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From representation to ornamentation: a comparative study of animal motif design in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties

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Abstract. The Western and Eastern Han dynasties marked a crucial transitional stage in the development of Chinese jade culture. Building upon the traditions of the pre-Qin period, jade art of the Han era gradually formed an aesthetic system and expressive language distinctive to its time. As an important component of jade ornamentation, animal motifs not only demonstrate the remarkable craftsmanship of Han jade artisans but also serve as material carriers of the spirit of the age and prevailing cultural concepts. From the perspective of design studies, this paper conducts a systematic comparison of animal motifs in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties from three dimensions—modeling techniques, compositional principles, and aesthetic style—thereby providing an in-depth interpretation of the stylistic transition from the "representational design" of the Western Han to the "decorative design" of the Eastern Han.

Keywords: jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, animal motifs, representational design, decorative design, design comparison

1. Introduction

Jade artifacts, as an important carrier of Chinese material civilization, embody the living practices, ideological beliefs, and social conditions of people in specific historical periods. Jade works of the Han dynasty synthesized the achievements of jade craftsmanship from the Shang, Zhou, and the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. While inheriting the sophisticated lapidary techniques and the mysterious stylistic elements associated with the Chu tradition of the pre-Qin era, Han artisans developed a distinctive style of their own. In terms of form, ornamentation, and carving techniques, Han jade reached an unprecedented level of maturity, marking a significant turning point in the subsequent development of Chinese jade art.

A wide range of animals were depicted in Han jade carving. From jade sword fittings and jade seals that symbolized social status, to belt hooks and assembled jade pendants used in daily life; from jade mouthpieces and jade hand grips employed in burial practices, to small round-carved jade objects intended for decoration and appreciation—animal imagery and motifs were ubiquitous. This vivid and diverse "animal world" formed the principal body of decorative themes in Han jade artifacts, each carrying distinct social functions and cultural meanings, and thus possessing unique scholarly value. From the perspective of artistic form, animal

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motifs in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties display clear stage-based characteristics. At the level of cultural meaning, the evolution of jade ornamentation during this period was closely related to contemporary social structures, political institutions, and intellectual trends. Examining the differences in animal motifs between the two Han periods and exploring the reasons behind them is of positive significance for clarifying the aesthetic development of ancient Chinese jade art and tracing the evolution of Chinese decorative patterns. Such research also offers new perspectives for understanding aesthetic tendencies and artistic concepts in the Han era. Based on this premise, the present study adopts a design-oriented perspective and draws upon jade artifact catalogues and extant historical literature. Through an analysis of modeling techniques, compositional principles, and aesthetic styles, it examines the detailed differences in animal motifs in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, explores their aesthetic characteristics, and interprets the social ideas and deeper cultural implications embodied within them.

2. Causes of the differences in animal motifs in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties

From ancient times to the present, animal motifs have consistently served as an important category of decorative patterns in jade artifacts. The most common examples include dragon, phoenix, and tiger motifs, while a considerable proportion consists of imaginary mythical beasts. During the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, with the establishment of a unified imperial order and the continuous development of the social economy, material prosperity and ideological diversity coexisted. Within the broader framework in which Confucianism was upheld as the orthodox doctrine, the rise of Daoism and the widespread pursuit of longevity through alchemical ingestion, self-cultivation, and transcendence fostered distinctive social customs centered on elaborate burial practices and the moral symbolism of jade. Within the Han cultural context of "serving the dead as one would serve the living" and the aspiration for immortality and transcendence, jade objects gradually acquired an aura of mysticism and supernatural significance. The belief that one should seek divine longevity during life and attain transcendence after death became one of the important themes underlying the artistic creation of Han jade artifacts. Compared with the abstract and rigorous styles of earlier periods, animal imagery in Han jade became more naturalistic and full-bodied. In addition to traditional animal subjects, large numbers of imaginative creatures with supernatural attributes—such as the Heavenly Horse and the *bixie*—appeared in jade ornamentation. Although these creatures were generally derived from real animals, they were often depicted with wings and were regarded as auspicious beings endowed with the function of mediating between humans and deities and linking life and death. Such imagery permeated many aspects of Han life, especially funerary rituals, demonstrating the Han people's active pursuit of the immortality of the soul, their effort to maintain connections among the realms of humans, spirits, and deities, their cyclical cosmological view of life and death, and their free-spirited romantic aesthetic sensibility.

