



*Reviewed by Eric J. Hoffman*

## **EARLY CHINESE JADES IN THE HARVARD ART MUSEUMS**

*By Jenny F. So*

Harvard Art Museums (Yale University Press), 359 pp, color illus., hardcover, 10 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches, Retail price \$60

In 1943 Harvard University had the good fortune to receive one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Chinese archaic jades ever assembled, the bequest of alumnus Grenville Winthrop. The eminent scholar Professor Max Loehr took on the task, in 1975, of cataloging and publishing this spectacular collection of more than 700 pieces. These range from the Neolithic era (thousands of years BCE) through the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE); at least half are Eastern Zhou (770–221 BCE), a period of exquisite jade workmanship. The jades include objects of personal adornment, ritual and court regalia, and funerary jades for both men and women.

Loehr's masterful book was "a seminal text in the scholarship of early Chinese jades" and is still a primary reference for their study. But much has transpired in the nearly 45 years since its publication, in the fields of Chinese archaeology and jade scholarship. Dr. So, who studied under Loehr at Harvard, has

taken on the challenge of creating an extremely scholarly book that goes well beyond merely updating Loehr. Whereas Loehr's book cataloged nearly the entire collection (but almost entirely in black and white photos), So's book focuses on just 102 jades, in related groups for in-depth discussion and comparison, and all in gorgeous color. The serious jade student will therefore want to have both books at hand. And although Loehr's datings were careful and cautious, and remarkably accurate for the time (Hongshan jades were virtually unknown then), a surprising number of Winthrop's jades have subsequently been related to as much as 1000 years *earlier*.



*Linked Jade Disk Pendants, Late Eastern Zhou period (500–400 BCE)*

So's book begins with a brief introduction to jade as a material. It addresses the still unsettled question of where the archaic jade carvers found their raw material as well as the hard abrasives needed to work it (jade is laboriously ground away, rather than "carved" like wood or chipped like marble).

A technical chapter takes a deeper dive into jade mineralogy, including the sources of jade's colors and a discussion of pseudojades that were also worked in antiquity. This chapter also examines tooling and detailing, and the tricky subject of jade "alteration," all as possible aids in dating.

A chapter on "archaeological context" follows, starting with the Hongshan culture in northeast China (c. 3750–3000 BCE). This chapter attempts to make sense of the enormous body of controlled excavations since Loehr's book. Then follow the catalog chapters themselves in roughly chronological order, beginning around 4000 BCE. Related groups of ornamental, ritual, and court regalia jades are discussed in light of the latest archaeological and scientific studies, including up-to-date (and hard to find) information on how these jades were worn.



*Jade Arc Pendant with Dragon Heads, Late Eastern Zhou period (300–225 BCE)*

The color photography throughout is often excellent, with some notable exceptions. Some of the jades are photographed on dark backgrounds, which sometimes does not work out well (for example, the dark hare on a dark ground, p. 167). And showing pieces at actual size or less of course works against

the smaller pieces. But this is, after all, academic rather than glamor photography. On the other hand, some excellent full-page extreme close-ups are provided where they can enhance the discussion.

This is a superbly researched, thoroughly up-to-date, extensively footnoted and seriously academic treatment of one of the finest archaic jade collections in the world. Dr. So, professor emerita in the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and former senior curator of ancient Chinese art at the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Galleries, has made a substantial and valuable contribution to jade scholarship.



*Jade Dragon Pendant, Late Eastern Zhou period (500–400 BCE)*