

HOW TO SELECT

JADE CRAFTS

Valerie Sartor & Wang Ying



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Foreword

We sincerely hope that this little book will help our readers to both buy jade and understand a little bit about jade and its relation with Chinese culture. As you read, you'll begin to understand that China is vast. This nation contains 56 minority peoples and is the third largest country after Russia and Canada. Even more significantly, China has offered the world many treasures since ancient times: silk, gunpowder, printing, peaches, apricots, citrus, medicines, coal, and zinc — the list goes on and on. Jade appreciation is but one of China's many valuable gifts.

However, please note that it's important to understand that the very term "jade" has broader significance in Chinese language than in English language because the cultural concept denoting jade is broader as well. In China and other parts of Asia the character for jade: Yù (玉) has a general translation that signifies precious or ornamental rock. This is one of the reasons why, when shopping for jade, you may be shown a wide variety of stones instead of the traditional green stone that Western people mistakenly perceive as jade: be warned that Chinese names for many ornamental non-jade rocks also incorporate the character yù. Fortunately, nowadays more and more Chinese vendors understand that most Western shoppers are seeking jadeite and nephrite rather than agates, turquoise and other brightly colored stones and gems. Native speakers intuitively know that such stones are not, in fact, true precious nephrite or jadeite but Westerners may not understand. So, to avoid confusion shoppers who would like to try a bit of Mandarin Chinese may refer to yìng yù (硬玉, "hard jade") for jadeite, or ruǎn yù (软玉, "soft jade") for nephrite.

Since the PRC opened up to the West beginning in 1978, the country has offered unique and wonderful opportunities for all kinds of jade lovers to come and shop, look at, and study the various ways the Chinese have utilized this stone. For those who love jewelry, jade can be abundantly found, both cheap and expensive, in a wide variety of patterns and styles. Designs range from ancient patterns that are still popular today (the coiled dragon fetus, for example) to ultra modern innovations that may have incorporated some sense of Western aesthetics. Jadeware is also abundant and has a wide range of designs and prices.

For Western visitors with a philosophical bent, they may also have a marvelous chance to reflect on and observe the way jade has been used for religious and spiritual purposes. For example, in the Western region of Shanghai stands a very ancient and renowned Buddhist temple called the Jade Buddhist Temple. This house of faith contains two extraordinary jade statues depicting the Buddha. A Chinese monk carried them from Burma to China in 1882. Later the temple was destroyed when China's last dynasty, the Qing, fell in 1911. Fortunately, some faithful monks saved the two statues and stored them away until the temple was rebuilt in 1928. These jade statues are not only rare, cultural artifacts but also important symbols of Chinese culture: they reflect how the people in China revere Buddhism.

One statue depicts a "Sitting Buddha," the second represents a "Recumbent Buddha;" both are carved from wondrous white jade, making them somehow more pure and alive than other Buddhist statues found around China. At 190 centimeters, the "Sitting Buddha" is covered in agates and emeralds. He is meant to show the Buddha at his exact moment of enlightenment. The "Recumbent Buddha" is smaller, at 96 centimeters in length; he lies serenely on his right side with his right hand supporting his head and his left along his thigh: this is called the "lucky pose." This second Buddha depicts the peaceful way the Buddha left the earth. Both of these elegant statues are a joy to gaze upon.

The Jade Buddha Temple also has many other statues and pictures representing Buddhism. It's a good place to go to look at the way the Chinese use valuable jade for spiritual reasons and a nice way to explore Chinese Buddhism as well.

And, for foreigners visiting Beijing, a trip to the Forbidden City is absolutely necessary no matter what one's interests may be. It is not a coincidence that this magnificent cultural heritage houses 30,000 pieces of jade alone. Jade statues, jade seals, jade carvings, and jewels: to simply view some of the many splendors carved in jade will take guests more than a single day. The ultra-modern Beijing Capital Museum is another enlightening and pleasant place to look at jade and other Chinese treasures. And of course, for those avid jade lovers interested in the process of jade carving and production there are dozens of jade factories in and around Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Xi'an, to name a few cities.

In fact, wherever you wander around China you will find jade: on the streets, in stores, adorning the necks of beautiful women, and in the offices of powerful businessmen. Jade is ingrained into Chinese culture in the same way as dairy products symbolize the Dutch or sushi represents the Japanese.

Our book hopes to introduce to you not only the basics of jade necessary for shopping but also it is our warm wish to convey in our own small way the extraordinary complexity of jade as a symbol of all things precious and valued by the Chinese. We hope you will enjoy reading the book and we have provided for those interested, as much as possible, the original Chinese characters. Foreign guests with no knowledge of Chinese can use this book and also beginning students of Chinese language and culture wishing to expand their knowledge base will find it helpful. What better way to enter China, the “Middle Kingdom,” than by examining a beautiful stone that the entire culture reveres?

