidian world to commune with nature. Placed on the desk or within a study or hall, they helped to create an atmosphere of pastoral peace and otherworldliness, where the mind can be set free.

29  Jade mountain with the scene of  
*The Nine Elders of Huichang*  
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period, dated 1786  
Green nephrite with altered areas  
Boulder 114.5 x 90 x 65 cm  
Bronze base height 41 cm, weight 832 kg