

Jade Burial Objects and Tomb Hierarchy in Yue Aristocratic Graves in Zhejiang during the Late Spring and Autumn to Early Warring States Periods

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Abstract. During the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States period, a time when “arrogation” (transgression of burial norms) was prevalent, the number of dragon-shaped jade huang and jade dragon-shaped pendants buried in Tomb D14M5 at Longba, Anji, exceeds that of second-tier tombs. However, an analysis from the perspectives of local burial jade traditions, associated grave goods, and the jade artifacts themselves suggests that this numerical excess cannot be defined as arrogation. It is hypothesized that the discrepancy between the ranking of burial jades and tomb construction may reflect the conspicuous consumption of jades as symbols of wealth in burial customs.

Keywords: Yue aristocratic tombs, tomb hierarchy, jade artifact ranking

1. Introduction

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, aristocratic groups frequently engaged in the use of objects and ceremonial implements that transgressed established norms—a phenomenon known as “arrogation.” Scholars such as Xu Dongshu [1], Li Lingling [2], Song Yin [3], and Tan Xiao [4] have examined this collapse of ritual propriety through analyses of historical records, musical instruments, and ritual bronze vessels. Research on arrogation in burial goods during these periods primarily appears in archaeological reports. Numerous finds, such as the No. 1 Chu Tomb at Huangmei in Hubei [5], the No. 1 Qin Gong Tomb at Fengxiang in Shaanxi [6], and the Ying State Cemetery at Pingdingshan in Henan [7], demonstrate that the assemblages of burial objects often exceeded the ranks to which the tomb owners were entitled. Overall, current research has focused on regions with concentrations of feudal states such as the Central Plains, Shandong, and Hubei, emphasizing musical instruments and bronze ritual vessels among burial goods, while giving insufficient attention to the southeastern frontier regions.

The Yue State was one of the principal feudal states on the southeastern frontier during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Unlike the Central Plains and other states, Yue did not maintain a funerary tradition of burying bronze vessels. However, under the influence of local cultural traditions, jade held a prominent place among the grave goods in Yue aristocratic tombs; typical forms such as dragon-shaped jade huang and jade dragon-shaped pendants signaled the tomb owner’s social rank. Against the backdrop of ritual collapse, did burial jades in Yue tombs display

arrogation? Zhejiang was a key region under Yue rule, where many aristocratic tombs have been discovered. The late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States period marked a time of Yue's growing power and territorial expansion, but also of ritual disorder and frequent arrogation. This study examines Yue aristocratic tombs in Zhejiang from this period, exploring the relationship between burial jades, tomb hierarchy, and the identities of the tomb owners. It also seeks to analyze how burial jades reflected the region's distinctive funerary culture under the influence of its historical context and burial traditions.

2. Yue aristocratic burial jade traditions and typical grave goods

During the pre-Qin period, jade burial practices were widespread in Yue. As Zhang Min has noted, "burial jades were one of the indicative elements of Yue aristocratic tombs" [8]. Many excavated Yue aristocratic tombs have yielded burial jades. Archaeological investigations of tombs dating from the Western Zhou to the early Spring and Autumn periods—such as the Xiaorenjian Tomb in Huangyan, D1M11 at Laohushan in Yuyao, the Dadunding Tomb at Xishan in Quzhou, D406 at Bianshan in Changxing, and the Zhou-period mound tomb at the Dongyang service area—have recovered jade huang, jade jue, and a variety of jade ornaments. Examination of tombs from the Western Zhou to the early Spring and Autumn periods where jades have been excavated reveals that these tombs were neither the largest in scale nor the richest in burial goods. For example, in the No. 1 mound at Laohushan in Yuyao [9], M11—which yielded a jade jue—was a shallow earthen pit tomb with only a single proto-porcelain dou. Among the 34 stone-chamber mound tombs excavated at Bianshan in Changxing [10], no jade artifacts were found in D429, the largest and most richly furnished tomb at the main peak, while D406 contained a jade huang. This suggests that during the Western Zhou to early Spring and Autumn periods, there was no clearly defined institutional standard for jade burial in Yue. By the Warring States period, however, the Hongshan Yue tomb group in Wuxi [11] demonstrates clear stratification: the extra-large Qiu Cheng mound contained numerous dragon-shaped jade huang and jade dragon-shaped pendants; the large Laohu mound contained variant dragon-patterned jade artifacts; while the small Caojiafen and Zoujiadun mounds each contained only a single bi-shaped jade pendant. Burial jades became key indicators for distinguishing tomb hierarchy, with the rank of jade artifacts corresponding to the rank of the tomb. Zhang Min classified and analyzed the burial jades from the Hongshan Yue aristocratic tombs in Wuxi, identifying forms such as dragon-shaped huang, dragon-phoenix huang, cloud-patterned huang, dragon-head huang, coiled chi-dragon-patterned bi-shaped pendants, valley-patterned ring-shaped pendants, twisted-thread-patterned ring-shaped pendants, projecting dragon-patterned bi-shaped pendants, and double-dragon tube-shaped pendants. He also argued that among these burial jades, huang-shaped and bi-shaped pendants served as primary ornaments indicating the tomb owner's identity and rank in life, with huang-shaped pendants carrying especially pronounced significance for rank [8]. How, then, did burial jades in Yue tombs appear during the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States periods? Statistical analysis indicates that by this time, Yue burial jades had developed relatively standardized forms and motifs. In terms of form, huang-shaped and bi-shaped pendants held a central place. Common decorative motifs included dragon shapes and variant dragon patterns such as valley patterns and twisted-thread patterns. Overall, dragon-shaped jade huang and jade dragon-shaped pendants can be regarded as the typical burial jades of Yue aristocratic tombs during this period.

