

## **Han Jade *Bi* Discs and the Significance of *Bi* Discs in the History of Chinese Culture**

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### **Abstract**

From the initial stage of ancient jade *bi* discs during the early part of the late Neolithic period six to seven thousand years ago, well into Han Dynasty when jade culture enjoyed a highly advanced stage amid expanding national power and overall advancing culture, *bi* had remained one of the most important jade articles after more than four thousand years' development. Much study still leaves unanswered several questions regarding the Han jade *bi* discs, which the author divides into four major categories and nine sub-categories by their patterns, and again three major categories and eleven sub-categories based on their functions as recorded in the ancient literature and archaeological phenomena. The aim is to analyze correlations between the patterns and functions of jade *bi* discs, and to briefly describe the gradual development of *bi* variety in function.

The compositions of the mystic codes carved on the jade discs from the late Liangzhu culture (2600-2300 B.C.E.), and the “*Qi-Heng*” diagram 「七衡圖」 in the *Zhou Math* 《周髀》 inform us that the form of *bi* originated from the human concept about the sun's orbit in the sky, so-called the “Yellow Path” or “Path of Light”. As early people's knowledge of celestial phenomena gradually progressed with the development of culture, they further observed that the twenty-eight constellations could be grouped into four quadrants, corresponding to the rules of seasons and astronomical configurations followed by an agrarian society. Moreover, the spatial and temporal regularities were expressed in symbolic signs and charts, from which came the iconography of the “Four Divine Creatures”. The latter imagery was very popular in Han Dynasty and mostly decorated the spaces or articles that signified celestial bodies. *Bi* discs with Four-Divine-Creature Patterns were among the most representative articles produced amid this trend.

The native culture went quiet during the Chinese Middle Ages. Then Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty revived the remotest and the most native beliefs and thoughts; jade *bi* discs patterned with dragons and/or tigers received much attention again. The mystic *Bi*, staying alive forever in the currents and undercurrents of history, possesses an everlasting noble status in Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Jade *Bi* Disc, the Ecliptic/Zodiac, Four Divine Creatures