

FISH SYMBOLS IN CHINA.

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER.

[The Field Museum of Chicago contains a great number of valuable jade ornaments which, together with many archeological objects, were collected by Dr. Laufer. We take pleasure in here furnishing our readers with illustrations of some of them together with Dr. Laufer's explanations,¹ and we begin by reproducing a peculiar Chinese girdle ornament called *küeh*, which consists of a ring open in one part and symbolizing separation. Wu Ta-Ch'eng, Dr. Laufer's authority, published the picture of one of them which he considers the oldest type of *küeh*.]

THE symbolism relative to the incomplete rings called *küeh* is peculiar. Wu Ta-ch'eng alludes to it in figuring a specimen in his collection (see accompanying illustration) in which I believe



KÜEH. AN OPEN JADE RING, SYMBOL OF SEPARATION.

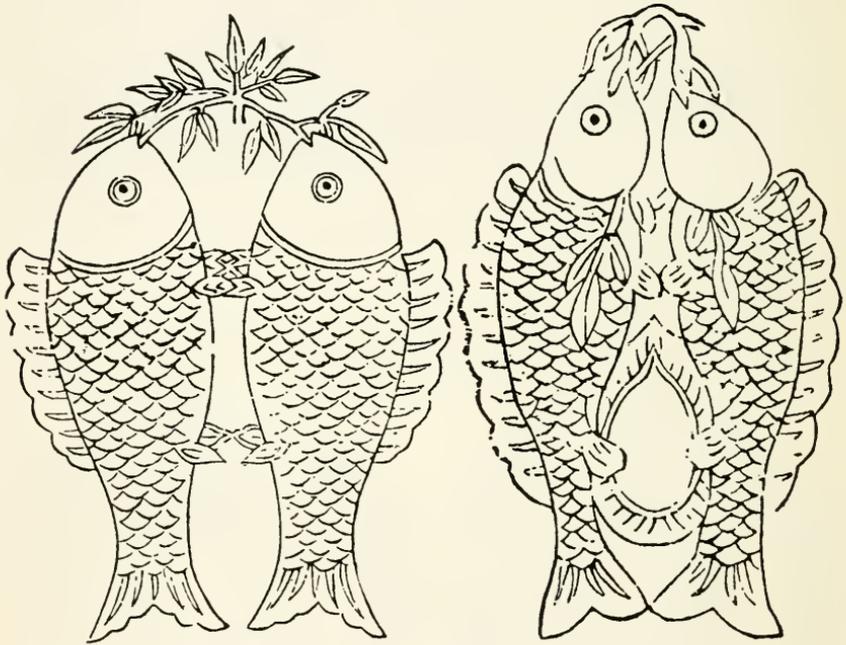
The Chinese archeologist Wu Ta-Ch'eng regards the figures on the obverse as two dragons, though they look more like fishes.

the oldest type of these rings may be found. It is carved from green jade with a black zone and has a double dragon (*shuang lung*) engraved on the one face and "the scarlet bird" (*chu kio* or

¹ Berthold Laufer, *Jade; a Study in Chinese Archæology and Religion*. Chicago, Field Museum, 1912.

chu niao), the bird of the southern quarter, on the other face. The form as here outlined exactly agrees with that on a tile disk of the Han period (*Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty*, Plate LXVII), Fig. 4). It is not known what its proper significance is on the tile nor in this connection on the ring. The break in the ring is effected by a narrow strip sawn away between the two dragon-heads which cannot touch each other; it symbolically indicates the rupture or the breaking-off of cordial relations between two people.

The gloomy half-ring *küeh* originally meant separation, banishment, nay even capital punishment; or, what could not appeal either

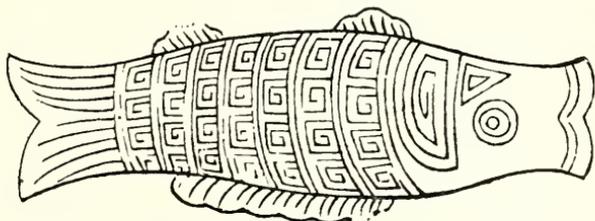


JADE GIRDLE PENDANTS. PAIRS OF FISHES.

to the people at large, the decision in literary disputes. But this entire symbolism must have died out during the Han period; for then a new style of girdle-ornament gradually seems to have come into general use, carved into graceful designs not pointing to any serious disaster for the wearer. It is useless to raise here a question of terminology, and to argue that these ornaments differ from the ancient half-rings and may have developed from another type which may have even existed in the Chou period under a different name. This may be, but the fact remains that the long series of these objects is designated *küeh* by the native archeologists, and that in some of

them the type, and above all, the designs of the *küeh*,—and these are presumably the oldest in the group of the new *küeh*,—have been faithfully preserved.