Did the dragon-shaped jade huang and jade dragon-shaped pendants from the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States periods serve, like the formal pendants of the Warring States period,

as indicators of tomb hierarchy? To answer this, it is necessary to examine the classification of six tombs.

Table 1. Inventory of burial goods in Yue aristocratic tombs, late spring and autumn to early warring states period

Tomb	Tomb Type	Mound Dimensions (m)	Passage Type	Tomb Length (m)	Burial Jades		Preservation Status
					huang-shaped pendants	bi-shaped pendants	
Shaoxing Yinshan M1	Mound tomb (flat-ground timber-lined)	?	“Jia”-shaped	100	?	?	Looted
Dongyang Qianshan D2M1	?	36×26×4.7	“Jia”-shaped	22.12	Phoenix-head 1, Floral-tooth 13	27	Intact
Anji Longshan D141M1	Mound tomb	50×42×8	“Jia”-shaped	≈25	Standing-bird dragon 1, Dragon 1	Twisted-thread 1	Looted
Changxing Bizi Mountain M1	Mound tomb	32×18×3.7	“Jia”-shaped	21.8	Cloud pattern 2	Valley pattern 2	Intact
Anji Longba D14M5	Vertical pit	?	Rectangular	≈9.68	Kui-dragon 2, Dragon 3, Cloud pattern 2	Twisted-thread 9	Intact
Shangyu Phoenix Mountain M3	Vertical pit	?	Rectangular	≈7.57		Plain-surfaced 1	Intact

Note: Tomb length = chamber length + passage length

3. Tomb classification and hierarchy

The excavation of the Hongshan Yue aristocratic cemetery in Wuxi was the first to reveal clear hierarchical differentiation among Yue aristocratic tombs. Based on the scale of mound construction, tomb structure, and burial goods, the archaeological report classified the seven excavated tombs into four ranks [11]. The strong correlation between tomb hierarchy and the rank of burial goods at Hongshan reflects a clear hierarchical gradient, making these classification standards an important reference for studying Yue aristocratic tombs. However, given that some tombs were damaged or looted, using the quantity of burial goods as an indicator can introduce significant bias. Therefore, this study relies solely on tomb scale as the primary indicator of hierarchy. Based on this criterion, the six Yue aristocratic tombs under study can be divided into three ranks. First-Rank Tomb (1 tomb): Shaoxing Yinshan M1 [12]. This tomb features a flat-ground wooden construction, with mound dimensions exceeding 50 meters in both length and width, and a total tomb length of over 50 meters. The academic community generally agrees that its occupant was Yunchang, the first king of Yue. Among known Yue aristocratic tombs, Yinshan M1 is unique in possessing defensive facilities (a surrounding moat) and a layered rammed-earth mound. As Chen Yuanfu observed: “The rammed-earth mound of the Yinshan Yue King’s tomb is constructed in layers. Reviewing mound tombs from the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods, their mounds were generally unrammed; even the larger ones with some ramming did not exhibit the uniformly layered, solid construction seen at Yinshan.” Chen further speculated that “at the time, the Yinshan Yue King’s tomb likely featured a sacrificial hall” [13]. In summary, as a feudal king’s tomb, Yinshan M1 is distinguished from other aristocratic tombs by its defensive features, layered rammed-earth construction, and the presence of

