

THE CICADA AN EMBLEM OF IMMORTALITY IN CHINA.

BY THE EDITOR.

IN comment on the significance of the praying mantis and its prey, the cicada, as described by Dr. Berthold Laufer in the January number of *The Open Court*, we may add a few remarks on burial objects in China, among which the cicada made of jade is most popular among the relics of the Han period. These objects are commonly called tongue amulets because they are placed upon the tongue of the dead, as mentioned by Dr. Laufer in his book entitled *Jade, A Study in Chinese Archaeology and Religion*.

Jade emblems of this kind are called in Chinese *Han yü*, which means a jade like that of the time of the Han dynasty. The term has been wrongly translated by Dr. Bushell "tomb-jade," but the word *Han* refers simply to the age in which this particular kind of jade, carved or uncarved, was used and has nothing to do with the word *han*, "to place in the mouth."

These jade objects have unquestionably a symbolic meaning, and appear to have been given to the dead for the sake of protecting them against evil influences. The jade cicadas are of a size which would fit into the mouth and are made to cover the tongue. As jade is expensive, it is natural that only rich people can indulge in such amulets. Dr. Laufer says:

"In the days of the Chou dynasty, jade was taken internally as food. 'When the emperor purifies himself by abstinence, the chief in charge of the jade works (*yü fu*) prepares for him the jade which he is obliged to eat,' says the *Chou li* (Biot, Vol. I, p. 125). Jade, add the commentaries to this passage, is the essence of the purity of the male principle, the emperor partakes of it to correct or counteract the water which he drinks, since water belongs to the female principle; the emperor fasts and purifies himself before

communicating with the spirits; he must take the pure extract of jade; it is dissolved that he may eat it. And in another passage of the *Chou li* (Biot, Vol. I, p. 492) we read that jade is pounded and mixed with rice to be administered as food to the corpse of an emperor before burial (*tsêng yü*).

"In later Taoism, we meet the belief highly developed that jade is the food of spirits and tends to secure immortality (De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Vol. I, pp. 271-273; Vol. II, p. 395). In the Han period a belief was dominant in a revival of the corpse, and the hill-censers and hill-jars of Han pottery interred with the dead have taught us how deep the longing for immortality was among the people of that age. Two ideas are, therefore, prominent in the burial of certain jade ornaments with the corpse during the Chou and Han periods,—the preservation of the body by the effect of the qualities inherent in jade, and the hope of a resurrection prompted by this measure.

"The idea of jade being apt to prolong life seems to have originated at the same time in connection with the notions and practices of alchemy then coming into existence. A marvelous kind of jade is called *yü ying*, 'the perfection of jade.' It is represented among 'the wonderful objects of good omen' (*fu jui*)—there are twenty-two altogether—on the bas-reliefs of Wu-liang of the Han period in Shan-tung where it is pictured as a plain rectangular slab accompanied by the inscription, 'The perfection of jade will appear, when the five virtues are cultivated.'¹ Vessels, it was supposed, could be made of this supernatural substance; in B. C. 163, a jade cup of this kind was discovered on which the words were engraved, 'May the sovereign of men have his longevity prolonged!' The then reigning Emperor Wên took this joyful event as a suitable occasion to choose a new motto for the period of his reign, and to count this year as the first of a new era, celebrated with a banquet throughout the empire.²

"It was believed that immortality could be obtained by eating from bowls made of this kind of jade. Thus the phrase, 'to eat in the perfection of jade' came to assume the meaning 'to obtain eternal life.' In the form of a wish, it appears in prayers cast as inscriptions on certain metal mirrors of the Han period connected with the worship of Mount T'ai in Shan-tung (Chavannes, *Le T'ai Chan*, p. 425) . . .

"Princes followed the observance of sending pieces of jade to

¹ Compare Chavannes, *La sculpture sur pierre en Chine*, p. 34.

