

# Earrings Culture of Ancient Chinese Han Nationality and Its Aesthetic Evolution

Jingjing Xu, Ronghong Zhang, Shaowu Yang

Institute of Jewelry, China University of Geosciences, Wuhan, China

Email: 249859272@qq.com

**How to cite this paper:** Xu, J. J., Zhang, R. H., & Yang, S. W. (2022). Earrings Culture of Ancient Chinese Han Nationality and Its Aesthetic Evolution. *Art and Design Review*, 10, 455-466.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/adr.2022.104036>

**Received:** October 8, 2022

**Accepted:** November 6, 2022

**Published:** November 9, 2022

Copyright © 2022 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

## Abstract

This paper takes the typical earrings shape system of ancient Chinese Han nationality as the starting point, briefly analyzes the development situation and characteristics of earrings in successive dynasties, and discusses the evolution of aesthetic consciousness in ancient Chinese society. It can be seen that the earrings culture of ancient Chinese Han nationality has continued up to now and gone through five stages of origin, development, silence, revival and prosperity, which reflects the aesthetic consciousness of ancient Chinese society gradually developing from the original religious belief to the royal power aesthetics as the center, and then to the secular aesthetics as the center.

## Keywords

Chinese Earrings Earrings Culture, Chinese Han Nation Aesthetic Evolution

## 1. Introduction

Earrings, which need to be pierced to wear, are a type of jewelry that damages and reshapes the human body. The occurrence and development of the Chinese Han nationality earrings culture is not only influenced by the social culture and cultural ecology, but also a material carrier to record the evolution of social culture and aesthetic appreciation. At present, most scholars only set the earrings culture in Chinese gold and silver ware culture, which is interpreted, and the special research on Chinese earrings culture needs to be further deepened. Therefore, this paper will explore the three issues of “when”, “why to happen” and “how to happen”, combined with different stages of social politics, economy, culture, religion, life customs and other cultural ecological factors, to see the evolution of social aesthetic consciousness.

## 2. Origin: Prehistory Period

The earrings culture in prehistoric times reflects the aesthetic concept centered on the original religious belief, and the earrings have divine beauty. The “Jade Ring” is the earliest earring made through manual thinking found in China. The shape is a ring with gaps and no decoration on the surface (**Figure 1**). It was unearthed in Xinglongwa culture about 8000 years ago (Fang & Zhou, 2004: pp. 9-11). Archaeological research shows that the wearer of the jade ring is a wizard in the tribe (Liu, 2003). Therefore, the earrings and jade ring have obvious original religious significance, and wearing the jade ring is to make the wizard better engage in witchcraft activities. Through the modern ethnology study reduction jade Jue wearing process, the wizard first need to puncture ears, after hole, until the Jue mouth from large enough ear hole through, to jade Jue through the earlobe, Jue mouth down for a long time (**Figure 2**) in the wizard’s ear will tear sagging disease, the ancients will this real pain, accompanied by great life danger wearing way is called “during the ear” (Yang, Liu, & Deng, 2007). The wizard’s obsession with decorating his ears in this way comes down to his understanding of the ear and hearing. They believe that the god has no specific shape and is difficult to see, and that in the communication between the wizard and the god, the ear and hearing are extremely important in the senses and means. For example, as recorded in the ancient books “Ci of Chu” and “Shuo Wen Jie Zi”, on the



**Figure 1.** A typical prehistoric earrings with a “jade ring” (Fang & Zhou, 2004).



**Figure 2.** Wearing condition of the “jade Ring” and its damage to the ears restored by modern ethnology research (Yang, Liu, & Deng, 2007; Yang, Liu, & Tang, 2012).

one hand, the wizard wore the jade ring to please the vision of the god with a better appearance, and cooperated with the beautiful dance music to invite the god to come to the world. After that, the god will tell the wizard his will, and convey the wizard to the people (Yang, 2016). It can be seen that the prehistoric social wizards wear a jade ring to enhance their auditory ability and facilitate their more practical efforts to obtain the instructions conveyed by the gods. At the same time, the jade ring does not use the bone horn and the clay as the material, but only uses the jade as the material, which also reflects its mysterious meaning. Because jade was called a “god” by the ancients, believing that jade has the divine power of god, jade, as a medium, can promote the communication between people and the gods (Ye, 2012).

