



PRIMITIVE

LIVING + COLLECTING

ARCHAIC CHINESE HARD STONE BI

Since Neolithic times, the Chinese have been master carvers of jade and other hard stone ritual and decorative objects. Various forms of hardstone artifacts have been dated to as early as 5000 BC, and they performed a ritual function in aristocratic burials as late as the Han dynasty (206BC to 222 AD). The actual meaning of these objects is not clearly known, but they were likely intended to serve as status symbols and help the soul of the deceased on its journey to heaven. Consequently, the enormous labor involved in perfecting their abstract shapes and lustrous finish is striking testimony to these symbols of wealth and prestige, and their more recent production represents the continuity of Chinese culture through the repetition and imitation of revered classical forms.



Chinese Hard Stone Bi (detail)



Chinese Hard Stone Bi

Round discs with concentric central holes were called “bi” (pronounced bee) and were perfected by the Liangzhu culture. Recent scholarship suggests that these round forms were meant to evoke the “dome of the heavens” or the path of the sun itself. The distinctive bi discs of the earlier Hongshan culture were rectangular with rounded corners, and many had two much smaller holes at the top for suspension. The bi form was the highest emblem of noble status as well as the most important funerary object for guiding the spirit of the deceased to heaven. The bi form was the highest emblem of noble status because of its perfect shape.

Today, these perfect objects convey both prestige and a strikingly organic purity of design which can easily enhance both traditional and contemporary spaces. To many people, they represent the “circle of life,” a continuous form with no beginning, middle or end, but a distinct center containing the unknowable truths.