

IMMORTALITY AND REBIRTH IN JADE: A WHITE JADE CICADA FROM THE HAN DYNASTY (202 BCE–220 CE) AT THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

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Introduction

The cicada is known for its molting, a process by which it sheds its old skin and grows a new one. In the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the *Historical Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) describes it as, “the cicada sheds its shell in the filth.”¹ We may perhaps thus assume that ancient Chinese people believed that cicada larvae were dirty; only when the cicada shed its old and dirty skin did it transform into a new symbol, representing a clean, pure beginning of life.² Foregrounded in the symbolic associations of purity and transformation, the cicada similarly transformed material culture in early China. And within this material culture, the cicada motif can often be found associated with three carved objects.

The first object is the cicada pendant 佩蟬, a type of pendant that features a hole at the top, to be worn as clothing. The second object is the cicada-shaped head ornament 冠蟬, which has a hole in the abdomen and serves as a decoration on elite men’s head crown. The last object is the funerary jade cicada 琿蟬, typically placed on the tongue of the deceased, symbolizing spiritual immortality and rebirth for the deceased.

This article focuses on a funerary jade cicada from the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), shown in Fig. 1 (object number 918.7.154). It was dated to the Han dynasty, and it was used as a burial object.³ It was carved from a single piece of translucent white jade; the surface remains smooth and polished with no visible cracks on the surface. Age has only made the cicada slightly yellowish at the edges. This cicada’s well-preserved condition makes it especially valuable for study and allows for an investigation of its role in the funerary practices in Han dynasty China. Specifically, this article will explore its symbolic functions in the funeral practices of the Han dynasty, including its significance for both the living and the dead at that time. This

¹ The original Chinese is: 蟬蛻於濁汚. Qian Zhang 张倩, “Gudai yuchan de wenshi yanbian he daoguang bianhua 古代玉蟬的纹饰演变和刀工变化 [The evolution of decorative patterns and carving techniques of ancient jade cicadas],” *Wenwu tiandi* 文物天地, December 2023, 92.

² Qian Zhang, “Gudai yuchan de wenshi yanbian he daoguang bianhua,” 92.

³ “Cicada,” Royal Ontario Museum Online Collection, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/354587/carving-of-cicada>.

article will also examine the material quality of this white jade cicada, focusing on how jade was associated with the deceased's status and how the white jade material reveals a broader and unexamined social and cultural background of the Han dynasty.



Fig. 1. White Jade Cicada at the ROM. “Cicada,” Royal Ontario Museum Online Collection, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/354587/carving-of-cicada>.

Methodologically, this article combines archeological contextual analysis and textual analysis. Specifically, building on the analysis of excavated jade cicadas in the Han tombs, this article examines classical works compiled during the Han dynasty or earlier, such as the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) and the Daoist classic, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, to provide a social and cultural contextual understanding of people's views on death and funerals in the Han dynasty, as well as how jade cicadas were conceptualized. This article also adopts a comparative method to examine the material quality of the jade cicada. By creating a table in Appendix B that records comprehensive information about all twenty-two cicadas in the Royal Ontario Museum's collection, from the Shang dynasty (1600 BCE–1046 BCE) to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), this article compares the selected white jade cicada with other cicadas in the museum and interprets the significance of materiality. It will then explore why jade was chosen for funerary cicadas and how its use reflected the social status of the deceased.

Materiality of the Jade

Jade's color, shape, carving technique, and material provide an understanding of its function and significance in the burial practice of the Han dynasty. The cicada is carved from a single piece of translucent white jade, and the surface is polished, smooth, and shiny. As Fig. 1 shows, it is symmetrically oval-shaped and carved as a three-dimensional cicada. The head is small and carved in a triangular-like shape, with two protruding spiral-shaped eyes and a few lines carved in relief on both sides of the

head. The body tapers into a pointed oval shape, as the top is rounded and gradually tapers toward the bottom, and a semicircle is carved at the top of the body. Two symmetrically teardrop-shaped wings are carved on the back, and they also have a rounded top that tapers to a pointed end, almost meeting each other along the centerline. The surface of the wings and back features no additional decorations or textures, showing the simplicity of the carving technique.

Having examined the cicada's appearance and carving techniques, it is equally important to situate this object within the broader archeological context of Han funerary practices. The cicada's significance becomes clearer when viewed alongside archeological evidence from Han tombs.