Therefore, from the purpose of using jade as the material, the identity of the wearer of the jade Jue, and the activities of wearing the jade Jue, the jade Jue is not only earrings, but also an important magic instrument in witchcraft activities. The ancestors’ aesthetic appreciation of the jade Jue is closely linked to the belief of the original witchcraft. The key to the production of the primitive witchcraft and its beliefs is caused by the low level of productivity of the primitive society and people’s inability to recognize the objective world scientifically. So “beauty, as a social phenomenon, serves as the product of social and historical development” (Liu & Xia, 2010). It is also subject to and grow in this primitive level of social development. Therefore, the ancestors’ aesthetic appreciation of the earrings and jade ring must be different from the pure decorative feelings of modern people, which is far more than the sensory pleasure brought by the color and texture of the jade and the symmetrical form on the shape of the jade ring. Modern people should return to the prehistoric aesthetic context and cultural ecology to examine the beauty of the earring jade ring. It can be seen that the origin of earrings is centered on the original belief. In wearing the jade ring, a decorative form with heavy awe, witchcraft color and self-dedication, the primitive ancestors can experience their own human strength, and then gain spiritual pleasure and have a beautiful feeling of the jade ring.

### 3. Development: During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties Period

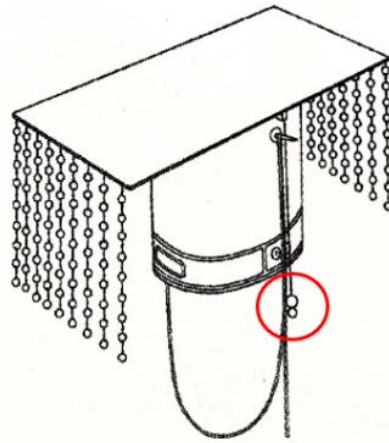
The earrings culture in the Shang and Zhou dynasties reflected the evolution of the aesthetic concept from the divine beauty to the royal power and ritual system as the center. The beauty of the earrings lies in the royal power shown by it. The aesthetic evolution reflected by the earrings culture also reflected the development of the humanistic spirit at this time. In the Shang Dynasty, people’s aesthetic appreciation of “jade Jue” changed. It is represented by the dragon structure on the jade ring system of the Shang Dynasty (Figure 3). The dragon schema originated in prehistoric times and is one of the original religious totems worshipped by the tribal ancestors. Therefore, on the one hand, the dragon pattern reflects that the beauty of the Shang Dynasty earrings jade ring has the characteristics of original belief. On the other hand, by connecting with the identity



**Figure 3.** Typical earshape and wear of Shang dynasty.

of the dragon pattern jade ring and the wearer, it can be seen that the social aesthetic consciousness at this time is gradually shifting from the original religious belief to the royal power aesthetic as the center. Take the dragon-shaped jade ring excavated in the tomb of “Fu Hao”, the first well-documented female military commander, statesman and Shang queen in Chinese history, as an example. In terms of wearing it, the dragon-shaped jade ring in the tomb of “Fu Hao” has small holes, so that people can decorate the jade ring on their ears by means of rope thread (Yu & Fang, 2004). Compared with the extensive wearing style of self-sacrifice in the primitive society, the Shang royal dynasties, as wearers, had showed the consciousness of self-centered care for the body, proving that their thoughts had gradually found a more rational judgment from the primitive witchcraft religion. Secondly, compared with the prehistoric social “jade ring” as the earrings exclusively worn by witches, the wearers of the “jade ring” in the Shang Dynasty were mainly concentrated in the royal ruling class. The results of the study on oracle bone inscriptions in the Shang Dynasty show that “the sacrificial divination activity at this time has presented a hierarchical order centered on the king of the Shang Dynasty (Zhang, 2017),” It proved that the Shang Dynasty ruling class was good at using the divine witchcraft activities to achieve the purpose of consolidating its own political rule. It can be seen that although the rulers of the Shang Dynasty believed in witchcraft and ghosts and liked divination, they were different from the witchcraft beliefs in the original jade ring. The level of social development and the increasing strength of the will of the royal power have weakened the beauty of the divine characteristics of the jade ring. What it shows is the observation with the will of the king as the leading and the belief of witchcraft as the subsidiary. The aesthetic appreciation of “jade Jue” lies in highlighting the royal power that cannot be overturned and submitted to awe. This also indicates that the divine beauty implied in the earrings culture will eventually decline in the rites and music civilization with the royal power as the core initiated by the ruling class of the Zhou Dynasty.

