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Supervising Professor: Michael Schoenhals

The Jade Road:  
A study of the jade trade in ancient China

Markus Palo

## Abstract

The term the 'Jade Road' is very hard to find in English literature yet the Chinese term '玉之路' exists within Chinese archaeological and cultural articles (and even in business and travel magazines) as a prehistory to the 'Silk Road'. Why has this term, 'Jade Road', escaped translation and explanation in English material and what facts and theories exist about it? This thesis has found that there exists evidence of a jade trade during the Neolithic Period (12,000 – 2200 BCE) and the Bronze Age (2200 – 500 BCE) in China well before silk was transported along the 'Silk Road' (starting from about the Han Dynasty, 汉朝 206 BCE – 220 CE). There have been cultural exchange between Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures during these periods shown on the similarity of the jade artefacts and the jade from Hetian in present day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region that has been found throughout China, called Hetian Jade (和田玉). Chinese archaeologists, gemmologists<sup>1</sup> and anthropologists use the term 'Jade Road' to describe the routes used by traders during the Neolithic Period and Bronze Age from the west of present day China to the central and east parts, and some of them say it went as far west from Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region as Egypt and the Mediterranean. In English literature this jade trade is in some material only briefly mentioned as a prehistory to the 'Silk Road'. Most Chinese scholars who use this term suggest that the 'Jade Road' was the forerunner to the 'Silk Road' and that jade was the goods that paved the way for exchange between the East and the West. There is no evidence of the frequency nor the scale of this trade however evidence that jade has been traded since Neolithic times across the entire landmass of present day China and at least as far as western Asia exist and are well documented in Chinese archaeological articles.

*Keywords:* jade road, ancient china, silk road, neolithic period, bronze age, nephrite, jadeite

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<sup>1</sup> A specialist in gems.

## 摘要

在英文文献中不存在‘玉石之路’这个说法，但在中文的考古和文化的文章就能找到。这个词语怎么还没被翻译到英语里呢？在这篇文论里有新石器时代（公元前 12,000 - 2200）和青铜时代（公元前 2200 - 500）玉石贸易的证据，把丝绸在丝绸之路沿着运输很久以前，从今日的新疆维吾尔自治区地区来的玉器跟别的地方所找到的玉器可以看到相似之处，即新石器时代的文化和青铜时代的文化已经有文化交流。中国的考古学家、宝石学家及人类学家用‘玉石之路’描述新石器时代和青铜时代的从“中国”西部的商人走东部的路，有的学家说这些路去及地中海。在英文文献中这个贸易只有很简短的提及‘丝绸之路’的史前史。当前运用这个词语的中国学者大部分建议‘玉石之路’就是‘丝绸之路’的前身，他们也建议玉石为东西两方的交换铺平了道路。商人到底是否常常在这条路走仍无证据，但是有证据指从新石器时代有玉石的贸易穿过全现代的中国，还有证据指这个贸易到达西亚，这些证据在中国考古文章有凭有据。

关键字：玉石之路、古代中国、丝绸之路、新石器时代、青铜时代、软玉、硬玉

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## 1. Introduction

The term the 'Jade Road' is not very well known outside of China, and perhaps not even within (the people in western China are more likely to know what it is, than the people in the eastern parts). If you google 'Silk Road' at scholar.google.com you get 35,900 hits, if you google 'Jade Road' you get 82 results (most of the hits referring to an address with a street called 'Jade Road' in Fulton, Missouri).<sup>2</sup> Most people are however very familiar with the term 'Seidenstraße' or 'Silk Road', coined by Ferdinand Von Richthofen in 1877. Yet long before silk was traded between East and West there was jade, and this commodity could not be found in any other place than where the geological composition of the land was just right; in present day western China around Hetian (和田) in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (新疆维吾尔自治区). Throughout China archaeologists have found jade artefacts in graves dating long before 'the Silk Road' (from as early as c. 6000 BCE), during the Neolithic Period; long before most people would think advanced mining techniques, lapidary skills and long distance trading were possible. The finest jade pieces in these graves have all been identified as jade from present day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, an ocean of land away from the areas where cultures of ancient east and central China such as the Yangshao (仰韶文化), Hongshan (红山文化) and Erlitou (二里头文化) cultures resided. How has the term the 'Jade Road' evaded translation and what do the Chinese scholars know of ancient China that made them coin such a term?

### *1.1 Aim of Thesis*

As I was researching about jade in China I came across the term ‘玉石之路’ ('the Jade Road'). Material about jade in China historically, is in English material limited (many photos of archaeological findings exist, however the details about what types of jade and where they originated from are very rare) and material about the 'Jade Road' is almost non-existent. Thus the aim of my thesis became to understand what the 'Jade Road' was, how the term is used in today's China and what facts and theories there exist that led to the creation of this name.

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<sup>2</sup> Google Scholar, (scholar.google.com), 2013-06-14.

### *1.2 Method*

Since the very lack of non-Chinese material has produced the aim of this thesis, material in English has only been used for background descriptions, mineralogical explanations and to a smaller extent as archaeological reference material. I have collected articles having to do with '玉石之路' ('the Jade Road') and '玉石' (jade) from the China Academic Journals (CAJ) and Century Journals Project (CJP) databases and I have used English archaeological, mineralogical and gemmological material having to do with jade and jade findings in China as supplements. These books and articles have been used together to compile a full description in English of the term '玉石之路', what facts there exist and how the term is used in today's China.

### *1.3 Disposition*

As I read article after article about the 'Jade Road' I noticed that the authors all used the same both logical and natural disposition; they started by introducing the archaeological findings about jade artefacts and then followed with their own theories about how those jade pieces had been transported along the 'Jade Road'. So an obvious disposition suggested itself for me as well; I have begun my thesis by explaining what the ancient cultures in China, from the Neolithic Period to the Bronze Age, might have been like and what we know about them today. The second part of '2. Background' explains what jade is, the importance of jade in Chinese cultures and why it is such an informative material to learn from when studying ancient cultures of China. The third part '*2.3 The Silk Road*' is dedicated to facts about the 'Silk Road' and what most English literature about ancient China consider to be the first trade route between the East and the West.

