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<i>Module Code:</i> SIC4007 <i>Module title:</i> Sinological English I: A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship	<i>Student number:</i> 2205828
<i>For completion by marker:</i> <i>Comments:</i>	
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The Ritual Functions and Moral Connotations of Wearing Jade

— Centered on the Texts of The Book of Rites

1. Introduction

Jade is the core carrier of Chinese ritual–musical civilization, not merely an ornamental object. The ancient system of jade–wearing was rooted in the ritual system of the Zhou dynasty, combining three essential functions: bodily discipline, hierarchical identification, and moral education. This paper takes *Yu Zao* 玉藻, *Pin Yi* 聘義 in *The Book of Rites* 禮記, and *Liji zhushu* 禮記注疏 as its main textual sources. It examines three dimensions: the disciplinary function of self–cultivation and mind–rectification, the status function of rank distinction, and the moral function of virtue–analogy. Jade–wearing regulates gait through the sound of jade and restrains the inner self through external ritual, achieving self–cultivation as unity of body and mind. It distinguishes superior and inferior status through jade material, colour, and ribbon forms, constructing a stable ritual–musical social order. It correlates the natural qualities of jade with the five constant virtues of the noble person (junzi 君子), elevating ritual objects to moral self–cultivation.

2. Rectifying the Mind and Conduct: External and Internal Discipline in Jade–Centred Self–Cultivation

2.1 External

Yu Zao 玉藻 in *The Book of Rites* 禮記 clearly states: The meaning of jade–wearing for self–cultivation in *Yu Zao* 玉藻 serves both to standardise external demeanour and to stabilise inner thoughts, forming a complete logic from external regulation to internalisation. According to *Yu Zao* 玉藻 and its commentaries, ancient jade pendants combined chongya 衝牙, huang 璜, heng 珩 and other pieces in regular forms. When the noble person walks, the jades strike one another. The right–side pieces correspond to zhi 徵 and jiao 角; the left to gong 宮 and yu 羽, naturally matching the five tones.

Only by walking calmly and correctly, standing upright, bowing slightly forward when advancing and lifting the head slightly when retreating, can the noble person produce orderly, melodic jade sounds. Hasty or slovenly movement creates chaotic, unregulated noise. The sound of jade thus becomes an immediate ritual yardstick, constantly restraining bodily conduct, urging one to reject frivolity and abide by ritual norms. Ancient rituals strictly governed gait in different contexts: quick steps outside the gate matched the *Cai Qi* 采齊 rhythm; walking in the hall followed the *Si Xia* 肆夏 music. Circling and turning all followed rules. The sound of jade echoed ritual music, turning abstract requirements into perceptible, verifiable standards that excluded all unruly action.¹

2.1 Internal

On this basis, jade-wearing further calms the mind by disciplining the body. *Yu Zao* 玉藻 says: ‘So also the man of rank, when in his carriage, heard the harmonious sounds of its bells; and, when walking, those of his pendant jade-stones; and in this way evil and depraved thoughts found no entrance into his mind.’² By wearing jade all day and maintaining dignified, ritual-compliant bearing, the noble person settles his vital energy and calms his heart, so that impetuous, depraved, or idle thoughts cannot arise. Long-term external ritual discipline gradually becomes internal moral self-regulation. The sound of jade constantly reminds the noble person to remain reverent and rule-abiding, finally achieving uprightness in body, conduct, and mind. This is the core meaning of the Zhou-dynasty practice that ‘a noble person does not part with jade without cause’.

3. Distinguishing Status and Order: Jade as a Symbol of Hierarchy

3.1 The material of jade

According to *Yu Zao* 玉藻 and its commentaries: ‘The son of Heaven wore his pendant composed of beads of white jade, hung on dark-coloured strings; a duke or marquis, his of

1 Original text: ‘古之君子必佩玉，右徵角，左宮羽。趨以《采齊》，行以《肆夏》，周還中規，折還中矩，進則揖之，退則揚之，然後玉鏘鳴也。’

2 James Legge, trans., *The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)*, Book XXVIII, Sacred Books of the East (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), p. 18.

jade-beads of hill-azure, on vermilion strings; a Great officer, his of beads of aqua-marine, on black strings; an heir-son, his of beads of Yü jade, on variegated strings; an ordinary officer, his of beads of jade-like quartz, on orange-coloured strings.³ White jade, pure and flawless, is supreme and reserved for the Son of Heaven, representing sovereign authority. Dark—mountain jade, with heavy patterns and deep colour, corresponds to dukes and marquises. Water—grey jade, elegant and mild, belongs to great officers. The heir apparent wears fine, pure yu jade 瑜玉 to show his exalted status. The shi 士 may only wear ruanwen 璫玕, marking their lower rank.