As a crucial transitional period in the development of Chinese jade culture, the stylistic evolution of animal motifs in Han jade artifacts was not merely a transformation of artistic form. Rather, it was the outcome of multiple contextual forces—including social structure, political institutions, and intellectual currents—working together, resulting in pronounced stage-specific characteristics.

2.1. Differences in social context: prosperous unity and political turmoil

The artistic style of Western Han jade artifacts emerged within the social context of a unified feudal empire, displaying a spirit of grandeur and magnanimity that seemed capable of embracing the vastness of the world [1]. After Liu Bang founded the Western Han dynasty, the early period of recuperation and consolidation

enabled the accumulation of substantial social wealth, providing a solid economic foundation for jade production. Economic prosperity not only encouraged the luxurious lifestyle of the imperial family and aristocracy, thereby stimulating demand for exquisite jade objects, but also led to the establishment of local workshops in various feudal states. Consequently, jade production was no longer confined to the central court and gradually developed into a diversified system. At the same time, the expansion into the Western Regions during the reign of Emperor Wu and the opening and flourishing of the Silk Road ensured a steady supply of high-quality Hetian jade. Driven by the dual forces of demand and raw materials, the stable social environment of the Western Han gradually broadened the range of jade applications. New categories and forms of jade objects continually emerged, and jade craftsmanship developed distinctive stylistic features of the era, with artistic achievements far surpassing those of previous periods.

By contrast, during the Eastern Han—particularly in its later years—frequent turmoil led to social devastation: villages lay silent, white bones were exposed in the wilderness, the economy declined severely, and the livelihood of the populace became increasingly precarious, let alone the production of luxurious items [2]. Under such circumstances, the jade industry underwent significant changes. In terms of production scale, jade manufacturing expanded to an unprecedented extent, and the enormous consumption of jade led to increasing scarcity of jade resources. Regarding usage, the ritualization and codification of jade within the Confucian ceremonial system of the Eastern Han intensified its consumption in ritual contexts. As for raw material supply, the political corruption of the late Eastern Han—marked by the struggle for power among eunuchs, imperial relatives, and aristocratic families, as well as the uprisings and regional fragmentation that followed the Yellow Turban Rebellion—severely disrupted one of the principal trade routes for jade, the Silk Road. As a result, jade trade was gravely damaged, and shortages of jade materials became acute. The chaotic social environment gradually transformed the style of Eastern Han jade from large-scale and complex forms to flatter and more standardized ones. Techniques that economized on jade materials—such as shallow relief and silhouette-style flat carving—became predominant. Overall, the achievements of Eastern Han jade were inferior to those of the Western Han, and the development of jade art had already begun to show signs of decline.

2.2. Evolution of carving techniques: technical innovation and mature refinement

The beauty of Han jade ornamentation was closely related to the carving techniques of jade artisans, revealing a clear trajectory of historical development. Building upon the technological foundations of earlier dynasties, Western Han jade craftsmanship gradually developed its own systematic language. Carving techniques displayed a tendency toward integration and diversity: line engraving, shallow relief, high relief, openwork carving, and fully three-dimensional round carving were often combined within a single work. Among these, the carving style known as the "Eight Cuts of the Han" *(Han badao)* matured during the early Western Han. Characterized by concise yet powerful knifework, it continued to be widely employed in the production of funerary jade throughout the Han dynasty. By the middle Western Han period, high-relief carving achieved notable prominence in jade sword fittings. The *chi*-tiger motifs carved upon them, often accompanied by broad twisted silk patterns, appeared more three-dimensional and imposing, conveying an overwhelming sense of dynamism and power. At the same time, incised-line carving underwent significant breakthroughs. Artisans not only pioneered the extremely delicate "gossamer-line" engraving but also developed the expressive "wide-slope gossamer line", providing rich linear vocabulary for depicting textures such as animal fur and feathers. These innovations demonstrated the extraordinary mastery of line by Han jade craftsmen. Supported by these techniques, Western Han jade works exhibit flexible, vivid, and varied artistic effects, emphasizing the momentum and dynamic vitality of the subjects represented.