I have started '3. Findings' by describing jade localities<sup>3</sup> and how these can help us know where a piece of jade has come from, in order to give readers the importance of the archaeological findings that has been made. The next section goes through these findings of jade artefacts throughout China; to know what may have been transported along the 'Jade Road' and to understand what period in China's history we are talking about. The third sub-title under '3. Findings', *3.3 The Jade Road*, explains some of the theories Chinese archaeologist,

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<sup>3</sup> The country or area where a gemstone is found

anthropologists and gemmologists have about how jade has been transported, where the 'Jade Road' went, what connections it has to 'the Silk Road' and of what importance this knowledge has for us today. The chapter ends with more unscientific articles and usages of the term 'Jade Road' to show how it is used outside the academic world. Lastly '4. Discussion' covers the importance of these archaeological findings and discusses the theories presented in '*3.3 The Jade Road*' to enable, for the English reader, a good understanding of what the 'Jade Road' was and what theories and facts there exist about it.

## 2. Background

In order to appreciate and understand the facts and theories about the 'Jade Road' one needs to understand about the ancient history of China, of jade and of the trade routes as described in most English literature. Descriptions of archaeological findings from the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods are well described and analysed in books and articles about ancient China and since my thesis is focused on only jade I have below gathered a compressed version of the most important information about ancient China, jade, jade culture and the 'Silk Road' to enable a good understanding of this thesis and the articles presented in it.

### 2.1 Ancient China

The Neolithic Period in China began 12,000 BCE with the development of agricultural communities and lasted until 2200 BCE with the coming of the Bronze Age (2200 – 500 BCE). At that time the Yellow River and the Yangtze River had not yet deposited the alluvial soil that now constitutes the plains between the eastern and western mountain chains in China. Instead the land consisted of lakes and marshes, the mountains were forested and the animals were plentiful. In the southern bend of the Yellow River archaeologists have found thousands of sites with traces of these early agricultural settlements.<sup>4</sup> They grew millet and to compliment their diet they hunted and fished using bows. Hemp was used to make clothes and they had domesticated dogs and pigs. They stored food in pottery jars decorated with animal motifs and they had even mastered silk production, a process which required a huge amount of knowledge and energy to complete.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.2 Jade and Jade Culture in China

The term 'jade' comes from the Spanish 'piedra de ijada' (literally, stone of the flank) as it was once thought to be able to cure kidney pains. Different green stones (serpentine, green quartz, vesuvianite, etc.) have in China been called jade, the character 玉 (Yu) originally meaning

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<sup>4</sup> John K. Fairbank, Merle Goldman *China: A New History*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 33.

'beautiful stone' and today used to describe greenish stones (mostly jade). The gemmological and mineralogical societies however only recognize the minerals jadeite and nephrite as 'jade', and these are the minerals I will be referring to in this thesis (otherwise the mineralogical names will be given). Both jadeite and nephrite can be emerald green to greenish black to creamy white, they have a hardness of 6.5 – 7 on Moh's scale of hardness and they are both very tough<sup>6</sup> which has made them popular to carvers. Jade has been a gemstone attributed god-like characteristics in China since ancient times and by wearing such a stone people could come closer to the divine. In his book *Chinese Jade Throughout the Ages* Stanley Nott mentions several historical references to the divinity attributed to jade in ancient China and the following quote from the *Shuowen Jiezi* (说文解字, c. 100 CE) shows how close to the religious the stone was described:

*Jade is a certain kind of fine stone possessing five qualities:*

*It is moist and glossy, possessing the characteristics of "Jen." (Kind and loving.). Upon examining its exterior, its interior is revealed to those who understand the stone, for it resembles the character for "Yi." (Perfect understanding and food treatment.). Its sound is musical and far-reaching, like the character of "Tsi." (Intelligent.). Although it may be cut, it retains to itself completeness, thereby displaying an inherent characteristic of self-defence like unto the character "Yung." (Brave.). It is without blemish when clear, similar to the character "Chieh." (Pure.). Its written symbol is formed by the combination of three Jades. [Shi zhi mei. You wu de: runze yi wen, ren zhi fangye; saili ziwei keyi zhi zhong, yi zhi fangye; qi sheng shu yang, fu yi yuanwen, zhi zhi fangye; bu rao er she, yong zhi fangye; rui lian er bu ji, jie zhi fangye. Xiang san yu zhi lian.]<sup>78</sup>*

Joseph Needham, although more concerned with the technical aspects of jade carving in ancient China, has he too noted the divinity connected to jade in his encyclopaedia *Science and Civilisation in China*. The following translated quote, from the 39<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Guanzi* (管子) dated to the Han Dynasty can be found within volume three of his encyclopaedia:

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6 The ability of a gemstone to resist fracture and alterations due to heat, light or chemicals.

7 Stanley C. Nott, *Chinese Jade Throughout the Ages*, (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1962), p. vi.

8 For the Chinese text see the digital version of the *Shuowen Jiezi* and it's definition of jade at <http://www.shuowen.org/view/81>.

*What are the nine virtues which make jade precious? Jade is warm, agreeable, and enriched with favours, this (may be called) its 'benevolence'. Its lines run back and forth near each other, communicating systematically, this (may be called) its 'righteousness'. It is sharp but its angles are not hurtful, this (may be called) its 'conduct'. It is fresh and bright, but cannot get dirty, this (may be called) its 'purity'. It can be broken but not bent, this (may be called) its 'refined quality' (i.e. it does not try to cover up its weak points). Its flourishing, shining, agreeable lights reflect each other but do not trespass upon one another, this (may be called) its 'tolerance'. Upon being struck it gives a clear, far-away and pure sound, not screaming, this (may be called) its 'gentleness'. These are the reasons why the rulers of men appreciate and value it for making auspicious seals.<sup>9</sup>*

Jade has continued to be highly prized in China and even today jade jewellery sell for very high prices in auction houses and jade imitations increase in numbers.

