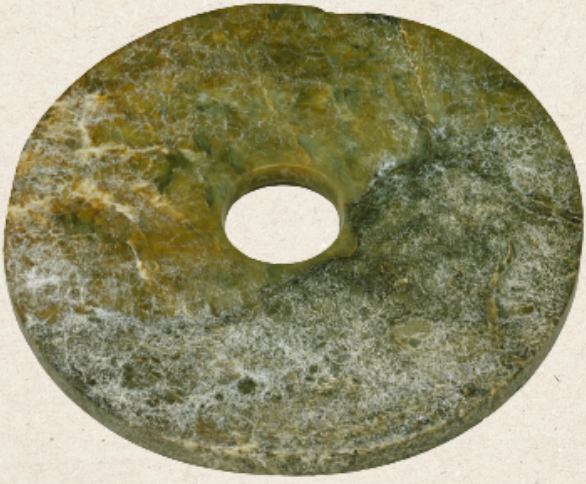
Liangzhu jade bi

by Kayla Stevens



an analysis of the National Museum of Asian Art, The British Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's representation of Neolithic Liangzhu jade bi

Images:
Disk (bi 璧) (F1911.444), via The National Museum of Asian Art
bi (2022,3034.243), via The British Museum
Ritual Object (Bi) (1986.112), via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Liangzhu Culture

The Liangzhu culture was an ancient Neolithic Chinese culture present from around 3300 to 2250 BCE, according to the National Museum of Asian Art. Name after the "location of the first documented excavation" (Wilson), the Liangzhu culture is known for the "high number and oustanding quality of jade found in their tombs" ("The Liangzhu Culture"). The Liangzhu people did not have a writing system, so we do not have much information on their culture. However, since jade takes an incredible amount of effort and time to abrade and shape, we know that they "placed great value on jade" items ("The Liangzhu Culture").

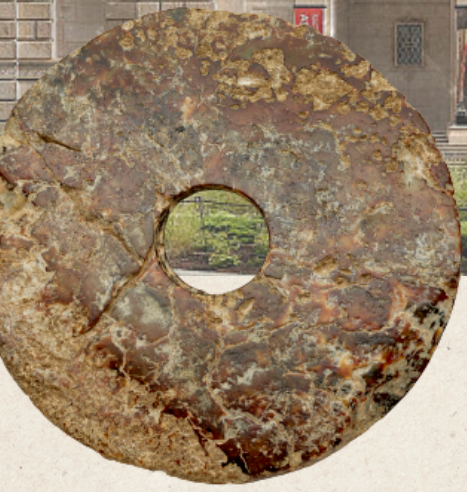
Image: "Aerial view 1 of City Site (from southwest to northeast)"

Jade Bi

One artifact that is commonly found in elite Liangzhu burial sites is the *bi*, a disk-like jade object with a hole in its center. "Their meaning, purpose, and ritual significance remain unknown," meaning that museums possess great power to shape the representation of *bi* and how they are viewed by museum-goers ("Liangzhu Jade *Bi*")

Image: A large jade bi disc, Neolithic period, Liangzhu culture | 新石器時代 良渚文化 玉璧, via Sotheby's

The National Museum of Asian Art



The National Museum of Asian Art (NMAA) has extensive resources about jade, Liangzhu burial site excavations, Liangzhu bi, and Charles Lang Freer's collection of Liangzhu jades on its website.

Images:
"Freer Gallery of Art," via The Smithsonian Institution
Disk (bi 璧) (F1911.444), via The National Museum of Asian Art

J. KEITH WILSON

Charles Lang Freer and His Collection of Neolithic Liangzhu 良渚 Culture Jades

…degraded disk
…ed from Pa Ku Cha. It cost him $40

…espite this first acquisition, Freer did not start buying jades in quantity for anoth
five years. In fact, his collection of Neolithic jades was largely built between 1916 a
his death in October 1919, a period when he added 152 works.