a sacrificial hall. Second-Rank Tombs (3 tombs): Dongyang Qianshan D2M1, Anji Longshan D141M1, and Changxing Bizi Mountain M1 [14-16]. These tombs all feature “jia”-shaped tomb passages, with mound dimensions between 40 and 50 meters, and tomb lengths around 20 meters. Dongyang Qianshan D2M1’s grave goods consist entirely of jade and stone artifacts, including unfinished pieces and raw jade materials—object No. 34, for example, may have been a circular lacquered wooden box containing multiple small ornaments and unfinished jade materials. Chen Yuanfu speculated that this was a box of jade-working materials, suggesting that the tomb’s occupant was a noble in charge of jade production. The outer pit of Anji Longshan D141M1 contained imitation bronze hard pottery ritual vessels and suspended bells, while two lacquered wooden armors were found inside the tomb, indicating that the occupant held high status, likely as a military commander. Changxing Bizi Mountain M1 is similar, with the outer pit yielding numerous imitation bronze proto-porcelain and hard pottery musical instruments, suggesting the occupant was a high-ranking noble. Overall, the second-rank tombs appear to belong to senior nobles responsible for managing jade production, military affairs, or other important state functions. Third-Rank Tombs (2 tombs): Anji Longba D14M5 [17] and Shangyu Phoenix Mountain M3 [18]. These tombs have rectangular tomb passages and overall lengths of approximately 10 meters. Anji Longba D14M5 yielded imitation bronze ritual pottery, suggesting the occupant was a Yue noble of relatively high social status. Shangyu Phoenix Mountain M3 produced a Yue King Bugang–inscribed jade spear, similar in form to stone spears excavated in Shaoxing in 1957 and 1973, though this alone does not confirm the tomb owner’s identity; other grave goods included a bronze sword and eight bronze arrowheads. It is proposed that the occupant was likely a high-ranking military officer, with the jade spear possibly serving as a royal reward. Overall, third-rank tombs lacked attached burial pits and ritual musical goods, indicating that their occupants held lower status compared to those in higher ranks.

4. Discrepancies in rank and their causes

Reflecting on the previous chapters reveals a noteworthy phenomenon: although Anji Longba D14M5 is classified as a third-rank tomb, the number and variety of its dragon-shaped jade huang and jade dragon-shaped pendants actually exceed those of second-rank tombs such as Dongyang Qianshan D2M1 and Anji Longshan D141M1. This indicates a clear discrepancy between the tomb’s structural rank and the rank suggested by its burial jades. Considering the broader historical context, it is true that the phenomenon of arrogation—using grave goods beyond one’s entitled status—was widespread during the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States periods. However, Yue had relatively limited contact with the Central Plains and other states at this time, and its burial customs displayed strong local cultural traditions. This raises the question: can the mismatch between jade burial rank and tomb construction rank in Yue tombs truly be defined as arrogation? To address this, the issue must be analyzed from three perspectives: local burial jade traditions, other categories of grave goods, and the jade artifacts themselves.

First, examining local burial jade traditions shows that before the late Spring and Autumn period, Yue had not yet established clear institutional regulations for jade burial ranks. Arrogation is defined as behavior that violates such established norms. As discussed in Chapter 1, burial jades in Yue tombs from the Western Zhou to early Spring and Autumn periods show no evidence of consistent, formalized rank indicators. In the absence of such standards, the notion of arrogation is inapplicable.

Second, analysis of other types of grave goods reveals no evidence of transgressing tomb hierarchy during this period. Taking the example of proto-porcelain vessels—which were widely included in Yue burials during the Eastern and Western Zhou periods—and drawing on Wu Tong’s

methodology [19], an analysis of the proportion of proto-porcelain vessels relative to total grave goods shows a steady increase from the early Western Zhou to the late Spring and Autumn periods. First- and second-rank tombs consistently contain large quantities of proto-porcelain ritual vessels modeled after bronze forms, whereas such vessels are rarely found in third-rank tombs. This indicates that, at least in terms of proto-porcelain ritual vessels, there was no evidence of arrogation in Yue aristocratic tombs from the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States periods. Consequently, the discrepancy between jade rank and tomb construction rank cannot be explained as arrogation.