The most important information we can gather from jade artefacts is the skill level of the ancient cultures. Unlike ancient European cultures that changed their views of what gem stone, metal or mineral was precious, ancient Chinese cultures have always treasured jade and the artefacts found are good indicators of how advanced their societies might have been.<sup>10</sup> During Bronze Age China and especially the Shang Dynasty (商朝, 1750 – 1040 BCE) there was a rise in cutting skills among the lapidaries which can be observed on the details of the jade artefacts of that time compared to those from the Neolithic Period. Even though bronze artefacts were produced jade was still highly sought after.

Why the ancient Chinese people chose jade and not some other precious gem mineral as the finest and most divine gem may never be discovered, however, as we will see in this thesis the 'Jade Road' may have played an important role in this choice.

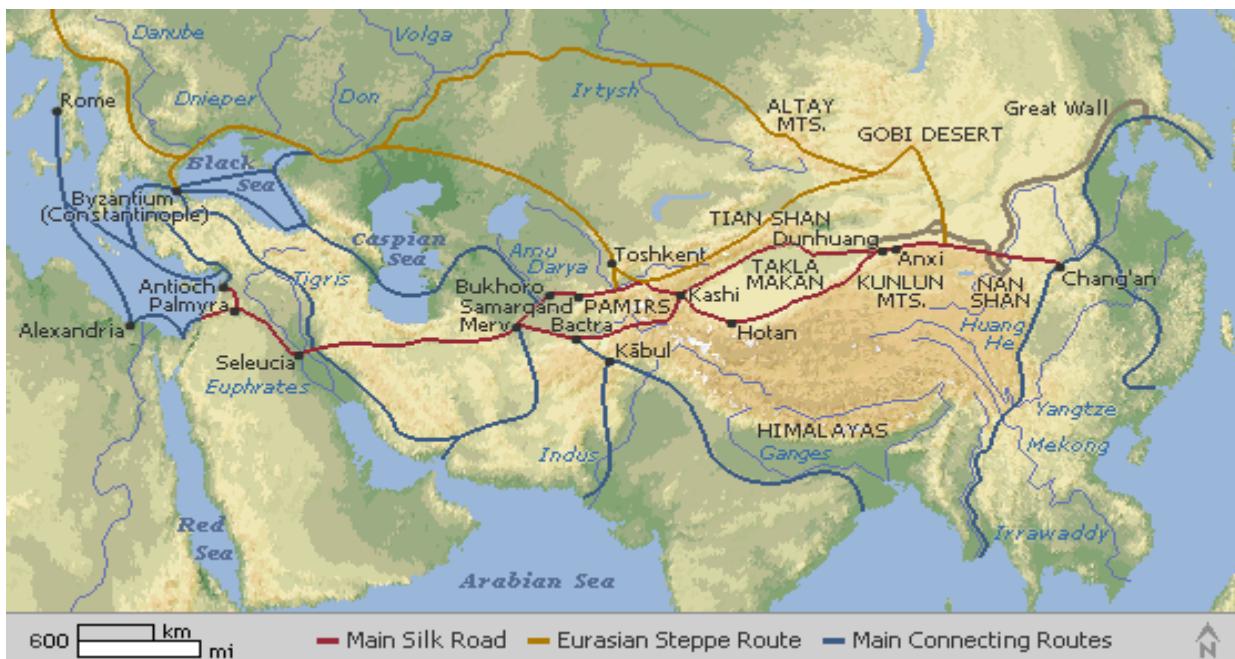
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9 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), vol. 2, 43.

10 Frances Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*, (London: The British Library, 2003), 26-27.

### 2.3 The Silk Road

The 'Silk Road' has been referred to in many English history books as the first real exchange between the East and the West. The name was coined by the German explorer and geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 because of the amount of silk that was transported along the different routes. It has been romanticised in books as an exotic road with caravans carrying treasures across the Eurasian landmass but it was in fact a myriad of roads all across China and it wasn't more than a few missionaries, explorers, geographers and archaeologists who actually travelled the entire length of the road; the goods were in fact traded between a series of agents before it reached the final destination.<sup>11</sup> The earliest records of silk having been transported from China to the Mediterranean comes from the second century BCE, during the Han Dynasty and the 'Silk Road' remains to a small degree in use until present time, though now mostly by tourists, petrol-tankers and traders following the roads shorter distances.



The silk routes from Chang'an 長安 (present day Xi'an 西安) to the Mediterranean and Rome.<sup>12</sup>

11 Frances Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*, (London: The British Library, 2003), 9-26.

12 East Site, (<http://www.east-site.com/silk-road>), 2013-05-21

### 3. Findings

The earliest reference to a 'jade road' or 玉石之路 comes from the article by Zang Zhen called 'The Jade Road – The Previous Name of the Silk Road', written in 1994. If this is the first time someone uses the term in a scientific article is uncertain, however many Chinese authors (both scientists and laymen) have used the term '玉石之路' extensively since.

Among the articles and books about jade in ancient China the archaeological evidence is indisputable, however the theories about ancient Chinese culture, the history of jade and the importance of the 'Jade Road' are all just that; theories. Most of the articles are from scientific journals with well established sources to back up their claims and with educated theories about the 'Jade Road', but some of the articles come from travel magazines, jewellery sections of business magazines and even web sites of museums. These 'unscientific' types of articles does not perhaps give us a scientifically accurate image of the 'Jade Road', they do however reflect the Chinese usage of the term 'Jade Road' and perhaps what reason these authors have had to portray it the way they do. I hope to be able to sum up this difference between the scientific evidence and the theories (both scientific and unscientific) as I go along and in part '4. Discussion' to enable a broad understanding of the 'Jade Road'.