As a large number of cicada-shaped burial objects were unearthed from Han tombs, archeological findings also indicate the cicada's presence in both elite and civilian tombs.⁴ Scholars have classified cicadas into three categories: Type A refers to a basic pupae-like or egg-shaped form (*yongzhuangluan xing* 蛹状卵型),⁵ which carves the triangular head and the cicada's body and does not carve wings. Type B is called the plain and simple form (*sumian jianyixing* 素麵簡易型), which carves the general shape of a cicada without much detail, and there are usually no physical features like eyes and necks.⁶ Type C is called the multi-angled type (*duolengjiao xing* 多稜角形), which is the most commonly unearthed type from Han tombs. They are characterized by carving the details of the cicada and skillful craftsmanship, including the use of the *Han Badao* technique, which literally means "Han Eight Knife," but refers to concise carving.⁷

The white jade cicada's style belongs to Type C, the multi-angle type cicada, as its details of the eyes and wings are skillfully carved using the Han Badao technique. Specifically, the craftsman carved the details of the protruding eyes and wings of the cicada. A semicircle pattern (the lower part of a circle) was carved at the point where the horizontal line connects the head and the body. As Fig. 1 clearly shows, on the two sides of the triangular-shaped head, there are a few carved segment lines along two sides of the head as texture, which is used to show the protruding eyes. This carving technique, which can exhibit the "full vitality of the jade cicada through just a few concise lines,"⁸ is typical of the Han Badao (concise carving) technique. However, despite the seeming simplicity of this technique, the durability of jade makes it

⁴ Jian Zhang 张健, "Handai muzang chutu yuchan yanjiu 汉代墓葬出土玉蝉研究 [A Study of Jade Cicadas Excavated from Han Dynasty Tombs]," *Wenwu jian ding yu jianshang* 文物鉴定与鉴赏 14 (2023): 118–21, 119.

⁵ Naicheng Zhu 朱乃诚, "Handai yuchan yanjiu 汉代玉蝉研究 [A Study of Han Dynasty Jade Cicadas]," *Wenbo xuekan* 文博学刊, no. 1 (2019): 4–16, 5.

⁶ Zhu, "Handai yuchan yanjiu," 4–16, 5.

⁷ Zhu, "Handai yuchan yanjiu," 8.

⁸ Mingying Wang and Guanghi Shi, "The Evolution of Chinese Jade Carving Craftmanship," *Gems & Gemology* 56, no. 1 (May 1, 2020): 30–53, 39.

“difficult to work,”⁹ and creating “a jade carving is difficult.”¹⁰ As a result, this Han Badao technique only became popular when iron grinding tools became widely used,¹¹ and developed as a distinctive and systematic carving style only since the late Han dynasty.¹² Considering the technical difficulty of jade carving at the time, the Han Badao carving technique not only highlights the artisan’s skilled craftsmanship but possibly suggests that the deceased possessed sufficient status and resources to commission a finely made jade object.

By reconsidering the three primary usages of jade cicadas in the Han dynasty, it can be deduced that the most likely use of this jade cicada was that it exclusively functioned as a burial object. For example, as the table of the cicadas at the ROM shows, the pendant in the form of a cicada from the Western Zhou dynasty (object number: 932.16.18) has a hole at the top, likely serving as a cicada pendant worn on one’s clothing (see Fig. 2). By contrast, there is no hole on the surface of the white jade cicada, meaning it could not have been hung on head crowns or clothes. Additionally, the white jade cicada’s small size (with dimensions of $5.5 \times 3.1 \times 0.9$ cm) made it comparatively more suitable for putting into the deceased’s mouth than to be worn.



Fig 2. Pendant in the Form of a Cicada at the ROM. “Pendant in Form of a Cicada,” Royal Ontario Museum Online Collection, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/321877/pendant-in-form-of-a-cicada?ctx=673a17a081f7a3d27d28afb65eae82eb964008e1&idx=6>.

To further examine the role that this jade cicada played in burial practices in the Han dynasty, it is important to place it within a broader historical and cultural background. Since the Neolithic age, various peoples of early China placed jade cicadas

⁹ Jessica Rawson and Carol Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing* (London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Press, 1995), 22.

¹⁰ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 22.

¹¹ Wang and Shi, “The Evolution of Chinese Jade Carving Craftmanship,” 30–53, 38.