“Tian”, also known as “earrings” is the typical earrings of the Western Zhou Dynasty (Figure 4). According to the Rites of Zhou, was born at the same time as the corondress system of the Zhou Dynasty, a kind of earrings that can be



**Figure 4.** Typical earshape “Tian” (modern restoration).

worn on both sides of the crown and can be worn without use (Li, 2015). As a must-match for the male ruling class to attend major etiquette occasions, according to the status of the wearer, “Tian” will use jade materials of different grades, reflecting the interpretation of beauty centered on the social hierarchy concept of royal power and ritual system. At the same time, the special wearing method of earrings “Tian” avoids the damage to the body, which not only reflects the consciousness of people-centered care for the body in the society at that time, and its cultural connotation also reflects the development of humanistic spirit. According to Zhuangzi, an ancient book of the Zhou Dynasty, the society believed that the body shape of virtuous people should be complete (Zhuangzi, 2010), The special wearing style of the earrings “Tian” is intended to emphasize the integrity of the wearer’s body shape, and thus to show the noble character of the wearer as the ruling class. At the same time, in Confucianism, the aesthetic appreciation of the earrings “Tian”, and the warning, the ruling class does not listen to the slander, highlighting the interpretation of the king’s governance (Li, 2015). It reveals the beauty of the “self-denying lover” in Confucianism. It can be seen that the aesthetic appreciation of earrings in the Zhou Dynasty society also began to examine the connection between beauty and people’s emotion and morality, showing the interaction between earrings culture and aesthetic consciousness, ethical value and humanistic spirit.

#### **4. Silence: The Han and Tang Dynasties**

The earrings culture of the Han and Tang dynasties reflects the interpretation of aesthetic concepts from the contemporary society. Influenced by the aesthetic concept of the Zhou Dynasty, that is, the body shape of people with noble moral character must be complete. In the Han and Tang Dynasties, the Han people in the Central Plains refused to wear earrings, and the development of earrings culture entered silence at this time. Liu Xi, a scholar of the Han Dynasty, once said that the barbarians and barbarians women were frivolous and frivolous, so their ears were pierced and they wore earrings as a warning to warn the wearers

to abide by women's morality (Liu, 2020). Therefore, in the Han national culture, piercing the ears and wearing the earrings meant the despicable character of the wearer. Emperor Taizong, the emperor of the Tang Dynasty, also said, "His parents of his hair and skin dare not destroy him," and issued a criminal law that deserved it after damaging his ears by himself (Li, 2015). In the painting art of the Han and Tang Dynasties, most of the occasional people wearing ears and earrings were jiile, servants with low social status, or the depiction of barbarian figures. It can be seen that the behavior of wearing ears has negative significance in the Han national culture at this time.

For the upper class of society, the earrings worn by the male ruling class are still, while the only common earrings is "ear clan" (Figure 5), which is also consistent with the wearing method of, often combined with the female hair accessories "hairpin", with the "ear" hanging in the hairpin head and hanging in the ears as ear decoration. The shape of "ear clanking" has two categories: nail head and cylindrical waist. The surface is mostly unornamented, and the shape is relatively single. It shows the silence of earrings culture of Han nationality in this period. But it is worth noting that in addition to the traditional jade material, gold has become another major material for making "ear clan". From the point of view of the gold material itself, it has the natural characteristics of metallic luster, relatively rare, strong malleability and high durability. Objectively, it is more appropriate to adapt to the creation of convenient wear, more rich and flexible forms of earrings. However, because the traditional jade has a strong cultural connotation of divine beauty, a symbol of royal power and noble moral character, the gold material was not paid attention to in the Han national culture before the Han Dynasty. In the background of the Han and Tang Dynasties, where the Silk Road had developed trade and frequent diplomatic exchanges, the gold, with payment and circulation, storage, and representing wealth and status, was more in line with the practical and utilitarian needs of the ruling class at this time. Therefore, since the Han Dynasty, the main material of han nationality earrings has gradually changed from beautiful jade to gold, and this phenomenon also reflected the change of social economic, political and aesthetic consciousness in the Han and Tang dynasties. It can be seen that beauty is not simply determined by the natural attributes of things, but that beauty really