#### 3.1 Jade Localities

To know why jade would have been transported at all we need to know where jade sources occur/doesn't occur. With different methods gemmologists, geologists and mineralogists can determine the small difference in the chemical compositions in jade from different localities thus accurately pin pointing where the jade came from.<sup>13</sup> It is very hard for archaeologists to find all sources of jade (jade mines, quarries, etc.) used in ancient China, yet with the (both ancient and modern) localities that *have* been found a geographical pattern can be distinguished that shows how certain areas have characteristic chemical features, this in turn can tell us that a piece of say nephrite originated from present day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region without us knowing the exact mining location, because we have already found that this type of nephrite

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. Adams, Russell J. Beck, 'A Signature For Nephrite Jade Using Its Strontium Isotopic Composition: Some Pacific Rim Examples', *Journal of Gemmology*, 31 (2009), 153-162.

from other sources in Xinjiang has the same characteristics as the piece of nephrite that is examined.

The two minerals that are included in the name 'jade' (nephrite and jadeite) have quite different localities and most of them outside or to the far western border of China. Nephrite has been found in Zillertal in the Tyrol, Transbaikal, New Zealand, Jordansmühl in the Zobten Mountains and within the Chinese empire in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in the region of Yarkand (莎车县) and Hetian, on the slopes of Kunlun Mountains (昆仑山) and in the Nanshan area (南山). Jadeite has been found in Upper Myanmar (Burma), Tawmaw, Uru Valley, Bhamo, Gulbashen and Kaskem Valley.<sup>14</sup>

None of these localities are within central or eastern China. So where did the jade objects used in the Xinglongwa Culture (兴隆洼文化 c. 6200 – 5400 B.C.), Majiabang and Songze cultures (马家浜文化, 嵩泽文化 c. 5000 – 3200 B.C.), Daxi and Qujialing Cultures (大溪文化, 屈家嶺文化 c. 4000 – 2600 B.C.), Shang Dynasty, etc., come from and what kind of objects have been found?



### 3.2 Archaeological Findings

The archaeological findings of jade and jade artefacts are many and spread across the entire China. Below I have gathered some of the most important findings regarding the 'Jade Road' and the theories about it.

By the Liao River (辽河) archaeologists have found jade objects dating from the Xinglongwa culture, the Xinle culture (新樂文化, 7000 – 5000 BCE), and the Hongshan culture (红山文化, 3000 – 2500 BCE).<sup>15</sup> These seem to be some of the oldest jade objects found in China but the origins of the jade used has not been determined, however since no jade sources exist in that area one can assume that they came from present day western China. In the

14 Stanley C. Nott, *Chinese Jade Throughout the Ages*, (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co, 1962), 9.

15 Kwang-Chih Chang, 'China on the Eve of the Historical Period' in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 48.

Cemetery at Dawenkou site in Tai'an, Shandong Province archaeologists excavated a total of 179 tombs dating from the Dawenkou culture (大汶口文化, 4100 – 2600 BCE), these contained, among white pottery and animal skulls, jade implements that had similar carved emblems as jades found from the Liangzhu culture (良渚文化, 3400 – 2250 BCE) suggesting an exchange of culture and cutting technique.<sup>16</sup> In 1976 archaeologists found 755 jade artefacts in the tomb of Fu Hao (妇好) in Anyang, Henan Province, dating from the Bronze Age Shang Dynasty.<sup>17</sup> Among them 300 were classified as nephrite and most of these were nephrite from the present day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous region.<sup>18</sup> In 1979 archaeologists discovered 42 ancient graves in the lower reaches of Kongque River (孔雀河) in Bayingol, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Within these tombs they found artefacts made out of agate, chalcedony and Hetian jade . Among the objects, the jade jewellery was finely carved and polished out of top-quality jade and the style was the same as that of the jade jewellery found in the Beiyinyangying site (北阴阳营遗址) in Nanjing dating from c. 4000 – 3000 BCE. The objects discovered that looked like jade axes where made out of white Hetian jade.<sup>19</sup>

In 2007 archaeologists discovered the first ancient jade mine in Subei Mongol Autonomous County (肃北蒙古族自治县) in north-western China in Gansu Province. In 2008, during their second survey, they found mining pits, tools and jade artefacts inside the mine dating from the Siba Culture (四坝文化, c. 2000 BCE) and this jade mine remained in use at least until the Eastern Han period, perhaps even into the Cao Wei and Jin dynasties (东汉, 25 – 220 CE, 曹魏 220 – 265 CE, 晋朝 265 – 420 CE).<sup>20</sup> Archaeologists have also found a connection between different ancient cultures around 4000 BCE throughout China in the way they cut and decorated

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16 Xiaoneng Yang, *New Perspectives on China's Past*, (London: Yale University Press, 2004), vol. 2, 67-70.

17 Ibid, 137-140.

18 Zhen Zang 臧振, 'Sichou zhi lu de qianshen - yushi zhi lu 丝绸之路的前身 - 玉石之路 (The Jade Road – The Previous Name of the Silk Road)', *Sichou zhi lu 丝绸之路 The Silk Road*, 2 (1994), 36.

19 Yunde Zhang 张运德, 'Zhongguo hetianyu de lishi diwei ji shengmingli 中国和田玉的历史地位及生命力 (A Tentative Analysis of the Historical Position of Hotan Jade and Its Vitality)', *Xiyu yanjiu 西域研究 The Western Regions Studies*, 3, 108.