¹² Zhu, “Handai yuchan yanjiu,” 4–16, 9.

into the graves of the deceased. Jade cicadas were also found in the Yinxu site (present-day Henan province) located in the capital of the Late Shang dynasty.¹³ Cicadas were crafted with jade or other tough stones, which symbolized the eternity of life. In the Han dynasty, death was viewed symbolically through the molting of the cicada, meaning that even after the body died, the soul was still preserved.¹⁴

The association between the cicada's molting and the soul's preservation was not merely conceptual but materially enacted through the placement of jade cicadas in tombs. By the Han dynasty, the use of jade amulets for the tongue in funerary rites, with the hope that the deceased might attain rebirth, had already become an established practice.¹⁵ Excavations have elucidated the high possibility that jade cicadas were significant burial objects throughout various stratas of society as jade cicadas have been found both in the centers of the capital Chan'an (current Xi'an) and other more peripheral zones within the Han dynasty.¹⁶ These excavations have also shown that as shared funerary objects, the jade cicada functioned similarly to elite and civilian tombs, only differing in terms of material and craftsmanship quality.¹⁷

By placing the cicada into the deceased's mouth, an intimate physical contact is created between the object and the body, showing that the cicada played an important role in Han burial practice. This significance becomes clearer when viewed within the broader intellectual and religious transformations of the period. As the authority of the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) declined in the Western Han, Daoist ideas gained prominence, offering an alternative framework for understanding life, death, and the cosmos. Daoism also foregrounded spiritual transcendence and the possibility of attaining immortality, which directly shaped new funerary meanings and practices. Within this context, rulers like Emperor Wu of Han (156–87 BCE) elevated themselves as semi-divine figures in sacrificial rituals and pursued various means of achieving immortality. The cicada's periodic molting resonated strongly with the Daoist concept of “ascending to immortality” (*yuhua chengxian* 羽化成仙), making the cicada an especially potent symbol during this period. Consequently, the jade cicada was not merely a burial ornament but a material embodiment of these emerging beliefs in metamorphoses and eternal life. Its placement in the mouth of the deceased,

¹³ Sarah Laursen and Donna Strahan, “Art and Technology in a Chinese Gold Cicada Plaque,” *Archives of Asian Art* 64, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 43–57, 52.a

¹⁴ Lin Xu 徐琳, “Liang Han yong yu sixiang yanjiu zhi er—Shenxian changsheng sixiang,” 两汉用玉思想研究之二 — 神仙长生思想 [A Study of the Concept of Jade in the Two Han Dynasties (II)—The Thought of Immortality and Transcendence], *Gugong xuekan* 故宫学刊 4 (2008): 431.

¹⁵ Jian Zhang 张健, “Handai muzang chutu yuchan yanjiu 汉代墓葬出土玉蝉研究 [A Study of Jade Cicadas Excavated from Han Dynasty Tombs],” *Wenwu jian ding yu jianshang* 文物鉴定与鉴赏 14 (2023): 118.

¹⁶ Zhang, “Handaimuzang Chutuyuchan Yanjiu,” 119.

¹⁷ Zhang, “Handaimuzang Chutuyuchan Yanjiu,” 119.

therefore, symbolized both the preservation of the soul and the promise of spiritual rebirth.

The Han dynasty Daoist philosophical classic, *Huainanzi*, which was compiled by the Prince of Huainan, Liu An, also discusses the nature of life and death in great relevance to the natural molting process. In one passage, it states, “[the one] shedding its shell like a cicada, or discarding its skin like a snake, freely drifting in the Grand Pure Place, ascending lightly and going alone, then suddenly entering the darkness” that during the Han dynasty, people viewed the cicada’s periodical motif as representing the immortal soul’s release from the body. The elite class in the Han dynasty placed it on the tongue of a deceased person as part of burial practices in the hope that the deceased’s soul could be preserved immortally and reborn one day.

For the living, by contrast, the jade cicada symbolized the practice of the Confucian virtue of filial piety, as Confucianism also rose along with Daoism during the Han dynasty. Starting from the mid-Western Han dynasty, Emperor Wu¹⁸ promoted the teaching of Confucianism, which significantly informed ritual practices at that time. Confucianism emphasized the virtue of serving the dead as one serves the living,¹⁹ greatly influencing how the living treated the dead in the funeral practice. More specifically, *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), a Confucian classic compiled by Dai Sheng during the Western Han dynasty, states, “To serve the dead as if they were alive, and to serve the departed as if they were still present, this is the ultimate expression of filial piety.”²⁰ Within this Confucian framework, when the living used luxurious jade in the funeral practice, and particularly by placing jade cicadas into the deceased’s mouth, they not only expressed hope for the deceased’s immortality but also performed, as living descendants, devotion to dedicating precious materials to the deceased. Thus, this white jade cicada also reflected living people’s practice of filial piety through careful service to the dead.