² Chavannes, *Se-ma Ts'ien*, Vol. II, p. 481.

be placed in the mouth of their deceased friends as the last honor to be rendered. Special messengers were entrusted with this token who fulfilled their task as described in the *Li ki* (*Tsa ki* II, 31) as follows: 'The messenger with the mouth-jade holding a jade ring (*pi*) announced his message in these words, "My humble prince has sent me [giving his name] with the mouth-jade." The assistant [to the son of the deceased] went into the house to report, and said in coming out, "Our bereaved master [giving his name] is awaiting you." The bearer of the jade entered, ascended into the hall and gave his message; the son bowed to him [as sign of thanks] and touched the ground with his forehead [as sign of grief and mourning]. The bearer, kneeling, deposited the jade south-east of the coffin on a reed mat, or after interment, on a rush mat. He then descended and returned to his place. An adjutant in court-dress, but still wearing the shoes of mourning, ascended the hall by the steps on the western side, and kneeling, his face turned to the west, he took the jade ring. Then he descended the same western steps, going in an eastward direction.' Thus the mouth-jade was presented according to rules of strict formality, and it is obvious from this passage that it could be presented even after the funeral had taken place without serving its purpose proper, and that even then the mourner was obliged to accept it; he doubtless kept it, but in what way, and to what end, is unknown. . . .

"A curious instance of an alleged or allegorical use of the mouth-jade in the case of live persons is narrated in the history of the kingdom of Wu, when King Fu Ch'ai (B. C. 494-472) joined the duke of Lu to attack the principality of Ts'i. At the point of giving battle, General Kung-sun Hia ordered his soldiers to chant funeral songs; another general requested his men to put into their mouths pieces of jade as used for corpses, while still another bade his men carry a rope eight feet long to fetter the soldiers of Wu (A. Tschepe, *Histoire du royaume de Ou*, p. 121). It can hardly be surmised that the second clause is to be taken in its real sense, for it would be difficult to see how a band of soldiers could be provided with these jade pieces at a moment's notice just before going to battle, unless we should suppose it a custom that every man should carry with him his mouth-jade, which is not very probable, and the general could hardly expect that a man while holding a piece of jade on his tongue could do efficient fighting. I therefore understand the sentence in a figurative sense meaning to say that the battle will be so fierce that every one should be prepared for death.

"The mortuary amulets in our collection described on the fol-

lowing pages were procured in Si-ngan fu from the private collection of a well-known Chinese scholar and archeologist who has been engaged for many years in antiquarian researches with great success. For the definition of these objects, I entirely depend on his explanations which agree with the general opinions upheld in Si-ngan fu. It will be seen that there is not only the tongue-amulet mentioned in the *Chou li*, but a whole series of jade amulets serving also for the preservation of other parts of the body. The underlying idea evidently was to close up all apertures of the body by means of jade, the essence of the *yang* element which was to triumph over the destructive underground agencies of the *yin* element, and it is assumed that this full equipment of the body was developed in the Han period. The characteristics of the pieces point to the same epoch. This is the most complete collection of this kind on record, and most of these types have not yet been described by Chinese archeologists.

"The archeological evidence quite agrees with the literary researches of De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Vol. I, pp. 271 *et. seq.*) The most important quotation for our purpose is that by Ko Hung: 'If there is gold and jade in the nine apertures of the corpse, it will preserve the body from putrefaction.' And T'ao Hung-King of the fifth century says: 'When on opening an ancient grave the corpse looks as if alive, then there is inside of the body a large quantity of gold and jade. According to the regulations of the Han dynasty, princes and lords were buried in clothes adorned with pearls, and with boxes of jade, for the purpose of preserving the body from decay.' The stuffing of the corpse with jade took the place of embalming, except that it did not have the same effect. In the case of the Han Emperor Wu (B. C. 140-87), the jade boxes mentioned had their lids carved with figures of dragons, phenixes and tortoise-dragons (*loc. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 401).

"Among the personal amulets worn by the corpse, those to be placed on the tongue are most important and frequently spoken of in the ancient texts. As all these amulets are imitative of bodily forms, those for the tongue are shaped in the outline of this organ. There are four types of them, the one plain, almost geometrically constructed, the other of a realistic design carved into the figure of a cicada, but at the same time preserving the shape of a tongue. A series of nine pieces is illustrated on the adjoined plate in natural size, the first four being of the plain tongue-shaped type. The first three are made of the same ivory-colored material, probably marble, which is decomposed and showing a rough surface in 1 and

3, while the original fine polish is preserved in 2. The substance of 3 has withered away so much that the ornamentation has disappeared and deep holes are eaten into the surfaces. The lines engraved on 1 and 2 explain themselves by serving the purpose of marking the parts of the tongue. In all these pieces, the medial portion is high and gradually sloping down towards the edges. In No. 1 the under surface is flat, and the tip is slightly turned upward. In No. 2, the lower side is shaped in the same manner as the upper one, but laid out with a different design of lines.