20 Guoke Chen 陈国科, Hui Wang 王辉, Yanxiang Li 李延祥, 'Gansu subei mazongshan gu yukuang yizhi diaocha jianbao 甘肃肃北马鬃山古玉矿遗址调查简报 (Survey of the Mazongshan Ancient Jade Mine in Subei County, Gansu)', *Wenwu 文物 Cultural Relics*, (2010), 10, 33

their jade artefacts, suggesting a cultural exchange at least as early as 6000 years ago.<sup>21</sup>

What are these jade objects and jade artefacts? The earliest jade artefacts found were axe heads and daggers probably used for ritual sacrifices. Some of the findings from the Liangzhu culture were *bi discs*. A bi disc (璧) is a round disc carved out of jade with a hole in the centre, during the Liangzhu culture undecorated, but later decorated with surface carvings. Together with the bi discs of the Liangzhu culture archaeologists also found so called *congs*. A cong (琮) is cut from jade in the shape of a tube with a round inner and a eight sided outer layer, the outer layer being cut as to give the impression of a hollow tube within a rectangular block. What the meaning of these objects were in the Liangzhu culture and other Neolithic cultures is not known but they are most likely to have been used as ritual objects of some sort.<sup>22</sup> The Shuowen Jiezi (说文解字) dating from the Han Dynasty explains the bi discs as a symbol for heaven (天) and the congs as a symbol for earth (地).<sup>23</sup> However the Shuowen Jiezi is written more than three thousand years after the first bi discs were cut during the Liangzhu culture and can not be considered as proof of the usage during that time.

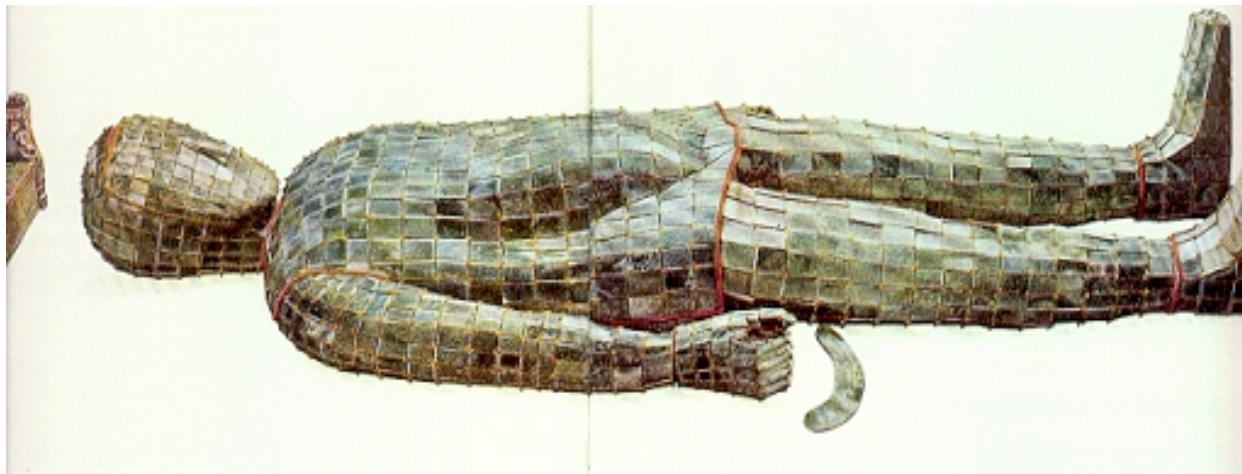
Other jade objects found include belt buckles, vases and burial suits created by cutting jade into thin squares and threading them together with metal wire into a full suit for the deceased.

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21 Kwang-Chih Chang, 'China on the Eve of the Historical Period' in *The Cambridge History...* (2006), 48.

22 Bingshan Xuan 宣炳善, 'Yuqi yu zhongguo chuantong wenhua 玉器与中国传统文化 (Jade Artefacts and Chinese Traditional Culture)', *Shijie wenwu 世界文化 World Culture*, (1998) 4, 9-10

23 Ibid, 10.



*Jade burial suit made out of thin jade plates and threaded together with gold wire.<sup>24</sup>*

Similar jade objects have been found throughout the whole of China and many of them are cut in similar styles and sometimes they even have the same characters engraved upon themselves suggesting a definite exchange of culture and cutting styles. Yet nothing has been found to support the claim that these object were shipped regularly along trade routes. This is where theories fill the gaps of the history of the 'Jade Road'.

### *3.3 The Jade Road*

Since the evidence for the 'Jade Road' exists in the form of the artefacts found throughout China there have been different theories about what they actually tell us of the jade trade of Neolithic and Bronze Age China. Many believe the artefacts to have been transported regularly along trade routes within China and to the Middle East.

Zhang Yunde (2009) says:

The Silk Road has been an important stepping stone for economic and cultural exchange between China and the West. Yet it isn't silk that has been traded, but Hetian Jade. The first road to make possible cultural exchange and commerce between Xinjiang and the central Chinese plains, between the East and the West isn't 'the Silk Road' but 'the Jade Road'. Supposing that the 'Jade Road' was the forerunner to the ancient 'Silk Road', then Hetian jade was the first goods to

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24 <http://computingchina.tripod.com>, (2013-05-30)

pave the way for economic and cultural exchange between the East and the West.<sup>25</sup>

He suggests that many parts of ancient China had a lot in common regarding culture and technical skills in the mining and cutting of jade during the Neolithic Period and Bronze Age and that jade was the stepping stone for this exchange.<sup>26</sup> This is supported by several archaeological findings such as the findings at the Cemetery at Dawenkou site which showed that different cultures had similar cutting techniques and engraving motifs of their jades.<sup>27</sup> Zhang Yunde continues to say that due to the similarities in the artefacts found from this early period in present day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Gansu Province, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia Province, Qinghai Province, the North East of China, etc., a connection between these regions had to exist.<sup>28</sup> It is this connection he refers to as the 'Jade Road'. He also suggests that the story *Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven*<sup>29</sup> which describes the travels of King Mu of Zhou as he travels from the East to the West, more or less is the exact route that jade would have been transported along since ancient times,<sup>30</sup> and this book is dated to before the Han Dynasty and the 'Silk Road' suggesting the existence of trade routes before 206 BCE. Regarding where the road went he says that the 'Jade Road' probably went from Chang'an (长安, present day Xi'an, 西安) in Shaanxi Province (陕西省), through Shanxi Province (山西省), Inner Mongolia (内蒙), Ningxia Province (宁夏省) and after entering Gansu Province (甘肃省) it continued along the same routes as the 'Silk Road' went.<sup>31</sup>

Shan Yongming (2011) agrees with Zhang Yunde about the importance of the 'Jade Road'

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25 Yunde Zhang 张运德, 'Zhongguo hetianyu de lishi diwei ji shengmingli 中国和田玉的历史...' (2009), 108.