**Figure 5.** "Ear clan" of Han Dynasty (Li, 2015).

determines the adaptation relationship and adaptation degree of the natural attributes of things with people and social life.

## 5. Reviving: Song Dynasty

On the one hand, the earrings culture of the Song Dynasty reflects the evolution of the social aesthetic concept to the civilian and the life, and on the other hand, it also has the aesthetic characteristics of the literati art. Earring culture appeared in the Song Dynasty, which was highlighted in the way of wearing earrings, which broke through the traditional method of hanging and changed the way of wearing ears. Gold and silver earrings have become commodities that can be traded, and the number increased, and a new decoration and modeling style appeared. So why did the Song people start to wear their earrings and make them beautiful? This aesthetic evolution is closely related to the political, economic, cultural and other factors in the Song Dynasty. On the one hand, before the Song Dynasty, the wars of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and the coexistence of the barbarian Han nation promoted the cultural integration between the Han nation and the barbarian cultural circle. On the other hand, the administrative mode of “the emperor and the scholar-officials governing the world together” in the Song Dynasty was an important social background contributing to this aesthetic evolution. In the Song Dynasty, there was a more developed imperial examination system than in the Tang Dynasty. A large number of men from the rich class became officials, which formed a scholar-official class with high social status and social influence. At the same time, the government of the Song Dynasty attached great importance to the development of commerce, the prosperity of commodity economy, the people accumulated a large amount of capital, and the society formed a rich class with a broad population base. The rich class became the scholar-officials class through the imperial examination system, which influenced the development of the society in the Song Dynasty. Therefore, different from the aesthetic fashion of the previous Song Dynasty, which was dominated by a single royal aesthetic, the aesthetic fashion of the Song Dynasty had another communication mode from folk aesthetic to royal aesthetic. Furthermore, compared with the royal family, the aesthetic appreciation of the folk scholar-officials is more inclusive and diverse. It is good at absorbing new things and culture, and also pays more attention to the enjoyment of the current life. It is loyal to the beauty of the natural landscape and the interest of rural elegance, and its aesthetic appreciation has the meaning of secular interest and literati feelings. For example, lotus flower grain gold earrings, flower leaf and fruit grain gold earrings, butterfly flower leaf-shaped gold earrings (**Figure 6**), the Song Dynasty earrings mostly featured realistic natural elements such as plants and insects. At the same time, the aesthetic taste of Song people is not limited to the simple simulation of things, but pays more attention to the integration of subjective thoughts in the observation of natural beauty, so that natural things can form the unified aesthetic image of subject and object in human hearts, show it



**Figure 6.** Example of typical earshape in Song Dynasty.

with exquisite concrete carrier, and seek the connection to people's view of beauty. For example, the lotus gold earrings are taken from the natural lotus shape, and the lotus flower in the nature is endowed with the symbolic significance of moral integrity in the process of artistic image, which is conveyed through specific earrings media and symbolizes the wearer's own interests, thus forming a unified aesthetic image of subject and object. Therefore, the song dynasty earrings decoration, modelling with natural scenery as the subject, embodies the song people secularization aesthetic taste, earrings construction pay attention to exquisite real characterization, shows the song people pursuit of elegant, dignified inside collect form beauty, and the connotation of graceful poetic earrings, expression, the song people have "rhyme outside" beauty, and their own literati feelings.