Eastern Han jade carving techniques further refined the foundations established in the Western Han, and the overall style gradually shifted from bold generalization to delicacy and refinement. During this period, the "Eight Cuts of the Han" technique became even more skillfully employed, allowing forms to be summarized with clarity while retaining expressive completeness. Openwork carving also became more intricate and precise than in the Western Han, with more rigorous and complex structural arrangements. Incised-line engraving increased significantly during this time, reaching a new level of sophistication. The finely executed "gossamer hair engraving", characterized by slender, flowing, and graceful lines, was widely used to depict details such as animal textures and wings, pushing the linear engraving art of Han jade to its peak. As described by the Ming dynasty connoisseur Gao Lian: "The excellence of Han carving lies in the double outline; the grinding method flows with graceful turns, fine to the slightest detail, without uneven density or broken connections, resembling gossamer lines in ink drawing, leaving no trace of hesitation". The refinement of carving techniques provided technical support for more integrated decorative designs. For instance, in the auspicious jade *bi* discs popular during the Eastern Han, artisans carved auspicious animals such as dragons and *chi* in openwork as subsidiary ornaments and engraved blessing inscriptions—such as "May your descendants prosper" or "May your descendants flourish day by day"—in fine incised lines. In this way, text, imagery, and craftsmanship were combined into a unified expressive system. Compared with the Western Han, Eastern Han jade carving placed greater emphasis on the expressive potential of line, skillfully combining thick and thin incised lines in a manner that was both graceful and vigorous, thereby producing intricate yet well-balanced visual compositions.

2.3. Transformation of aesthetic consciousness: from majestic simplicity to refined elegance

The art of any given era inevitably reflects the aesthetic consciousness of that time. The aesthetic outlook of Western Han society was rooted in the posture of a multiethnic, unified, and centrally governed empire. Particularly after the prosperous reigns of Emperor Wen and Emperor Jing and continuing into the era of Emperor Wu, the Han Empire became the most extensive and powerful state of its time. Its vast territory, economic prosperity, and social stability fostered a cultural temperament characterized by confidence, openness, boldness, and vitality, reflecting an energetic, robust, and expansive spirit of the age. The aesthetic consciousness of the Western Han was nurtured within this dynamic intellectual and cultural environment. It shaped an ideal of "grand beauty" centered on momentum and movement, forged upon the collective consciousness of the "Great Han". Li Zehou, in *The Path of Beauty*, observed that "in Han art, movement, power, and 'momentum' constitute its essential qualities" [3]. In jade art, this concept of "grand beauty" gave rise to a distinctive aesthetic style characterized by majestic simplicity and archaic strength. In form, it pursued a bold and seemingly effortless grandeur, with dynamic ornamentation that radiated tension and vitality. In material, it favored the warm and substantial quality of Hetian jade. In craftsmanship, it emphasized the summarized and decisive expressive method exemplified by the "Eight Cuts of the Han". The essential aesthetic orientation was outward-looking and assertive, highlighting the immense life force embedded within artistic forms.

By the Eastern Han period, however, the imperial court had grown increasingly corrupt, political darkness intensified, and social contradictions became more acute. The complete institutionalization and theological reinterpretation of Confucianism resulted in an aesthetic culture that tended toward quietism and withdrawal [4]. The flourishing of apocryphal theology and Huang-Lao mystical techniques, together with the rise of Daoism, the introduction of Buddhism, and the religious transformation of Confucian thought, intertwined to exert profound influence across the ideological superstructure. Consequently, the center of artistic aesthetics gradually shifted from the grandeur of "great beauty" to an emphasis on practicality and tangible interest.

Under this evolving aesthetic climate, jade artifacts displayed clear functional differentiation and thematic expansion. Amuletic ornaments such as *gangmao*, *wengzhong*, and compass-shaped pendants—objects believed to ward off calamities and evil—became widely popular. At the same time, themes related to auspicious blessings and narratives of immortals increased markedly. Compared with Western Han jade, Eastern Han works thus displayed stronger characteristics of secularization and everyday life. Combined with other objective factors—such as the highly institutionalized use of jade, shortages of jade materials, and changes in carving techniques—the aesthetic orientation of Han jade gradually shifted from the outward simplicity and grandeur of the Western Han to the inward refinement and elegance of the Eastern Han. Ornamentation tended toward flatter and more patterned compositions, while the maturity of gossamer hair engraving encouraged detailed expression through the coordinated use of thick and thin incised lines. Aesthetic consciousness became more inward and decorative in nature, placing greater emphasis on the integration of ritual norms with practical functions.