26 Ibid, 112.

27 Xiaoneng Yang, *New Perspectives on China's Past*, (London: Yale University Press, 2004), vol. 2, 67-70.

28 Yunde Zhang 张运德, 'Zhongguo hetianyu de lishi diwei ji shengmingli 中国和田玉的历史...' (2009), 112.

29 Mu Tianzi Zhuan 穆天子传, found in the tomb of King Xiang of the Wei state during the Eastern Zhou, 770 – 256 BCE.

30 Yunde Zhang 张运德, 'Zhongguo hetianyu de lishi diwei ji shengmingli 中国和田玉的历史...' (2009), 112.

31 Ibid, 112.

and says:

Today the 'Silk Road' is universally known, yet the 'Jade Road' has not been written about until recently. Among the findings the Chinese archaeological society has revealed from the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties jade and jade artefacts have always been of great importance and the origins of these jade artefacts all point to the existence of the 'Jade Road'.<sup>32</sup>

He continues to say that jade from Hetian has been transported for 5000 to 6000 years (since the Neolithic Period) and that this trade route, preceding the 'Silk Road', went as far as the Mediterranean.<sup>33</sup> During the Han Dynasty when silk started to be traded it was along the jade routes it was transported and Shan Yongming suggests that from this period it was actually a jade and silk road (玉帛之路).<sup>34</sup>

Xuan Bingshan (1998) says that one can read about central and eastern China's ancient cultures having contact with western China's ancient cultures and how the central and western cultures acquired jade from the Kunlun Mountains in texts such as the *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* (古今图书集成, *Imperial Encyclopaedia*) and the *Tiangong Kaiwu* (天工开物, *Exploitation of the Works of Nature*).<sup>35</sup> The scientific facts behind these texts are not necessarily existent since they were written long after the Neolithic Period and the Bronze Age and the interpretation of texts to suggest that the people in them were actually travelling along the jade routes could be seen as quite minute. However if the 'Jade Road' existed until the Han Dynasty (when/if it became the 'Silk Road') or if they both in fact were the same road(s) then these texts can give an important description of where the jade/silk routes went throughout China and to the Mediterranean and they do deserve to be further studied by archaeologists knowledgeable in this field.

Gan Fuxi has studied the techniques and the materials used in ancient China to make adornments. In Kiziltur's graveyard in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region the earliest glass

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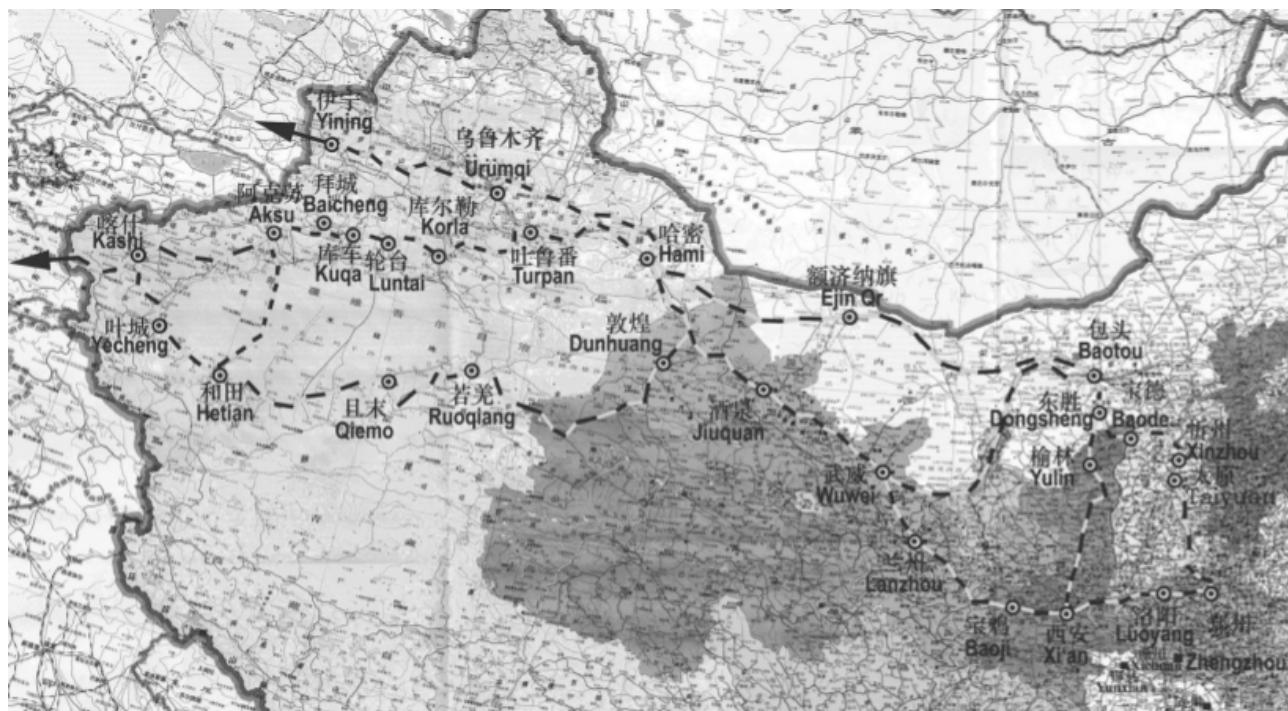
32 Yongming Shan 单永明, 'Zhuisu qiannian – yushi zhi lu 追溯千年 – 玉石之路', *Zhongguo baoyushi 中国宝玉石* *China Gems & Jades*, 3 (2011), 156