Although cicadas had a symbolic significance and were widely used in Han dynasty burial practices across all social classes, archeological findings still show that jade cicadas were only found in the elite’s tombs, while civilian tombs only included cicadas made from stone or other materials.²¹ Most of the cicadas from the Han dynasty displayed in the Royal Ontario Museum’s gallery are made of worked and polished jade, primarily in white and green jade. In contrast, as the table in the appendix indicates, an exquisite cicada from the Shang dynasty (Object number: 928.12.159) polished and carved in a three-dimensional and realistic form still used fluorite rather than jade (Fig. 3). This distinction supports the scholarly argument that the use of jade cicadas in funerary practice became widespread and reached its peak

¹⁸ 漢武帝.

¹⁹ Zhang, “Handai muzang chutu yuchan yanjiu,” 120.

²⁰ The original Chinese is 事死如事生，事亡如事存，孝之至也. Sheng Dai 戴圣, *Li Ji* 礼记 [Book of Rites] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2022), 1019.

²¹ Zhang, “Handai muzang chutu yuchan yanjiu,” 120.

during the Han dynasty.²² The reason for using jade as a primary material for cicadas in the Han dynasty is analyzed in the following paragraphs.



Fig 3. Cicada in the Shang dynasty at ROM. “Figure of Cicada,” Royal Ontario Museum Online Collection, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/295797/figure-of-cicada?ctx=6fab82901e778152ca1db5931fa369d83e8de6a3&idx=22>.

Firstly, jade is historically associated with the elite class’s ornaments in ancient China because of the jade’s physical features.²³ Specifically, jade is extremely tough and durable. In addition to its strength, jade is also valued by the elite class because of its beauty—color, texture, and translucence—becoming a symbol of beauty and refinement for the elite class.²⁴ These material characteristics guarantee that particular items have survived for exceptionally long periods of time and convey enduring beauty to the owner.²⁵ These features make jade a beautiful and easy-to-preserve burial object, and it was widely used in the elite’s funeral practices.

The toughness and durability of jade make it a symbol of eternity and indestructibility. Because jade does not easily break, decay, or lose its luster, it visually and materially suggests a body or soul that can resist corruption over time, which matches the elite class’s desire for eternal power and immortality.²⁶ What’s more, jade is also associated with the moral virtues of a gentleman in Confucian thought. Specifically, the *Book of Rites* records that Confucius once said, “In ancient times, the gentleman likened people’s virtues to those of jade: its gentle warmth and luster

²² Zhu, “Handai yuchan yanjiu,” 4.

²³ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 13.

²⁴ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 13.

²⁵ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 13.

²⁶ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 13.

embody benevolence; its dense and solid texture embodies wisdom; its edges, which are sharp yet do not wound, embody righteousness; and the way a jade pendant hangs downward embodies propriety.”²⁷ Accordingly, as jade is smooth and soft to the touch and angular but not sharp, it represents important Confucian values of benevolence and righteousness.²⁸

The jade cicada, as a burial object, was also thought to protect the deceased’s body and status after death. As mentioned earlier, jade is a luxury ornament worn by the elite class in their lifetime in ancient China, as Rawson states, “jade ceremonial blades and swords with decorative jade hilts were held in the hand to indicate role or status.”²⁹ Jade can ensure that “a person’s rank was recognised by others, and courtiers and servants could thus keep their distance.”³⁰ In other words, jade made the elites’ class status visible and cautioned others to not offend them, thus providing protection to the elite.³¹ This protection is extended into death, as the elite used the jade in the burial practices to guard against supernatural forces, like ghosts and evil spirits. People in the Han dynasty also believed that jade had a preservative function that could prevent the decay of the body after death,³² as when a Daoism classic, *Bao Puzi* 抱樸子, discusses the ways of being immortal, it states, “If gold and jade are placed in the nine orifices [of the human body], the dead will become immortal” 金玉在九竅，則死人為不朽。³³ These nine orifices include the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, urethra, and anus. Under the influence of Daoism, people in the Han dynasty believed that the use of jade could protect the body of the dead. Thus, jade became a primary material of the burial objects in the Han dynasty, and it could be directly placed on the body of the deceased. Consequently, the materiality of jade and the symbolism of the cicada work together to form a particular view of death and rebirth in the Han dynasty. Jade, with its toughness and endurance, protects the corpse, while the cicada, with its shedding and renewal, symbolizes the soul’s ability to escape the decaying body. In other words, jade represents the preservation of the body, while the cicada form embodies the transformation of the spirit. Together, they construct a framework of immortality and rebirth, where the physical body may remain intact through jade’s protective power, even as the soul undergoes rebirth and ascends into a new form of