3. A comparative analysis of the design language of animal motifs in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties

Animal subjects were widely employed in Han dynasty jade artifacts and appeared in great numbers. They may be broadly divided into two categories: realistic animals—such as tigers, horses, pigs, cicadas, and fish—and mythological creatures, including dragons, phoenixes, *chi*-tigers, *bixie*, and the Four Divine Creatures. These figures not only appeared extensively as decorative motifs on flat pendants and funerary jades but were also independently rendered in lively round-carved forms. The vivid and naturalistic modeling of such animal jade objects constitutes one of the most representative artistic achievements of Han jade carving. Animal motifs in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties display clear stylistic differences across distinct stages of development. These differences can be examined from three aspects of design language: modeling techniques, compositional principles, and aesthetic style.

3.1. Modeling techniques: multi-perspective twisting and silhouette-style flat relief

The artistic creation of Han jade artifacts often employed romantic exaggeration. Animal images were frequently subject to subjective refinement and aesthetic idealization, with artisans pursuing the spiritual vitality of animals and an Oriental sense of charm through highly generalized forms. Animal motifs on Western Han jade artifacts exhibit coordinated organization and accurate proportions, while those of the Eastern Han tend to display a more restrained tension and reduced dynamism. One of the principal reasons for this difference lies in the use of the modeling techniques known as "multi-perspective observation" and "three-dimensional twisting".

Multi-perspective observation represents an innovative modeling method developed by Han jade craftsmen. When shaping the principal decorative motifs, artisans divided the animal body into several segments—such as the head, neck, torso, and hindquarters—and captured the morphological features of each part from different viewpoints, including overhead, lateral, and rear perspectives. These segments were then integrated through curved surfaces into a unified form. On this basis, craftsmen further applied a technique referred to as "three-dimensional twisting", in which the volumetric forms captured from different viewpoints were twisted, transformed, and overlapped before being projected into a two-dimensional plane or shallow-relief space. This process produced a visual effect characterized by strong torsion and dynamic tension. Taking the *chi*-tiger motif on this jade sword slide as an example (Figure 1), the body and limbs are rendered with different orientations through the above-mentioned method, producing a twisting posture that appears to turn

in multiple directions simultaneously. This technique breaks the limitations of a single viewpoint and suggests spatial continuity and bodily movement within a flat plane. Although certain local distortions may seem contrary to natural anatomy, the harmonious proportions and coherent movement create a strong visual impression of three-dimensionality and instantaneous motion. Through such modeling techniques—combined with carving methods such as curved-surface carving, relief, and artistic openwork—Western Han jade artisans were able to create a sense of volume and dynamism within planar forms, thereby serving the aesthetic ideals of strength, movement, and the grand vision of "great beauty" that characterized Western Han art.

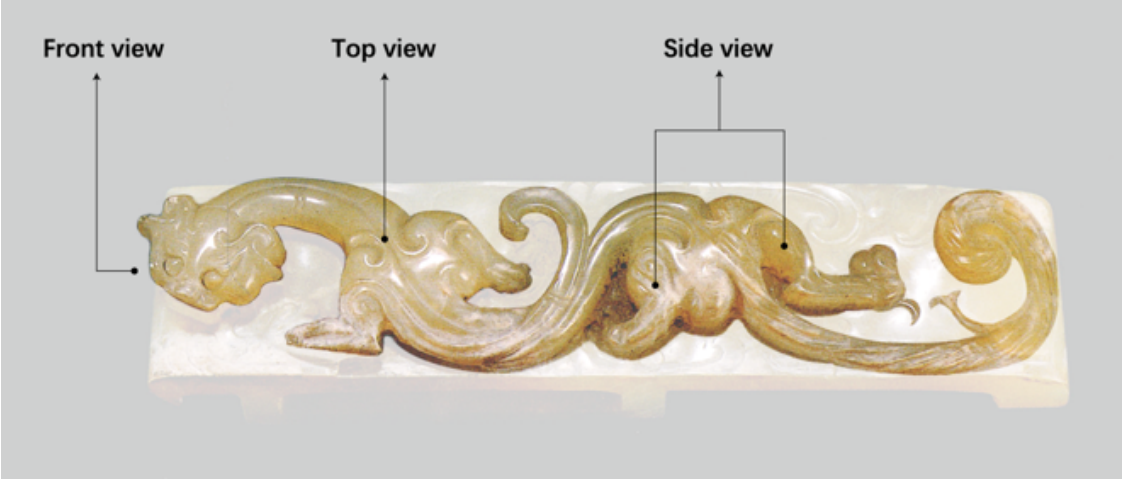

Figure 1. Analysis of the "three-dimensional twisting" modeling technique in Western Han jade animal motifs