Freer relied primarily on dealers in China to supply him with early jades.[6] They or their agents brought things to him, but generally they sent photographs or objects for his consideration. Given Freer's great distance from China, most of the acquisitions were made as bulk purchases for convenience. You Xiaoxi 游筱溪, Wang Jiantang 王鑑堂, 李文卿, his three top …ghai 上海 (table 1).[7] Together, they provided more …cient jades

Figure 3

According to an essay by J. Keith Wilson, Freer acquired his first Neolithic Liangzhu artifact in 1911 from someone named Pa Ku Cha.

While this first acquisition is not currently on display in the National Museum of Asian Art, similar *bi* disks are.

Image: Screenshots from "Charles Lang Freer and His Collection of Neolithic Liangzhu 良渚 Culture Jades" by J. Keith Wilson, via the National Museum of Asian Art

A 2011 Google Maps tour of the gallery on ancient Chinese jades features four glass cases devoted to the bi. On the walls next to these cases are wall text panels about ancient Chinese jades, the Liangzhu culture, and Liangzhu jade bi. The same information can be found on the NMAA's website.

While two of the glass cases have the *bi* suspended in the air, the larger, central case has the *bi* set against a white backdrop since there are objects on the other side of the case. The implications of how these items are displayed are important to consider.

Image: Screenshots from the Google Maps tour of the National Museum of Asian Art

Image: Screenshot from the Google Maps tour of the National Museum of Asian Art

Throughout the NMAA's online content, a major emphasis is on how there was little information known about Liangzhu funerary objects at the time they were excavated and acquired.

Instead, Freer collected them for their aesthetic appeal, "long before most other Western collectors and museums took an active interest in them" ("Ancient Chinese Jades"). While we cannot know the specific meaning or use of these *bi*, the NMAA does remind visitors that we do know it was an extremely laborious process to work and shape jade, which involved slicing, grinding, and abrading the nephrite ("Liangzhu Jade Bi").

Given the lack of information on these objects, it is understandable that they would be displayed out of the context of their original burial meaning. However, we should also consider: **since we at least know that jade was highly valued by the Liangzhu, is displaying the *bi* vertically giving the items their due respect?**

They appear to be arranged more for their aesthetic value than actual meaning, which parallels the initial collecting intentions of Freer. A more respectful and contextualized display of these *bi* might be to lay them horizontally as if they are laying in a grave, to recreate how they were found.

Image: "Charles Lang Freer with Claire Dallam, wife of US Army Captain Samuel Field Dallam, at Gushan 孤山 during a trip by houseboat from Shanghai 上海 to Hangzhou 杭州, February 8–13, 1911," via the National Museum of Asian Art

How can we ethically grapple with the fact that these bi were taken from burial sites? There does not appear to be any clear attempt on the NMAA's part to discuss the fact that they were removed from peoples' graves and sold, even when we know that bi were valued and important to funerary rituals and burial practices.

In his book *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, Denver Museum of Nature & Science anthropology curator Chip Colwell outlines the challenge of the Calusa skulls in the museum's collection. These skulls were no longer affiliated with any currently living tribe and were thus left in a limbo in which the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) could not fully facilitate the repatriation of these skulls to a particular tribe (Colwell 2017). While the *bi* in the museums I discuss in this zine are not under the jurisdiction of NAGPRA, their situation is still relevant. The Liangzhu civilization collapsed due to environmental pressures, meaning there is likely no accurate way to trace cultural affiliations between people from present-day China to their Neolithic ancestors (Zhang 2021 et al). Even though the *bi* are not human remains, they were incredibly valued by their creators and believed to have powerful, even magical properties ("Chinese jade"). These considerations raise the questions: **is it ethical for these museums to display, or even simply own these objects, given their funerary use? If they are displayed in museums, how can they be done so in a way that respects and honors the unknown people who were buried with these items? And is there even a way to do so?**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) also has bi in its collection. I chose to look specifically at a Neolithic Liangzhu bi. It was purchased with funds from the Friends of Asian Arts group in 1986 from the China Curios Center Hong Kong ("Ritual Object (Bi)").