Valerie Sartor

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*"When I think of a wise man, his merits
appear to be like jade."*

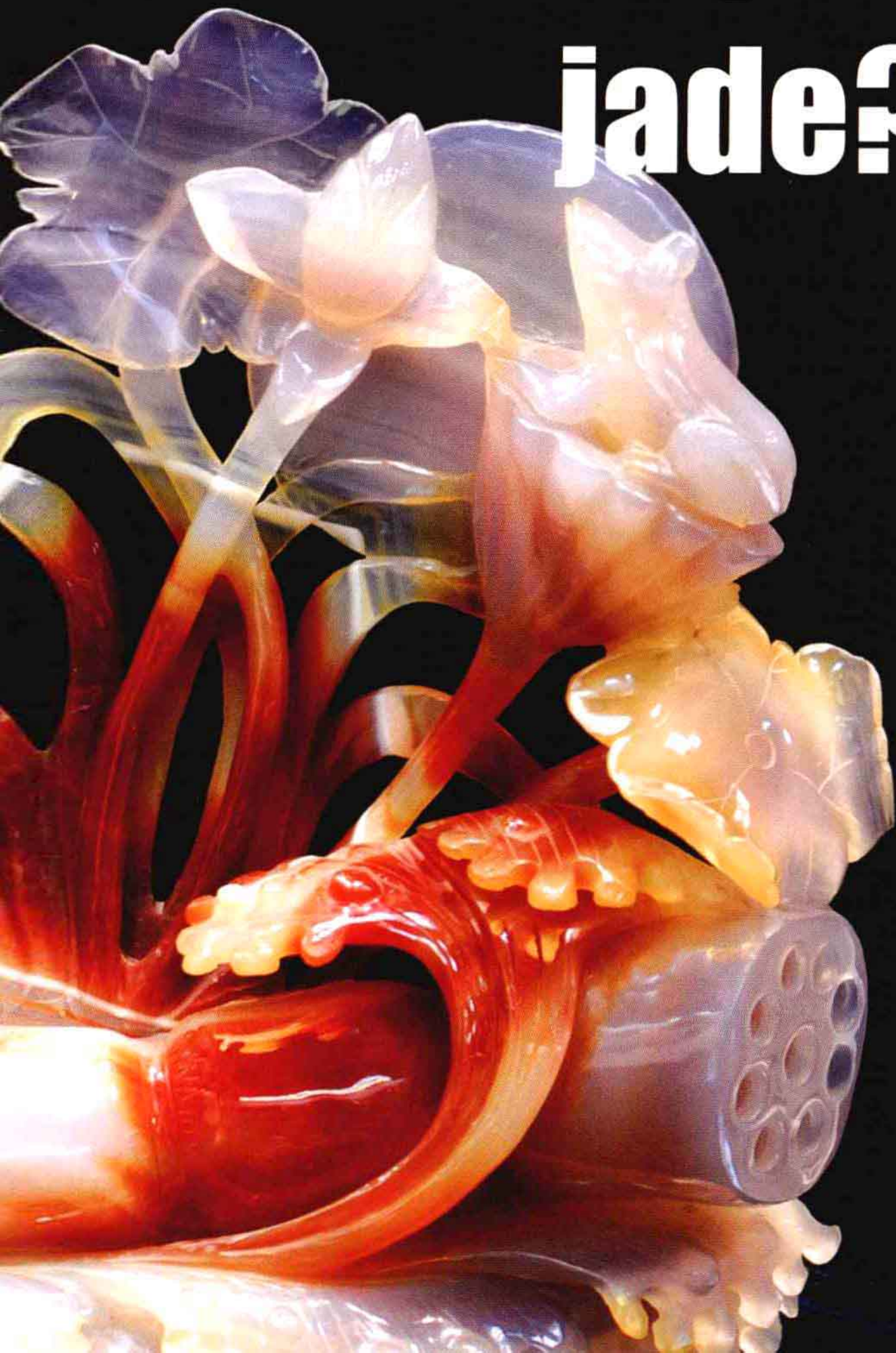
*"Without being worked, jade cannot be
shaped into a vessel; without being educated,
people cannot be shaped into virtuous citizens."*

*"If a ruler perfectly observes the rites of the
state, white jade will appear in the valley."*

"Gold is valuable but jade is priceless."



**What
exactly is
jade?**



Jade, or yù as it is called in Chinese today actually signifies two different gemstones, jadeite and nephrite. Interestingly, both stones have names that refer to the kidneys. This is because the English word “jade” derives from the Spanish phrase *piedra de ijada* — which translates as loincloth. Jade was such a prized possession that according to legend a Chinese emperor once offered 15 cities for a single piece of jade carving he could hold in his hand. Even the Aztec emperor Montezuma smiled upon hearing Cortés, the Spanish conquistador, demand only gold, because for Montezuma jade was the most precious possession. In that part of the world, Mayan kings wore jade ornaments near their loins to symbolize their wealth and fertility, hence



⚡ *A piece of jade ore.*

the word’s translation. Some later Mayan kings were buried wearing elaborate jade masks. Furthermore, ancient Native Americans, ancient Greeks, and Romans, just like the Chinese, recognized long ago that wearing

jade around the lower torso helped to cure kidney troubles. The scientific word for jade — nephrite, comes directly from the Greek word *nephros*, which means kidney.