From the late Western Han to the Eastern Han period, however, the social and economic environment brought about changes in artistic goals. The Eastern Han aesthetic orientation shifted from emphasizing rapid and dramatic movement toward a more tranquil and enduring sense of spatial and temporal calm [5]. Correspondingly, the aesthetic style of jade artifacts gradually moved toward planarization, favoring harmonious and gentle decorative effects. To accommodate this transformation in aesthetic preference, Eastern Han jade craftsmen modified the previously employed three-dimensional twisting animal forms by extending, deforming, and recombining them into new planar decorative units projected onto the jade surface. The various parts of the animal body thus became purely ornamental elements, and the visual aesthetic was transformed accordingly, giving rise to a distinctive modeling technique known as "silhouette-style flat relief". For example, in the animal motifs on the Eastern Han bi disc decorated with the *Changle* grain pattern (Figure 2), the previously curved and volumetric forms of Western Han jade become flattened. Anatomical structures are no longer clearly articulated: the head, wings, and body of the mythical beast merge with its mane and surrounding decorative patterns, making it difficult to distinguish specific structural elements such as feet or claws. Viewers cannot immediately identify concrete anatomical components within these abstract units, which effectively dissolves the visual awkwardness that might otherwise arise from twisted bodily forms. Instead, the composition generates a mysterious and elusive visual experience characterized by suggestive imagery and ambiguous form.

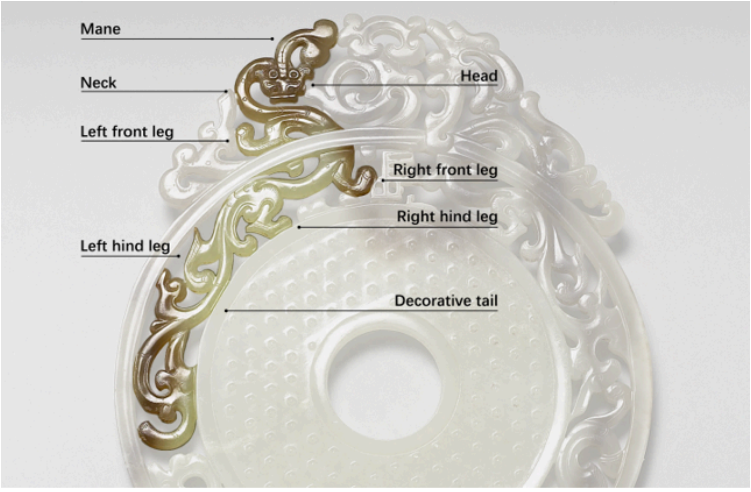

Figure 2. Analysis of the "silhouette-style flat relief" modeling technique in Eastern Han jade animal motifs

Therefore, the differences between animal motifs in Western and Eastern Han jade artifacts cannot simply be reduced to a superficial distinction between "three-dimensional" and "planar" forms. Rather, they may be regarded as two variations within the same stylistic tradition. The Western Han, through its distinctive use of multi-perspective observation and three-dimensional twisting, endowed its motifs with strong dynamism and visual tension. Eastern Han motifs, by contrast, represent a planar transformation of Western Han forms, appearing more like decorative surface patterns that emphasize patterned arrangement and compositional completeness.