3.2 the ribbons securing the jade

Beyond material and colour, the ribbons securing the jade also follow strict hierarchy and may not be transgressed. The Son of Heaven uses plain black ribbons; dukes and marquises use red; the heir apparent uses variegated qi ribbons 綦綬; shi 士 use simple yun ribbons 緼綬. Each rank has its own fixed combination, preventing confusion or usurpation at the level of objects.

In ancient society, without modern identity markers, jade-wearing served as a visible ritual symbol of social and political status. In court assemblies, ancestral sacrifices, and daily encounters, people could quickly recognise rank from jade material, colour, and ribbons, upholding hierarchical etiquette and maintaining interaction order. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 states that such rules ‘clarify noble and base, distinguish ranks⁴’, placing each person in their proper station and upholding ritual, thereby stabilising the Zhou patriarchal-ritual system. Jade is no mere personal ornament: it embodies ritual order and sustains social ethics and political stability.

4. Comparing Virtue to Jade: Moral Connotations of Jade-Wearing

If rectifying the mind and distinguishing ranks are the ritual functions of jade-wearing, then comparing virtue to jade is its spiritual core and ultimate value. The Zhou esteem for jade rested not on rarity or beauty, but on its moral qualities. *Pin Yi* 聘義 fully develops the idea that ‘the noble person compares virtue to jade’, matching natural qualities of jade to moral

3 James Legge, *The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)*, p. 19.

4 Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Lu Deming 陸德明, *Liji zhushu* 禮記注疏, juan 1, Jiajing Li Yuanyang Fujian ke, Longqing er nian (1568) xiuben, p1.

traits of the junzi 君子, making jade a model for self-cultivation in ren 仁, yi 義, li 禮, and xin 信.

Pin Yi 聘義 records Confucius:

First, *wen run er ze* 溫潤而澤 Soft, smooth, and glossy, it appeared to them like benevolence⁵. Jade is soft, lustrous, and inward-shining, not aggressive or arrogant, matching the generous, tolerant, gentle virtue of the junzi 君子.

Second, *zhen mi yi li* 縝密以栗 fine, compact, and strong,—like intelligence⁶. Jade's dense, solid texture reflects the thoughtful, steady, prudent wisdom of one who understands affairs deeply.

Third, *lian er bu gui* 廉而不剷 angular, but not sharp and cutting,—like righteousness⁷. Jade has clean edges yet does not cut, just as the junzi 君子 upholds principles without harshness or excess.

Fourth, *chui zhi ru dui* 垂之如隊 hanging down (in beads) as if it would fall to the ground,—like (the humility of) propriety⁸. Jade hangs naturally and humbly, expressing the junzi's 君子 reverence, restraint, and decorum.

Fifth, *fu yin pang da* 孚尹旁達 with an internal radiance issuing from it on every side,—like good faith⁹. Jade is pure, consistent inside and out, like the sincere, truthful, integrated conduct of the junzi 君子.

Jade-wearing is thus essentially carrying virtue in an object and cultivating the self via jade. The junzi 君子 wears jade to constantly examine himself, internalising and enacting ren 仁, zhi 知, yi 義, li 禮, xin 信.

5 James Legge, trans., *The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)*, Book XLV, Sacred Books of the East (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), p. 465.

6 James Legge, *The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)*, p. 465.

7 James Legge, *The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)*, p. 465.

8 James Legge, *The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)*, p. 465.

9 James Legge, *The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)*, p. 465.

5. Conclusion

In sum, based on *Yu Zao* 玉藻, *Pin Yi* 聘義, and *Liji zhushu* 禮記注疏, ancient jade-wearing had three core functions: self-cultivation, rank distinction, and virtue-clarification.

The jade-wearing system embodies the Chinese wisdom of ‘making ritual daily and virtue tangible’. It embeds abstract ritual and morality into a wearable object, offering lifelong reminder and practice. From bodily discipline to inner cultivation, from social order to character formation, jade-wearing carries not only ancient ritual norms but also the cultural genes of moderation, respect, integrity, and moral priority. After thousands of years, it still expresses profound humanistic depth and enduring spiritual value.

Bibliography

Book

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