Images:
"The Metropolitan Museum of Art," via TripAdvisor
Ritual Object (Bi) (1986.112), via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ritual Object (*Pi*)

Chinese, Neolithic period (Liang-chu culture), ca. 2400 B.C.
Jade (actinolite). Diam. 8⅜ in. (21.3 cm), D. ⅝ in. (1.6 cm)
Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts. 1986 (1986.112)

The austere shape, imposing mass, and monumental proportions identify this perforated disk as an important ceremonial object of China's Neolithic culture. Worked from a mottled green stone identified as actinolite (a form of jade), it bears traces of saw and drill marks on its otherwise smooth surfaces that provide a textbook study of early Chinese lapidary techniques. The disk belongs to the late Neolithic Liang-chu culture of Kiangsu and Chekiang provinces. In 1982, twenty-five such disks, ranging in size from five to ten inches in diameter, were excavated from a Liang-chu tomb near Ch'ang-chou, Kiangsu. Carbon 14 datings for the tomb place it between 2700 and 2200 B.C. (K'ao-ku, 1984, no. 2, pp. 109–29).

The function and meaning of these disks are unknown. As late as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), jade disks performed a ritual function in aristocratic burials, where they were placed above the head, below the feet, and on the chest of the deceased. They were also depicted on painted burial shrouds of the second century B.C. In these paintings, two dragons are shown threading their way through a jade disk on their way from the nether world to the celestial realm. This suggests that jade disks may have been intended to help the deceased's soul in its journey to heaven. Although it is not certain that they functioned in this way in Neolithic times, the enormous labor involved in perfecting the abstract shape and the lustrous finish of these disks is striking testimony to the reverence accorded them.

M.K.H.

The Liangzhu Bi is described in the book "A Decade of Collecting, 1984-1993: Friends of Asian Arts Gifts," edited by Judith G. Smith.

Similar to the NMAA, the book mentions that "jade disks may have been intended to help the deceased soul in its journey to heave" (Smith 1993, 8), but we cannot be sure.

Nevertheless, the author emphasizes how "the enormous labor involved in perfecting the abstract shape and the lustrous finish of these disks is striking testimony to the reverence accorded them" (ibid).

Image: Screenshot of *A Decade of Collecting, 1984-1993: Friends of Asian Arts Gifts*, via Google Books

The speculation and lack of information surrounding the Met's *bi* is greatened by the limited details provided on their website. Unlike the NMAA, I was unable to view the specific display of the Met's *bi*.

There is a Google Maps tour on Google Arts & Culture, but the photography is washed-out and grainy. Moreover, I couldn't enter Gallery 207, where the *bi* is displayed.

Image: Screenshot of Gallery 207: The Art of Ancient China, via Google Arts & Culture

Image: Vase with rabbits (24.80.168), via the Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Met's website mentions that there is a Year of the Rabbit display in the gallery. Since the bi does not have rabbit imagery, I wonder how the special Year of the Rabbit objects are displayed in relation to the other ancient Chinese items.

Are these items brought into conversation, or is the bi pushed to the side for the Year of the Rabbit display?

There is a lack of clarity about how the ancient Chinese objects are displayed, and the inability for virtual visitors to view the gallery exacerbates the lack of information available.