3.2. Compositional principles: asymmetrical balance and complex patterned schemes

Han jade art placed strong emphasis on the control of overall visual effect. Jade craftsmen skillfully employed various compositional principles—including symmetry, balance, harmony, and the aesthetic unity of opposites formed through the deliberate disruption of equilibrium. As a result, Han jade artifacts possess a dignified and elegant appearance, rigorous structure, and rhythmic vitality. In Western Han compositions, the core principle lay in establishing dynamic visual balance within asymmetry, most characteristically through the use of S-shaped curves. Such compositions were formed by the connection and combination of multiple curved segments and were widely applied to decorative motifs of dragons, *chi*, phoenixes, and other creatures. Through these flowing curves, visual balance was constructed within the composition, imparting fluid tension and movement to the object (Figure 3). In addition, Western Han jade craftsmen often employed displaced centers of gravity and asymmetrical arrangements to achieve visual equilibrium. In the double-*chi* bear-and-tiger-pattern pendant shown on the right side of Figure 3, the overall center of gravity of the jade pendant tilts toward the right. Meanwhile, the *chi*-tiger in the upper left turns its head backward toward the left, creating a dynamic counterbalance. Through this asymmetrical arrangement, overall visual stability is achieved, reflecting the aesthetic principle of "unity of opposites". The resulting composition is highly dynamic and expressive.

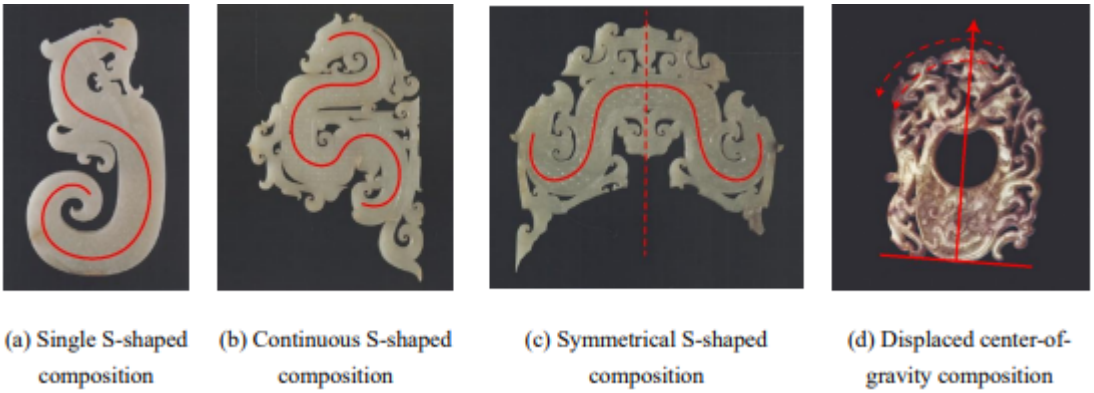

Figure 3. Analysis of dynamic balance compositions in Western Han jade animal motifs

By the Eastern Han period, in order to address the challenge of transforming three-dimensional forms into planar designs, jade craftsmen developed new compositional strategies based on abstract pattern units and standardized layouts. In this system, the elongated heads, claws, tails, and other parts of animal bodies were simplified into flattened abstract units, which were then arranged and combined according to relatively fixed compositional schemes, forming a repetitive and highly patterned compositional system. At the same time, the popularity of Daoist immortalist thought contributed to the widespread use of layered cloud motifs. These swirling cloud forms served as essential decorative elements for depicting mythical creatures moving through mist-filled celestial realms. Artisans thus incorporated both animal body parts and auxiliary motifs such as cloud patterns into abstract design modules, arranging them according to relatively stable compositional frameworks. The modular combination of cloud motifs and mythical beasts became one of the most common compositional forms of the Eastern Han period. The jade *bi* disc shown in Figure 4 is a typical example of such a composition. The body of the *chi*-tiger still forms a graceful S-shaped curve; however, its torso, claws, mane, and tail merge with cloud-like modules to create a composition in which the mythical creature appears to emerge and dissolve within drifting clouds. The resulting visual effect evokes a hazy and ethereal atmosphere, while the composition itself tends toward standardized patterning.

Western Han jade animal motifs sought to simulate and intensify the movement and momentum of living creatures through balanced asymmetry. In contrast, Eastern Han compositions relied on modular combinations and patterned arrangements to construct symbolic and metaphorical visual scenes.