⚡ *A piece of nephrite partially carved.*

Even the Russians admired and utilized jade, carving a huge

sarcophagus of jade for Czar Alexander III when he died. But it is the Asians, especially the Chinese, who have treasured jade as a precious, sacred, and mysterious stone throughout the ages, according to literary, philosophical, and imperial attention. Jade is still highly revered in China. People collect and purchase symbols of animals and plants, jade in its raw state, and still revere ancient stylized designs. Jade is immensely popular in the Orient. The Huaxia Bank, a leading bank in China, uses an ancient design (the coiled fetal dragon) formerly carved in jade by the China's ancient Hongshan people as its logo. For the Chinese jade is much more than a stone: it has outstanding moral virtues and embodies the feminine essence of the universe.

The Chinese consider both jadeite and nephrite as "genuine jade" and in fact the two stones look alike. Both are



♦ *The Goddess of Mercy, jadeite.*



♦ *Coiled dragon fetus.*

very hard, composed of dense, close-grained aggregates, but technically they differ in color and chemical composition. Jadeite forms under great heat and pressure that originates from 20 to 30 miles under the earth. This type of jade is called a microcrystalline; it retains a very high polish but unfortunately it can be easily broken. Chinese nephrite is much tougher; geologically it is called amphibole and is formed much closer to the earth's surface. Calcium, magnesium, and water contribute to its formation, making it fibrous and hard to fracture. Note that 50 tons of pressure is necessary to crush one cubic inch of nephrite — this means that nephrite is the world's toughest stone, tougher than even diamonds! Both jadeite



♦ Jadeite (fei cui) carved into a design of a lion with persimmon and Ruyi. (Photographed in White Peacock Art World by Wu Jie Meng and Zhao Yong Lai)

and nephrite, along with other precious substances, are found on the earth's surface by means of erosion.

Nephrite is more common in China and around the world. In color it ranges from mid to dark green, with hues of gray green but it

can also be whitish, yellowish, or even reddish in color.

Jadeite is more expensive because it is rare and is a brighter stone. Most Chinese prefer jadeite over nephrite, with the exception of Hetian jade, a product that is now becoming

scarce as the mines in Xinjiang are getting depleted. But the jadeite you will find in China is not actually Chinese. It comes from Southeast Asia, notably Myanmar (formerly Burma). The



♦ Different shapes of white jade: Hetian jade.



• A design of the coiled dragon for a pendant: nephrite.

Chinese have been importing vast quantities of Burmese jadeite for centuries. And the finest jade figures in fact, such as those on display in Beijing's Forbidden City Museum as well as valuable jade articles marked for export market, are carved from Burmese jadeite. Concerned scholars assert that Myanmar has three lines of products to export: the green line, the red line, and the white line, each denoting jadeite, rubies, and heroin respectively. What concerns them more is the recent expose of a relatively new heroin trade scam: unsavory dealers purchase cheap jade boulders in Myanmar, then hollow out the boulder, fill it up with packets of heroin, reseal the stones, and ship them across the border to China. The drug goes to Hong Kong, and eventually to the United States.



• Samples of jadeite (white and green) and nephrite (dark colour).

Jadeite is a lovely stone. Mostly it is green but it also comes in a rainbow of colors: whites, pinks, reds, blacks, browns, and violets. In fact, in both types of jade — nephrite and jadeite — the color distribution varies widely but experts feel that the best quality jades have evenly distributed color. Yet if veins, blemishes and streaks of color exist, this is not always considered a flaw by Chinese and foreign collectors. Indeed, some patterns are highly coveted, because talented artists may carve the stone in ways that highlight and/or enhance the unique natural motifs inside a piece of stone.

The Power of Jade

All over the world, for thousands of years, mankind has felt

attracted to jade. Many myths from all parts of the planet surround this stone. During the pre-Columbian period; the Mayas, Aztecs, and Toltecs of Central America revered jade more than gold. And for thousands of years the Maoris in New Zealand prized jade, using it to carve weapons and religious instruments. Even in ancient Egypt jade was admired as the stone symbolizing love, inner peace, balance, and harmony. In fact, many cultures outside of China throughout the ages have regarded jade as a lucky or protective stone.

In Chinese myths related to creation, it is said that the Storm God had a rainbow in one hand and a jade axe in the other. He gave the axe to man as a survival gift. Ancient Chinese received jade in the form of the jade axe, which were in the different colors of the rainbow. They



• A dragon head belt buckle carved in nephrite.