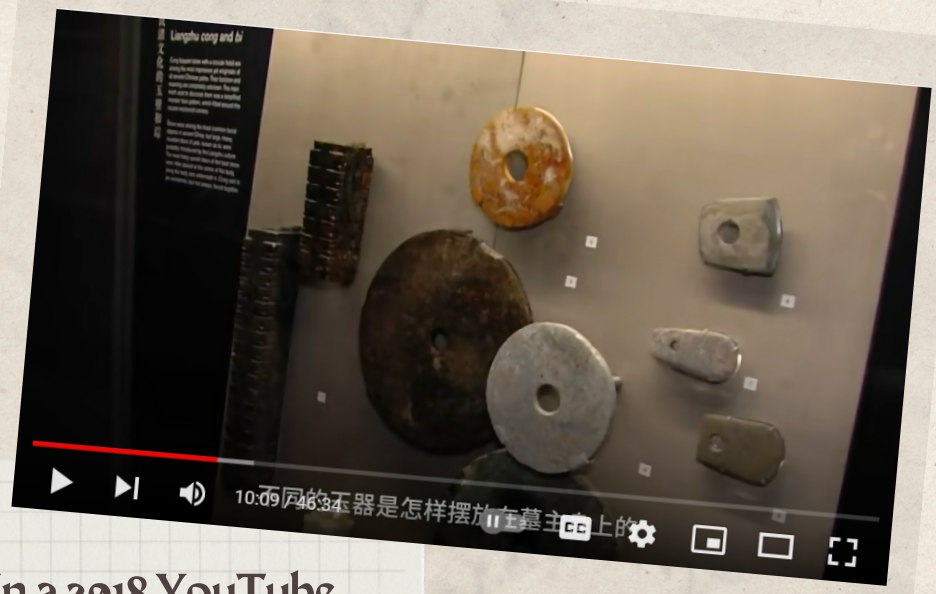
The Met's website does not provide a specific description about the *bi*'s design, unlike the NMAA and The British Museum. However, in *A Decade of Collecting*, the authors describe the *bi* (spelled *pi* in the book) as having an "austere shape, imposing mass, and monumental proportions." The use of dramatic words like "austere," "imposing," and "monumental" parallels the dramatic staircase and dark lighting of the ancient Chinese arts gallery where the *bi* is displayed (Smith 1993, 8).

Image: Screenshot of Gallery 207: The Art of Ancient China, via Google Arts & Culture

The British Museum

Th e British Museum takes perhaps the boldest stance on Liangzhu jade bi.

Images:
"British Museum," via Britannica
bi (2022,3034.243), via The British Museum



In a 2018 YouTube video, Carol Michaelson, curator of Chinese jade in the Department of Asia, gives a walk-through of the Chinese Jade gallery

As the Met and NMAA describe, the information the British Museum proposes is only speculation, since there is no writing left behind by the Liangzhu people.

While the NMAA presents its *bi* disks in groups, floating in the air, the British Museum arranges its jade objects to demonstrate "how the bodies would have been laid in the grave with these jades on top of them" (1.10818.net).

Image: Screenshot of "20180308 大英博物馆中国玉器收藏 British Museum Chinese Jade Collection" from 1.10818. net, via YouTube

In addition to other jade objects, the display features two bi over where the center and stomach of the body would be. And yet - the arrangement is still vertical.

While it may be easier for the visitor to view, the display still does not accurately represent how the *bi* may have been placed horizontally in a grave, which further removes the objects from their original context.

Image: Screenshot of "20180308 大英博物馆中国玉器收藏 British Museum Chinese Jade Collection" from 1.10818. net, via YouTube

I chose to further examine one of these bi. On the collection website, it is described as "a quite exceptionally fine disk" and that "because of its fine quality this disk was probably one of the pieces placed at the center of the body in a tomb." ("Bi")

This description demonstrates the contextual intersection of aesthetics and practical use for *bi*. It is **because** of their aesthetic appeal that we can assume they were placed in a tomb. Unlike the Met and NMAA descriptions, which discuss aesthetics and labor separately, we see here the aesthetics relating directly to the object's usage, rather than simply informing collection practices.

Despite the British Museum's attempt to contextualize the *bi* based on how it was used, rather than aesthetic grouping like the NMAA, it still implements language that takes these objects out of context. The webpage for the Chinese Jade Gallery describes jade as "exquisite" and "exotic" ("Chinese jade"). These words distance the jade from its intended purpose, making them inherently unfamiliar objects of fascination. The fact that the British Museum does not provide information about how the *bi* was acquired or from where further complicates its representation, contributing to the mystique surrounding it.

Image: bi (2022,3034.243), via The British Museum

In conclusion:

It is up to museums' discretion how they interpret these bi and what they display as fact to their visitors.

These three instances of how Liangzhu jade *bi* are displayed and described by major museum institutions demonstrate museums' power in shaping the image and storytelling of an object. When it comes to the ethical considerations surrounding the display and possession of burial objects, a museum's representation of these objects can selectively share and conceal information from its full story.

This zine demonstrates the importance of being a critical and inquisitive museum visitor, and the different forms of media we can engage with to further educate ourselves.

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