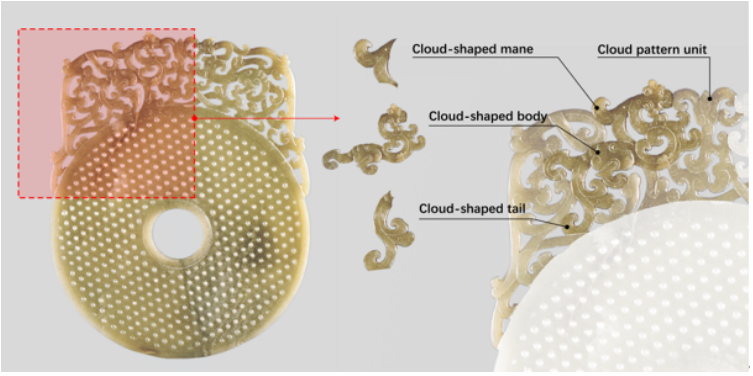

Figure 4. Analysis of modular composition in Eastern Han jade animal motifs

3.3. Aesthetic style: majestic vigor and refined ornateness

The aesthetic style of jade artifacts represents a comprehensive visual impression formed through the interaction of materials, form, ornamentation, carving techniques, creative methods, and spiritual qualities. It embodies the aesthetic ideals, social psychology, and emotional temperament of a particular era. The stylistic differences in animal motifs between Western and Eastern Han jade artifacts are most distinctly reflected in the contrast between the "majestic vigor" of the Western Han and the "refined ornateness" of the Eastern Han. This difference is not merely a shift in formal language but also reflects a broader transformation in design thinking and aesthetic consciousness—from an emphasis on representation to an emphasis on decoration.

The "majestic vigor" of Western Han animal motifs is primarily expressed through the dynamic visual tension generated by animal forms. Visual tension refers to the outward force created by the interplay and opposition of formal elements; its essence lies in stimulating an internal sense of movement through the juxtaposition of contrasting components. Western Han animal motifs systematically produced such tension through dynamic modeling, spatial distortion, and structural contrasts.

The openwork double-ring pendant with dragon and phoenix motifs from the Western Han period (Figure 5) provides a representative example of this approach. Its design demonstrates multiple strategies for generating visual tension. The pendant is structured with two concentric rings that divide the composition into inner and outer zones. In the inner ring, a roaming dragon is arranged along an S-shaped curve, generating strong elastic tension that guides the viewer's perception of horizontal force and directional movement. The dragon's forelegs, hind legs, and tail extend into the outer zone, breaking the spatial boundary of the inner ring and establishing a dynamic relationship with the phoenix figure outside. The phoenix stands upon the dragon's claws, while its crest and tail feathers extend upward and downward into swirling cloud patterns, filling the outer area and creating a balanced distribution of density and openness. Particularly noteworthy is the coiled dragon body and hook-like claws, which create a mechanical sense of stored power ready to be released. At the same time, the circular outer ring of the pendant presents a static geometric boundary that restrains the intense movement occurring within the composition. The contrast between motion and stillness becomes striking, while the overall structure remains stable and balanced. In addition, the curved surfaces produced by sculptural carving enhance the three-dimensional vitality of the dragon and phoenix motifs compared with the flatness of the surrounding ring. Overall, Western Han animal motifs retain the physiological structure of real animals while incorporating moderate exaggeration, pursuing equilibrium within variation and vitality within coordination. This combination produces a powerful visual impact and forms the grand, vigorous artistic style characteristic of the Western Han.

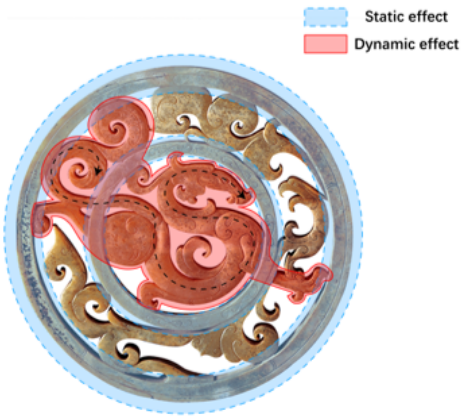

Figure 5. Analysis of dynamic visual tension in Western Han animal motifs

In contrast, Eastern Han animal motifs emphasize rhythmic order and decorative elegance, achieving a refined and intricate aesthetic through the arrangement of lines and planar composition. In jade carving, "rhythm and cadence" are manifested through the patterned variation of form, size, length, curvature, thickness, density, and the interplay of rigidity and softness [6]. Eastern Han jade ornamentation, particularly through the cloud-like stylization of dragon and cloud motifs, excels in creating strong rhythmic patterns and harmonious visual cadence on a flat surface.