## 6. Prosperity: The Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties

The development of earrings culture in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties has the characteristics of diversified integration, reconstruction and innovation, which reflects the evolution of the secularization of aesthetic concepts. The use of earrings by the Han nation was popularized at this stage, and the earrings culture flourished and developed vigorously, showing the characteristics of integration and innovation under multiple cultures. The popular earrings system in the Yuan Dynasty, for example, (Figure 7) water drop flower leaf pattern inlaid with gold earrings, is the product of the integration of Buddhist culture, Han ethnic culture, Mongolian culture and Arabic gemology culture. First of all, the shape of water droplets comes from the wreaths and earrings in the makeup of a Buddhist Bodhisattva, such as the earrings painted on the silk painting of the Diamond Hand Bodhisattva of the Tibetan Dynasty in the British Museum (Li, 2022). Secondly, the use of flower and leaf pattern inherited the characteristics of the Song Dynasty earrings. Moreover, a turquoise is inlaid in the center of the earrings, surrounded by 12 gems (now lost). A large number of gems are inlaid on the earrings, which is related to the Mongolian culture of the Yuan Dynasty. At this time, through the trade of the Grassland Silk Road in the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongolian people brought all kinds of gems produced from West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia into China, and the Arab gemology was introduced, which was called it "Hui Hui Stone".

During Zheng He's voyages to the Western Seas in the early Ming Dynasty



and the rise of the folk Maritime Silk Road trade in the middle of the Ming Dynasty (Gu, 2019), the use of colored stones in the earrings became more and more prosperous. In addition to the Ming Dynasty, the royal family, and the rich people will buy their own gems to make colorful jewelry such as earrings and ornaments (such as Figure 8). At the same time, the production of earrings in the Ming Dynasty gave full play to the existing silk inlay technology in the Song and Yuan dynasties, combining large particles of colored gems with fine as hair wire, forming the aesthetic characteristics of dense and exquisite shape and luxurious system of Ming Dynasty earrings.

“One ear and three pincers” (“three earrings on one ear”) is a unique earrings shape system of the Qing Dynasty, and its evolution more reflects the integration of Manchu and Han ethnic culture and aesthetics. At first, “one ear and three pincers”, namely wearing three ear holes in one ear (Figure 9), was the practice of the Manchu rulers of the Qing Dynasty, thus symbolizing auspicious luck, which was a tradition that Manchu women must follow when they were



Figure 7. Example of typical earshape of Yuan Dynasty.



Figure 8. Example of typical earshape in Ming Dynasty.



Figure 9. typical typical ear ear earrings in the Qing Dynasty.

young (Yang, 2022). While Han women wear “one ear falls” (“one earring on one ear”), that is, one ear wears one ear hole. The difference between the two earrings is one of the characteristics of the social difference between Manchu women and Han women in the Qing Dynasty. In the long-term Manchu and Han people, Han women not only began to wear “one ear and three pliers” influenced by the Manchu earrings culture and aesthetic influence, and Manchu women also improved the traditional “one ear and three pliers” shape system under the culture and aesthetic influence of Han women, creating a “new ear and three pliers” (Figure 8). The earrings of “new one ear and three pliers” are divided into three vertical branches under one earpiece, in order to restore the traditional wearing effect of “one ear and three pliers”. “New one ear and three pliers” can not only avoid the ear lesions caused by wearing three ear holes in one ear and wearing three earrings, but also can retain the traditional Manchu customs from the visual effect. At the same time, the Qing Dynasty earrings have a cheesy beauty. Earar design is committed to the integration of different themes including plants, animals, beasts, architectural shapes and other diverse types of gems, and finally used to express their own secular interest and the pursuit of a better life. In addition to the “million” characters and ribbon lines used on the earrings of Figure 8, the common gourd patterns, bat patterns and butterfly patterns are all auspicious. The earrings shape system of the Qing Dynasty showed the aesthetic characteristics of “picture must have, apartment must be auspicious”. Therefore, the aesthetic appreciation of the Ming and Qing Dynasties is different from the elegant style of the literati in the Song Dynasty. The evolution of the earrings shows the integration of the beauty of the art form and the appreciation of the multi-source life content at this time, and the noble and elegant taste gives way to the secular interest. The return of art to life reflects an aesthetic taste that is closer to human affairs and life itself (Song, 2014).