²⁷ Dai, *Li Ji*, 1225. The original Chinese: 夫昔者君子比德於玉焉：溫潤而澤，仁也；縝密以慄，知也；廉而不刿，義也；垂之如隊，禮。

²⁸ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 13.

²⁹ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 17.

³⁰ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 17.

³¹ Rawson and Michaelson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, 17.

³² Xu, “Liang Han yong yu sixiang yanjiu zhi er—Shenxian changsheng sixiang,” 430.

³³ Hong Ge 葛洪, *Baopuzi neiwai pian* 抱朴子内外篇 [Baopuzi, Inner and Outer Chapters] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1985), 43.

existence. Then, the deceased can become immortal, with their bodies being preserved and souls being reborn.

Cultural Exchange in the Han Dynasty

To further understand the social and cultural meaning of this jade cicada, it is essential to examine the material quality of the jade itself. The white jade cicada being discussed is made of white snowflake jade, and the surface is well-polished. Although the exact identity of the deceased with whom it was buried is unknown, the material of the jade cicada still suggests their elite status. Furthermore, since only glass and stone cicadas have ever been excavated from civilian tombs, it is nearly impossible that the white jade cicada in question could have been made for a civilian.³⁴ This is evident as the table in the appendix shows that there are two glass-made cicadas from the Han dynasty (933.12.11.C, 933.12.11.D) in the ROM collection: as Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 show, their surfaces were unpolished, with a mottled and flawed surface, suggesting that the craftsman did not polish the surface very carefully. Additionally, in terms of the carving technique, these cicadas were not carved in a three-dimensional, realistic style; instead, they were carved in a flat manner, showing that the craftsmen were unable, or not commissioned, to employ the more advanced protruding-carving technique. Accordingly, the deceased who held these kinds of cicadas plausibly had a relatively low status.



Fig 4. Carving of Cicada. “Carving of Cicada,” Royal Ontario Museum Online Collection, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/355450/carving-of-cicada?ctx=673a17a081f7a3d27d28afb65eae82eb964008e1&idx=11>.

³⁴ Xu, “Liang Han yong yu sixiang yanjiu zhi er—Shenxian changsheng sixiang,” 416, 30.



Fig 5. Carving of Cicada. “Carving of Cicada,” Royal Ontario Museum Online Collection, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/516120/carving-of-cicada?ctx=6fab82901e778152ca1db5931fa369d83e8de6a3&idx=12>.

As mentioned above, scholars have classified burial cicadas into three categories, and although these two glass cicadas can be identified as Type C, the multi-angled type of cicada, they are still similar to a cicada that is collected in the Shaanxi Historical Museum, as the figure shows, and, with a rectangular body shape, is classified as the “crude and simple type” 粗糙简陋型³⁵ by scholar Zhu Naicheng. The specific features of cicadas, such as eyes and wings, are also present but carved in a simple and crude way.³⁶ Since the Spring and Autumn Period (771 BCE–476 BCE), the artisans have been managed by dedicated government bureaus. The elite class had their own craftsmen, and these glass cicadas show that craftsmen employed less advanced and developed techniques in crafting burial objects for commoners, compared to the sophisticated craftsmanship of elite jade cicadas. Hence, the choice of jade as a material serves as a marker of the deceased’s high social status in Han dynasty funerary practice.

³⁵ Zhu, “Handai yuchan yanjiu,” 10.

³⁶ Zhu, “Handai yuchan yanjiu,” 10.



Fig 6. Cicada from Shaanxi Historical Museum. Zhu, “Handai yuchan yanjiu,” 8.