33 Ibid, 156.

34 Ibid, 157.

35 Bingshan Xuan 宣炳善, 'Yuqi yu zhongguo chuantong wenhua 玉器与中国传统文化 (Jade Artefacts and Chinese Traditional Culture)', *Shijie wenhua 世界文化 World Culture*, 4 (1998), 9-11.

beads have been unearthed and with the help of studying the chemical composition of these glass beads Gan Fuxi has managed to find out which type of mineral/sand it was made from. He has dated them to around 1100 – 800 BCE (Western Zhou, 西周时代, to the Spring and Autumn Period, 春秋时代) and confirmed that they were made locally but with the technique coming from west Asia.<sup>36</sup> He has also found that there has been a trade between today's western China and west Asia and even as far as Egypt, where jade and other gemstones have been traded to and from western China.<sup>37</sup> With these findings he has also drawn a suggested map of how the glass technique and gemstones may have been transported within and outside of China;



*Map of 'the Glass and Jade Road' within China as suggested by Gan Fuxi.*

36 Fuxi Gan 干福熹, 'Boli he yushi zhi lu 玻璃和玉石之路 (The Glass and Jade Road)', *Guangxi minzu daxue xuebao (ziran kexueban)* 广西民族大学学报 (自然科学版) *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Natural Science Edition)*, 15, 4 (2009), 7-9.

37 Ibid, 9-12.



*Map of 'the Glass and Jade Road' outside of China as suggested by Gan Fuxi. The place names from left to right are: Luxor, Babylon, Baghdad, Ecbatana, Tehran, Nishapur, Anau ,Ashgabat, Tashkent, Badakhshan, Kashgar, Almaty, Hetian, Aksu, Yining, Ürümqi, Hami, Ejin Banner and Lanzhou.<sup>38</sup>*

This suggests that long distance trades were not only for silk but had actually existed almost a thousand years before silk was transported along these routes. Most of the authors cited in this thesis emphasize the jade routes within China but Gan Fuxi's discoveries give good scientific evidence of the existence of the 'Jade Road' outside of China and as seen by his map it could very probably have been the predecessor of the 'Silk Road'.<sup>39</sup>

Zhang Gaoling 张高陵 (2011) gives readers a romantic depiction of his first travels along the 'Silk Road' to the West interwoven with facts about the 'Jade Road' and the ancient history of the 'Silk Road' and how much it has influenced trade and economies since ancient times (and to some degree even today). His article 'Cong “yushi zhi lu” dao “sichou zhi lu”, 从“玉石之路”到“丝绸之路” (From “Jade Road” to “Silk Road”)', in the Chinese magazine *Zhongguo Shangren* 中

38 Fuxi Gan 干福熹, 'Boli he yushi zhi lu 玻璃和玉石之路 (The Glass and Jade Road)'..., 13.

39 See the map of the 'Silk Road' on page 7.

国商人 (China Businessman) is far from a scientific take on the 'Jade Road', it does however give us a good understanding of the use of the term 'Jade Road' within China today. In his article he writes without hesitation about how the 'Silk Road' used to be the 'Jade Road' and both are in fact one and the same and he describes the ancient peoples as brave creators of the trade routes.<sup>40</sup> He says that the trade between China and as far west as the Mediterranean has existed since Neolithic times and that cultural exchanges were enabled, strengthening all cultures, however he is very distinctly of the opinion that as soon as trade began it was more a question of China and later the Han people influencing other cultures rather than the other way around.<sup>41</sup> Claiming that the Han people influenced other cultures is a very bold statement and something that lacks any scientific evidence. Since he also says that it was in fact Hetian jade from today's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region that was the most sought after type of jade, one wonders if he believes that it was the early descendants of present day Han people who first came to Xinjiang and started the trade routes and not people from Xinjiang travelling to central and eastern China. The article is, as mentioned earlier, not scientific yet it shows the usage of the term 'Jade Road' as something that strengthens the historical importance of ancient China's cultures and the influence China has had in Asia and even Europe since the Neolithic Period. The article is also written in a romantic style resembling the way English authors write semi-fictional works about the 'Silk Road' and adds little, if anything, to a scientific understanding of the 'Jade Road'.

The Silk Route Museum in Jiuquan, Gansu Province, has a large number of archaeological findings from the 'Silk Road' together with the 'Jade Road collection' consisting of ancient jade pieces found throughout China (many of the pieces mentioned in '3.2 Archaeological Findings'). The museum does not seem too confident about the 'Jade Road' facts and from their web page one can read the following quote about the 'Silk Road':

... But many historians believe that this Trade Route started long before the creation of Silk and was called the Jade Route. Jade was used for both tools and for its beauty but also Chinese believe it had spiritual properties. [sic]<sup>42</sup>

40 Gaoling Zhang 张高陵, 'Cong "yushi zhi lu" dao "sichou zhi lu" 从“玉石之路”到“丝绸之路” (From “Jade Road” to “Silk Road”), 中国商人 *China Businessman*, (2011) 12, 104-107

41 Ibid, 104-107

42 The Silk Route Museum, ([www.silk routemuseum.com/en/history.htm](http://www.silk routemuseum.com/en/history.htm)), 2013-05-21

#### 4. Discussion

As seen by the localities of jadeite and nephrite findings, none of the top quality can be found within central or eastern China. Yet it seems jadeite and nephrite have been sought after since Neolithic times and this has been proven by the artefacts found throughout China made out of jade originating from present day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. There have been several archaeological findings of jade originating from present day western China in the eastern parts dating from the Neolithic Period to the Bronze Age and there are several old Chinese texts (with varying scientific support) referring to people travelling to the Kunlun Mountains and Hetian in western China, either as a passing by on a longer journey or to acquire Hetian jade. All of these texts are dated to some time after the Bronze Age, yet they have travelled by what seems to be the same routes as the authors cited in this thesis believe were the jade routes and perhaps they travelled those routes *because* they were at the time in regular use.