"The piece in No. 4 is of a uniformly pure milk-white jade, the two dark lines showing in the photograph being yellow in color. Rounded over the upper surface, it consists of two slanting portions on its lower side with a short incision cut horizontally into the medial line, in the same way as will be seen in No. 8.

"Numbers 5-9 show five variations of the cicada type, that in 5 being the most realistic, those in 8 and 9 being in an advanced stage of conventionalization. In No. 5*a*, the two wings and the body are well designed; 5*b* displays the lower face of the same specimen. All of this type have the two faces ornamented differently. The hardened earth incrustations which have penetrated into No. 6 will be recognized in the illustration. Both 5 and 6 are of grayish jade, and of excellent workmanship. No. 7 is remarkable for its size, its color, and its elegant technique. The color of the jade is black in the two wings and the right upper portion, and dark-gray in the central and upper part. In this, as in so many other cases, we have occasion to admire the ingenuity and color sense of the artist in carving the jade block in such a way that the colors were appropriately distributed, either to an artistic end, or as here, to lend an object its real colors, or realism of color and a color of realism. No. 8 is the smallest and plainest of this type which I know, and not ornamental on the obverse; it is of lustrous white jade with a slight greenish tinge. In the two slanting sides, it agrees with the plain tongue-shaped type, but the style of carving shows that here also the figure of the cicada is intended. No. 9 shows the specimen on its lower face which is of grayish jade, but with a very peculiar chocolate-brown portion in the upper end with a narrow bluish stripe below it. On the upper side, the two wings of the insect are brought out by lines engraved, as in the other specimens. Only two of them are provided with a contrivance by which they can be fastened. That in No. 5 has two small holes about 2mm. in length drilled in the upper edge; they communicate in the interior and thus allow the



1
4
7

2
5a
5b

3
6
8 9

TONGUE AMULETS FOR THE DEAD IN THE SHAPE OF CICADAS.

passage of a wire or cord. The object in No. 6 is provided with a small perforated rounded handle."

Dr. Laufer adds: "Why the cicada was chosen for this amulet, seems not to be known. This idea may be connected with the *memento mori* brought out by the figures of a cicada and mantis on the Han jade buckles."

This explanation seems to us forced, and we are reluctant to accept it, because we can offer another interpretation which is more probable and is suggested by the ancient Taoist rite to procure an elixir of life. If we consider that all lasting substances were deemed in the mystical notions of the Taoist sages a proper food of immortality, it is evident that these mixtures were taken as a kind of ambrosia, a food to procure immortality, and one of the most important ingredients among them was jade.

Jade was pulverized and eaten, or was mixed with water and taken as a drink. The idea also prevailed that the Taoist sages, through breathing exercises within their own bodies, could develop a new immortal personality which grew as in a cocoon after the fashion of the cicada, and it was thought that the body of the sage would burst open and set the child at liberty. This child represented the new soul of the sage, and when set at liberty it left the body just as the cicada would leave the shell of the cocoon. The ancient Greeks cherished the same idea and represented the *psyche* as the butterfly which would rise to new life after the caterpillar had ripened into a chrysalis and sprung its own shell leaving behind the empty cocoon at the moment of liberation.

Accordingly what would be more appropriate in Chinese symbolism than to place in the mouth of the dead a piece of jade to ensure the everlastingness of the soul? That this piece of jade was formed in the shape of a cicada would be just as appropriate as that the butterfly would be to the Greeks a symbol of the immortality of the soul. Nay, we may be sure that the Chinese really believed in it, and had the confidence of the effectiveness of a cicada placed within the body of the dead.

It seems to me that this explanation agrees better with Chinese traditions than the general idea of a *memento mori*, for the reason that the cicada was the victim of the mantis, or that it would remind us of mortality and of the fate that will overtake every man. It stands to reason that on the contrary the cicada was believed to be an effective means to escape the decay of death and to insure to the dead life everlasting.