## 7. Summary

The earrings culture of ancient Chinese Han nationality has continued to this day and gone through five stages of origin, development, silence, revival and prosperity, reflecting the aesthetic evolution of ancient Chinese society centered on primitive belief to royal politics, and then to secular politics, including morality, art and life. The occurrence of jade Jue is a witness to the early development of people’s aesthetic consciousness. Through the fog of primitive witchcraft, we can see that the origin of beauty comes from social practice. In the form of earrings created by themselves, people initially see a kind of the beauty of understanding and transforming the world under the original belief. In the years when the cognition gradually became rational, the beauty of the earrings showed the majesty of the royal authority and ritual system and the beautiful view of ethics and morality. In the Song Dynasty, the revival of earrings presented people’s exploration of the unity of the form and content of beauty, and pursued the aesthetic style of high Athenian Austria, external charm, shape and god. In the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, the development of earrings reflected the

exchange of art forms and life contents. Mutual views of this period, lively and popular customs were the aesthetic taste of this period. Earring has evolved for more than 8000 years. Today, earrings are not only a way for people to beautify their appearance and life, but also a kind of carrier for people to realize themselves and create themselves through art and aesthetics. Earar reflects the diversified and personalized characteristics under the public aesthetic. The distinction and interaction between art and public aesthetic are promoting today's aesthetic transformation in a better direction.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### References

- Fang, X. M., & Zhou, X. J. (2004). *The General History of Chinese Jade. Neolithic Northern Volume* (pp. 9-11). Haitian Publishing House.
- Gu, X. Z. (2019). See the Use and Source of Ming Dynasty Gems from the Unearthed Materials and Literature Records. *Southern Cultural Relics, No. 6*, 288-298.
- Li, H. R. (2022). Financial Policy and Social Economy in the Song Dynasty. *Chinese Social Sciences, No. 7*, 113-129.
- Li, S. M. (2015). *The Classic of Filial Piety* (Xingbing Translate, p. 62). Shanghai Ancient Books Press.
- Li, Y. (2015). *Ear Light—Chinese Past Ages Earrings* (p. 59). China Textile Publishing House.
- Liu, G. X. (2003). Xinglongwa Cultural Bedroom Burial Customs to Know Again. *Huaxia Archaeology, No. 1*, 43-51.
- Liu, S. C., & Xia, Z. F. (2010). *The Basic Principles of Aesthetics* (p. 33). Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- Liu, X., & Yu, R. D. (2020). *Proofread: "Interpretation Name—Interpretation Jewelry"* (70 p.). Zhonghua Book Company.
- Song, L. L. (2014). "One Ear and Three Pliers": The Scenery of the Manchu Women in the Qing Dynasty. *Liaoning Today, No. 9*, 74-75.
- Yang, B. D. (2016). *A History of Chinese Prehistoric Jade Articles* (p. 99). The Palace Museum Press.
- Yang, H., Liu, G. X., & Deng, C. (2007). *Exploration of the Origin of Jade—Research and Atlas of Jade in Xinglongwa Culture* (pp. 54-55). Chinese Archaeological Art Research Center.
- Yang, H., Liu, G. X., Tang, C. (2012). *The Origin of Jades in East Asia: Jades of the Xinglongwa Culture*. Centre for Chinese Archaeology and Art, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.
- Yang, Z. S. (2022). *Chinese Gold and Silver Ware* (p. 1022). Sanlian Bookstore.
- Ye, S. X. (2012). Takes the Jade Ring of Xinglongwa Culture as an Example. *National Art, No. 3*, 21-30.
- Yu, Y. J., & Fang, G. (2004). *The General History of Chinese Jade—Xia Shang Volume* (p. 228). Haitian Publishing House.

Zhang, X. X. (2017). *A Study of Huadong Zi Bu Ci and Yin Rites* (p. 977). Zhonghua Book Company.

Zhuangzi (The Warring States Period) (2010). *Respectful Name for Zhuang Zhou* (T. H. Sun Trans., p. 192). Zhonghua Book Company.