The dragon-pattern jade *huang* pendant shown in Figure 6 illustrates this aesthetic orientation. Its design demonstrates the emerging stylistic tendencies of the Eastern Han. The artisan used dense, fine, and short incised lines to carve the decorative details of two interacting dragons, which contrast with the overall flowing and relaxed contour lines, creating a rhythmic interplay between density and openness. Alternating tight and loose lines, together with varied spatial arrangements, produce a visually rich and balanced composition. To maximize the use of jade material, the craftsman designed the bodies and heads of the two dragons in a turning movement that directs the viewer's gaze inward, drawing the outward visual tension back toward the center. The symmetrical and balanced composition thus conveys a sense of stability and psychological calm. The dragons' long and slender bodies and limbs no longer emphasize muscular strength or power. Instead, their forms are defined by graceful lines that intertwine with swirling cloud imagery, creating an ethereal atmosphere consistent with the Daoist concepts of immortality and transcendence. The overall form becomes gentle and subdued; the dragon's elongated body resembles a linear drawing, functioning primarily as part of a complex decorative pattern. This transformation reflects the refined and ornate decorative taste of the Eastern Han period, in which three-dimensional representational design gradually yielded to decorative patterning. Although the absence of curved sculptural surfaces reduces the sense of physical volume, the tension generated by lively line work and intricate ornamentation still conveys a distinctive vitality characteristic of Eastern Han jade.

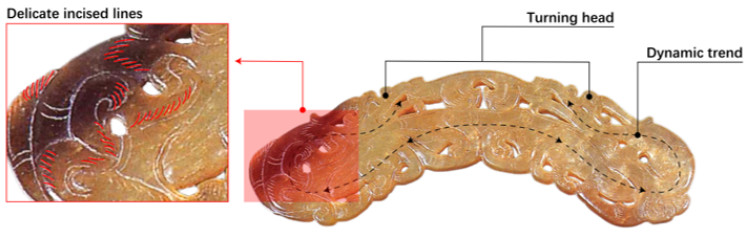

Figure 6. Analysis of rhythmic cadence in Eastern Han animal motifs

The stylistic evolution of animal motifs was not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it clearly reflects the broader transformation of aesthetic style in Han jade art as a whole. This shift can be understood as a transition from a "representational system" based on form and spatial structure to a "decorative system" grounded in line, pattern, and composition. During the Western Han period, artisans generally emphasized the modeling of individual forms and the expression of dynamic movement. Through techniques such as multi-perspective observation, three-dimensional twisting, and artistic openwork, jade carvings were endowed with strong dynamism and visual tension. In contrast, the ornamentation of the Eastern Han gradually moved toward patternization and planarization. Instead of emphasizing volumetric structure and dynamic tension, artisans focused on planar arrangement and overall decorative effect. Forms became calmer and more restrained, while the earlier sense of vigorous and agile bodily movement gradually diminished. As a result, the decorative quality of jade ornamentation increasingly surpassed its representational function.

4. Conclusion

The design evolution of animal motifs in jade artifacts of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties reveals a clear trajectory from representational expression toward decorative articulation. Western Han ornamentation, characterized by three-dimensional modeling, dynamic compositions, and a vigorous style, emphasized the expression of the inner vitality of the subject and the spiritual aspiration to communicate with the cosmos; in this context, form served the powerful content and emotional force embodied in the imagery. By contrast, Eastern Han ornamentation employed a planar, modular, and refined visual language, shifting toward the pursuit of formal order, auspicious symbolism, and ritual function. Decoration and practicality thus became the dominant principles of design.

The transformation from the grand and forceful representational design of the Western Han to the ornate and elaborate decorative design of the Eastern Han was by no means accidental. Rather, it reflects the broader changes in social life during the Han period, serving simultaneously as a symbolic expression of the ideology of the ruling class and a crystallization of evolving social thought, shifting artistic aesthetics, and the remarkable craftsmanship and spirit of Han artisans. These factors together endowed Han jade with its distinctive functions and enduring cultural value. Through a comparative study of animal motifs in Han jade artifacts, it is possible to discern the broader trajectory of transformation within Han jade culture—from a worldview centered on divine authority toward increasing secularization, from imaginative cosmological visions toward engagement with lived reality, and from the cosmic order of heaven and earth toward a more human-centered perspective. Such insights provide a new analytical dimension for the study of artistic aesthetics in the Han dynasty.

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