Moreover, the color of the white jade cicada is also important to examine, as the white jade may indicate the emergence of the Silk Road and cultural exchange via the Silk Road during the Han dynasty. As scholar Xu Lin states, before the Hetian jade was introduced to China, people in the Han used jades from local Chinese jade mines such as those in the current Gansu Province.³⁷ The archeological site of Mazongshan mountain jade mine³⁸ in the Han dynasty in Gansu shows that most of the jades are bluish-green jade, blue-gray, light yellow, and sugar-colored jade, with a small amount of white jade, and all of them are tremolite jade materials,³⁹ showing that most of the local Chinese jades are green in color. Among the twenty-two cicadas in the Royal Ontario Museum collection, most are made of worked and polished jade, and mainly white and green jade.



Fig 7. Tremolite jade materials in the Mazongshan mountain jade mine. Xu, “Zhongguo gudai yuliao laiyan de duoyuan yitihua jincheng,” 103.

³⁷ Lin Xu 徐琳, “Zhongguo gudai yuliao laiyan de duoyuan yitihua jincheng 中国古代玉料来源的多元一体化进程 [The Process of Diversified Integration in the Sources of Jade Materials in Ancient China],” *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊, no. 2 (2020): 103.

³⁸ 马鬃山玉矿.

³⁹ The original Chinese: *toushan shiliao* 透闪石料. Xu, “Zhongguo gudai yuliao laiyan de duoyuan yitihua jincheng,” 103.

As the table shows, the carving of a cicada (object number: 915.7.5) in the Han dynasty in the ROM collection was made of tremolite jade. It is similar to the green tremolite jade that was unearthed from the Mazongshan jade mine, as Fig. 8 shows. Therefore, this cicada at ROM supplements Xu Lin's argument that the color of jade that originated from the jade mines in the regions of the Han was mainly green, instead of white jade.



Fig. 8. Carving of Cicada at the ROM. “Carving of Cicada,” Royal Ontario Museum Online Collection, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/322866/carving-of-cicada?ctx=6fab82901e778152ca1db5931fa369d83e8de6a3&idx=20>.

But in the late 2nd century BCE, the Emperor Wu sent the diplomat Zhang Qian to the Western region, including Central Asia, to secure political allies and open trade routes. With Zhang Qian's return to the Han dynasty in 126 BCE, he brought back information about Yutian (Hetian) jade to the Han court, which was a high-quality jade in the Yutian Kingdom (current Hotan Prefecture, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region). This marked the official entry of jade into the purview of the royal family and the elite class.⁴⁰ With the introduction of Hetian jade, the phenomenon that the elite class used Hetian white jade or green jade had become more common. Burial objects, including the jade cicadas, were made of high-quality jade with no defects.⁴¹ As scholar Zhang Jian states, most of the white jade cicadas were made of jade from the Western region.⁴²

Therefore, this specific white jade cicada in the ROM could be identified as Hetian jade because it is white, and the quality of the jade is warm, smooth, and lustrous (*wenrun* 温润), and it is not the tremolite jade material, as compared to jades

⁴⁰ Xu, “Zhongguo gudai yuliao laiyuan de duoyuan yitihua jincheng,” 102.

⁴¹ Xu, “Zhongguo gudai yuliao laiyuan de duoyuan yitihua jincheng,” 102.

⁴² Zhang, “Handai muzang chutu yuchan yanjiu,” 120.

in Fig. 7. Its surface has no defects and no brownish-red color (*tangse* 糖色), and it is smooth, which is a feature of Hetian jade.⁴³ Therefore, this specific jade cicada is likely a Hetian jade that originated from the Western region (current Xinjiang province) and was used by the elite class in the Han dynasty. Other than its role as a burial object, it also shows how materials could be exchanged through the Silk Road. The use of the snowflake jade as a material of the cicada not only shows that the elite class had access to imported luxury goods but also highlights that the cultural exchange through the Silk Road also influenced the funeral ritual in the Han dynasty.

Conclusion

By focusing on a single white jade cicada from the Royal Ontario Museum, this article has demonstrated how a single small funerary object reflects the broader cultural, religious, and material worlds of the Western Han dynasty. Through archeological analysis and close examination of classical Han dynasty and earlier texts, the article has shown that jade cicadas represented both Daoist beliefs in preserving spiritual immortality and Confucian practices of filial piety. Jade cicadas' placement in the mouth of the deceased embodied the view of death as a cicada's molt in the Han, a transition in which the body perishes but the soul endures. For the deceased, the cicada symbolized immortality and rebirth; for the living, it materialized devotion and filial piety toward their ancestors.