Several archaeological sites from Neolithic and Bronze Age times have found jade artefacts with similar lapidary techniques and similar carvings which suggests a cultural exchange and perhaps an exchange of goods as well. A big demand develops a big production and trade and since these minerals was not to be found within central China the ancient Chinese peoples started routes connecting the East with the West; these are what are referred to as the 'Jade Road'. What people who started the trade is disputed; some believing it was Han people, others that it was the peoples from today's western China and western Asia. The latter has more scientific evidence and seems to be the most accurate guess of who started the jade trade. Chinese scholars have different views of how much these routes have been used and which way they went and since some of the land travelled has changed (between the Neolithic Period to the Han Dynasty, a span of almost 12.000 years) from marshes and lakes to plains it is highly likely that these routes have changed as well. However all of the authors cited in this thesis agree that jade has been traded across China long before the silk trade began. Some believe the road spread from around Hetian in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in western China to the central Chinese plains and eastern China, some believe it went as far west as Egypt and the Mediterranean, others do not emphasize where the actual trade routes may have been located and

instead focuses on the importance of the early development during the Neolithic Period obvious from the skills of the ancient lapidaries. There is strong evidence for a trade between present day western and eastern China, and western Chinese and western Asian cultures. The western Asian ancient cultures have at least taught the western Chinese cultures the glass making technique and some gem material has been traded to western China. If this trade has been the same as that to the eastern parts of China then the peoples of Xinjiang has been the connecting link of the longest land trade route in history.

With the jade trade cultural exchange was possible and soon more goods were shipped along the jade routes. Somewhere around the Han Dynasty it seems silk was in high demand, and perhaps the most traded goods during that time became silk instead of jade. Silk was traded from China to the Mediterranean while most of the Chinese authors in this thesis only suggests that jade has been transported within present China (with the exception of Gan Fuxi and Shan Yongming who suggest jade traders to have travelled as far as Egypt and the Mediterranean); one could think of the 'Silk Road' as the full length trade route from China to the Mediterranean starting during the Han Dynasty and the 'Jade Road' as the routes within the Chinese Empires since Neolithic times. During the Neolithic Period and the Bronze Age, China as we know it today didn't exist and with the evidence of trade existing during this period between today's western China and western Asia one can assume that the 'Jade Road' went outside of the borders of today's China and perhaps even as far as the Mediterranean and Egypt (with strong evidence of trade from today's western China to at least western Asia).

It was from the Han Dynasty that Ferdinand von Richthofen decided was to be the beginning of the Seidenstraße, the 'Silk Road'. Many Chinese scholars believe that the 'Jade Road' was the Silk Road's predecessor and that in fact jade was the goods that paved the way for the trade and cultural exchange between the East and the West. If the jade traders were the first to travel across China, it is very plausible that other traders would have travelled the same roads, and it makes the theory of jade as stepping stone for trade between the East and the West very likely. If the 'Jade Road' was often travelled by traders then China's Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures may have interchanged culturally more than is recognized today and at a very early stage, perhaps even influencing the languages of eastern/western China.

Jade has been a good indicator of the cultural and technical advances of Chinese cultures;

if they had adornments it suggests that they had advanced from a more primitive way of life into one with hierarchy, social classes and good enough food supplies to enable energy to be spent on producing luxury items. Thus the 'Jade Road' also sheds new light upon the technical skills of lapidaries in ancient China and the influence kings, lords or emperors must have had over their people in order to mine, manufacture and transport the jade and the jade artefacts.

The 'Jade Road' adds a lot of importance to the western Chinese ancient cultures (something that is somewhat overlooked in English literature compared to Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures in the central and eastern parts of China) because of the early development and the influence they may have had on eastern Chinese cultures. This is something that should be of interest to archaeologists interested in Asian and Chinese cultures to investigate further (Chinese archaeologists have already realized the importance of this area and have started to investigate more in western China).

There is evidence for jade having been transported however there is no evidence of any kind of actual routes taken by traders; the 'Jade Road' is a name for something that exists between the archaeological findings. Perhaps this is the reason for not embracing the term the 'Jade Road' in the West; there just isn't enough evidence to suggest regular trade routes and it is easier to add a short 'pre-history' chapter about jade trade in the 'Silk Road' books. However, it is important to find more evidence about the ancient jade trade since it is highly likely that if these routes were as popular as most of the authors in this thesis suggest then the silk traders would have used the same routes. The jade routes and the silk routes may well have been the very same routes and if so it becomes a question of which people from which region founded the ancient trade routes that became the world famous 'Silk Road' instead (and according to most of the authors cited in this thesis it clearly was jade traders from present day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region). This is not just a question of terminology (should it be called the 'Silk Road' or the 'Jade Road') but a lack in most books about the 'Silk Road' of emphasizing the early stages of the 'Jade/Silk Road'.

Unscientific articles and usage of 'Jade Road' in today's China are to a majority romanticised and give the impression of Chinese peoples influencing and improving other cultures. The article in this thesis of this kind was also written with nationalistic undertones and other facts about emperors god-like moral conducts and knowledge and that trust in the Chinese

nation always strengthens the society.<sup>43</sup>

It may be impossible to find archaeological evidence of the actual routes that were used yet it is proven by archaeological evidence that jade indeed has been traded across China in ancient times well before the 'Silk Road' and however rare or often the traders crossed the gigantic land mass that is present day China to trade their jade we can still call these routes the 'Jade Road'.

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43 See Zhang Gaoling 張高陵 (2011)

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