Table 2. Statistics on proto-porcelain burial goods in Yue tombs

Period	Item Type	Tomb Rank						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Western Zhou (Early–Late)	Total burial items (pcs)			41-90	26-40	13-25	6-12	1-5
	Proto-porcelain items			31-65	19-30	8-18	4-7	0-3
Late Western Zhou to Mid Spring and Autumn	Total burial items (pcs)			71-110	41-70	21-40	11-20	1-10
	Proto-porcelain items			51-110	26-50	16-25	8-15	0-7
Late Spring and Autumn to Warring States	Total burial items (pcs)	> 500	121-500	81-120	61-80	41-60	21-40	1-20
	Proto-porcelain items	> 200	61-200	51-60	41-50	21-40	11-20	1-10

Note: Table adapted from "A Study on Conspicuous Consumption Burial Customs in Eastern and Western Zhou Yue Tombs."

Finally, focusing on the jade artifacts themselves reveals additional nuance. Jades from tombs such as Anji Longshan D141M1 and Changxing Bizi Mountain M1 exhibit high purity, minimal inclusions, and finely executed, fluid carving. In contrast, the jades from Longba D14M5 are of lower quality, with more impurities and inconsistent coloration, and the carving is simpler and less refined. Although Longba D14M5 may appear to "transgress" in terms of the number and variety of formal jade pendants, its jade artifacts still adhere to strict rank distinctions when quality and craftsmanship are considered. This indicates that during the Eastern and Western Zhou periods, Yue's jade burial system did not measure status purely by quantity; the material quality and technical refinement of jades were equally critical indicators of status. This also suggests that the hierarchical logic underlying jade use in Yue funerary culture remained fundamentally intact.

In summary, the observed discrepancies between burial jade rank and tomb construction rank in Yue aristocratic tombs from the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States periods cannot be adequately explained by arrogation. Instead, these differences may reflect the increasing emphasis on jade's symbolic role as a marker of wealth, shaped by the influence of conspicuous consumption in contemporary burial customs.



Figure 1. Jade dragon-shaped pendant from Anji Longshan D141M1 (source: Zhejiang Anji Longshan Yue aristocratic tomb)



Figure 2. Jade dragon-shaped pendant from Anji Longba D14M5 (source: excavation report of the warring states tomb at Anji Longba)



Figure 3. Dragon-shaped jade huang from Changxing Bizi Mountain M1 (source: Zhejiang Changxing Bizi Mountain Yue aristocratic tomb)



Figure 4. Dragon-shaped jade huang from Anji Longba D14M5 (source: excavation report of the warring states tomb at Anji Longba)

5. Conclusion and discussion

This paper has focused on the jade burial goods found in Yue aristocratic tombs in Zhejiang during the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States periods, addressing three main questions. First, it reviewed the state of jade burial practices in Yue tombs during the Eastern and Western Zhou periods, finding that from the Western Zhou to early Spring and Autumn periods, there were no clear institutionalized rank distinctions for burial jades. Second, drawing on the classification standards of the Hongshan cemetery, this study used tomb size as the primary criterion to divide six tombs, including Dongyang Qianshan D2M1, into three ranks and inferred the likely identities of their occupants. Third, from the perspectives of local jade burial traditions, other grave goods, and the jade artifacts themselves, it analyzed why the discrepancies observed between jade rank and tomb construction rank during the late Spring and Autumn to early Warring States periods in Yue aristocratic tombs cannot be defined as arrogation, and proposed that these differences may instead

reflect the growing emphasis on jade as a marker of wealth. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. It does not conduct an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes for the observed rank discrepancies but merely offers a preliminary hypothesis. Furthermore, the study sample is limited to a small number of tombs, with constraints in both geographic coverage and chronological range, making it insufficient to fully represent the burial jade culture of Yue across the entire Eastern and Western Zhou periods. Future research should expand the sample size and adopt interdisciplinary approaches to more comprehensively and deeply reveal the connotations and developmental patterns of Yue funerary culture.

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