Analysis of the white jade cicada's form and carving technique further revealed how its materiality marked social hierarchy. By comparing this cicada with other examples in the ROM collection and with excavated jades from Mazongshan, the article demonstrated that the jade's durability, beauty, and moral associations made it uniquely suited for funerary purposes, while its refined craftsmanship shows the elite social status of the deceased. Finally, the cicada's material, Hetian jade, underscores the cultural exchange in the Han dynasty, showing how materials that circulated through the Silk Road found their way into elite ritual life.

⁴³ Xu, "Zhongguo gudai yuliao laiyuan de duoyuan yitihua jincheng," 105.

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APPENDIX A

Object Label of the cicada at the ROM:

Object Name: Cicada

Medium: Worked and polished jade

Geography: China

Date: 3rd Century BCE–Early 3rd Century AD

Period: Han dynasty

Dimensions: 5.5 × 3.1 × 0.9 cm

Object number: 918.7.154

Credit Line: The George Crofts Collection

Collection: China

Department: Art & Culture: China

APPENDIX B

Table of cicadas in the ROM Collection:

No.	Name	Date	Period	Medium	#	Color	Type
1	Figure of cicada	13th–1st half of 11th century BCE	Shang dynasty	Worked and polished fluorite	928 .12. 159	Green	C
2	Cicada	3rd century BCE–3rd century AD	Western Zhou dynasty	Worked and polished jade	931 .13. 42	Green-brown, wholly buff-coloured due to calcification	B
3	Pendant in form of a cicada	1046–771 BCE	Western Zhou dynasty	Worked and polished jade	932 .16. 18	Brown with red mottling	Similar to B
4	Pendant in form of a cicada	1046–771 BCE	Western Zhou dynasty	Worked and polished	932 .16. 17	Brown with red mottling	Similar to B

				jade			
5	Carving of cicada	Late 3rd century BCE–early 1st Century AD	Western Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	918 .7.1 50	Dark green with a little bit of grey	C
6	Carving of cicada	late 3rd Century BCE–early 1st Century AD	Western Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	931 .13. 253	Translucent light green	C
7	Carving of cicada	late 3rd Century BCE–early 1st Century AD	Western Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	918 .7.1 48	White, but yellowish at the bottom left	C
8	Carving of cicada	Late 3rd century BCE–early 1st Century AD	Western Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	918 .7.1 46	White	C
9	Carving of cicada	206 BCE–24 AD	Western Han dynasty	Glass	933 .12. 11. B	White, but most areas are yellowish	C (crude and simple)
10	Carving of cicada	206 BCE–24 AD	Western Han dynasty	Glass	933 .12. 11. C	Green-white, but wholly buff-coloured and mottled	B
11	Carving of cicada	206 BCE–24 AD	Western Han dynasty	Glass	933 .12. 11. D	White but wholly buff-coloured and mottled	B
12	Carving of cicada	206 BCE–24 AD	Western Han	Glass	933 .12.	White and yellowish	C (crude

			dynasty		11. A		and simple)
13	Carving of cicada	24–220 AD	Eastern Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	932 .16. 194	Light green- grey	C
14	Carving of cicada	206 BCE– 220 AD	Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	915 .7.4	White, but most areas are yellowish	C
15	Cicada	206 BCE– 220 AD	Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	918 .7.1 49	Translucent white	C
16	Cicada	late 3rd Century BCE–early 3rd Century AD	Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	918 .7.1 54	Translucent white	C
17	Carving of cicada	late 3rd Century BCE–early 3rd Century AD	Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	921 X6 9.1	White	C
18	Carving of cicada	late 3rd Century BCE–early 3rd Century AD	Han dynasty	Worked and polished jade	915 .7.5	Green	C
19	Carving of cicada	late 3rd century BCE–early 3rd century AD	Han dynasty	Worked and polished	921 .21. 515	Green (a bit yellow)	B
20	Carving of	618–907 AD	Tang	Moulded	930	Green	N/A

	cicada		dynasty	glass	X1 70. 9		
21	Carving of cicada	18th–19th century AD	Qing dynasty	Worked and polished jade	996 .11 9.3	Translucent green	C
22	Pendant in form of a cicada	1644–1911 AD	Qing dynasty	Worked and polished jade	918 .7.1 52	Brownish- yellow with red mottling	B