The two illustrations of double fishes, here reproduced, are carved from green jade. In the first their fins are connected, and they are holding in their mouths the leaved branch of a willow (*liu*), according to the Chinese explanation. It should be added that, during the Han period, it was customary to pluck a willow-branch (*chê liu*, see Giles No. 550), and to offer it to a parting friend who was escorted as far as the bridge *Pa* east of Ch'ang-ngan where the branch of separation (*küeh*!) was handed to the departing friend.² The significance of this ornament is therefore simple enough: we must part, but we shall remain friends as these two fishes are inseparable. It reveals to us at the same time how the *küeh*, so formidable in the beginning with its message of absolute divorce, was mitigated into a more kind-hearted attitude which made it acceptable



JADE GIRDLE PENDANTS. SINGLE FISH.

to all people—it became a parting-gift, a farewell trinket. The date of this piece is set at a period covering the Wei and Tsin dynasties, i. e., roughly the third and fourth centuries A. D., but I have no doubt that the pattern goes back to the creative period of the Han.

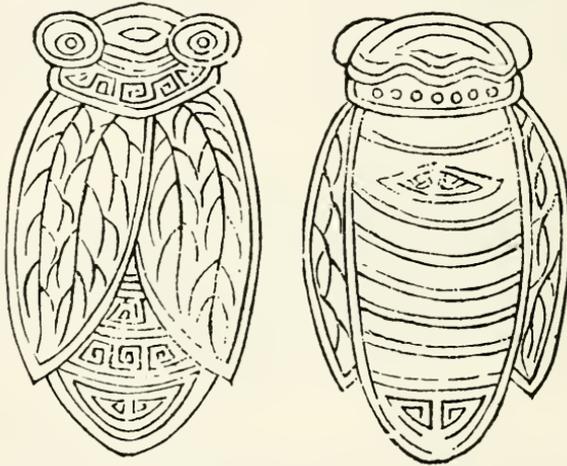
The second figure displays a similar design of a pair of fishes, the same carving being brought out on both faces. Also here, the editors explain the plant design as that of a willow. The leaves are represented here on the bodies behind the gills, and a leaf-shaped wreath (with the perforation of the ancient *küeh*) appears between the lower fins. Another difference is that the tips of the tails here touch each other which seems to hint at a more intimate union of the party concerned, while there is a gap in the previous piece in correspondence with the break in the ancient half-ring.

[It is noteworthy that the fishes frequently appear in pairs in the Christian catacombs where the idea of a parting suggests itself very obviously. Here the two fishes are usually separated by an anchor, the common symbol of

² Pétillon, *Allusions littéraires*, p. 172.

hope, so as to suggest very plainly the idea of a parting with the hope of meeting again. We may add that the pair of fishes as they appear in the zodiac are very different in nature and presumably in meaning, and should not be confounded with either the Chinese fish, with the *küeh*, or the Christian fishes in the catacombs; and further the figure of the single fish has again a significance of its own. In Chinese it means loneliness, independence and uniqueness. We here reproduce such a single fish.]

The scales are conceived of as meander fretwork; but I do not know whether, for this reason, this fish is associated with thunder. The peculiar feature is, at all events, its single-blessedness in distinction from the common fish couples. There is a huge fish in the Yellow River, called *kuan* (Giles, No. 6371, Pétilion, *loc. cit.*, p. 500)³



JADE GIRDLE PENDANT. CICADA.

supposed to be a kind of spike, noted for its solitary habits of life, and therefore an emblematic expression for anybody deprived of company like an orphan, a widower, a bachelor, or a lonely fellow without kith or kin.⁴ A girdle-ornament of this design was perhaps a gift for a man in this condition.

Among the jade amulets placed on the corpse to prevent its decay the fish occurs on the eye and lip-amulets. But there are also

³ The Chinese theory that this species is not able to close its eyes is certainly mere fancy, as in all fishes the accessory organs of the eye like the lids and lachrymal glands are poorly developed.

⁴ In this sense, it is mentioned as early as in the *Shu king*. In one poem of the *Shi king*, No. 9 of the songs of the country of Ts'i, Wên Kiang, the widow of Prince Huan-of Lu, is censured for returning several times into her native country of Ts'i where she entertained an incestuous intercourse with her own brother, the prince Siang. The poet compares her to the fish *kuan* who is restless and sleepless at night for lack of a bed-fellow (see Legge, *Shi king*, Vol. I, p. 159, and Vol. II, p. 293).

instances of large separate carvings representing fishes which have no relation to the body, but have been placed in the coffin for other reasons.

The Field Museum of Chicago contains two mortuary jade fishes unearthed from graves of the Han period. One of them⁵ is a marvelous carving of exceedingly fine workmanship, all details having been brought out with patient care. It represents the full figure of a fish, both sides being carved alike, 20 cm. long, 11 cm. wide, and 2 cm. thick, of a dark spinach-green jade. A small piece has been chipped off from the tail-fin. There is a small eye in the dorsal fin and a larger one below in the tail-fin. It is therefore likely that the object was suspended somewhere in the coffin; it is too large and too heavy (it weighs 1¼ pounds) to have served for a girdle-ornament. In this way,—with comparatively large bearded head and short body,—the Chinese represent a huge sea-fish called *ngao* (Giles No. 100).

Such large and fine jade carvings are likely to have had a religious significance, and the following passage may throw some light on this subject:

“In the Han Palace Kun ming ch’ih a piece of jade was carved into the figure of a fish. Whenever a thunderstorm with rain took place, the fish constantly roared, its dorsal fin and its tail being in motion. At the time of the Han, they offered sacrifices to this fish in their prayers for rain which were always fulfilled.”⁶

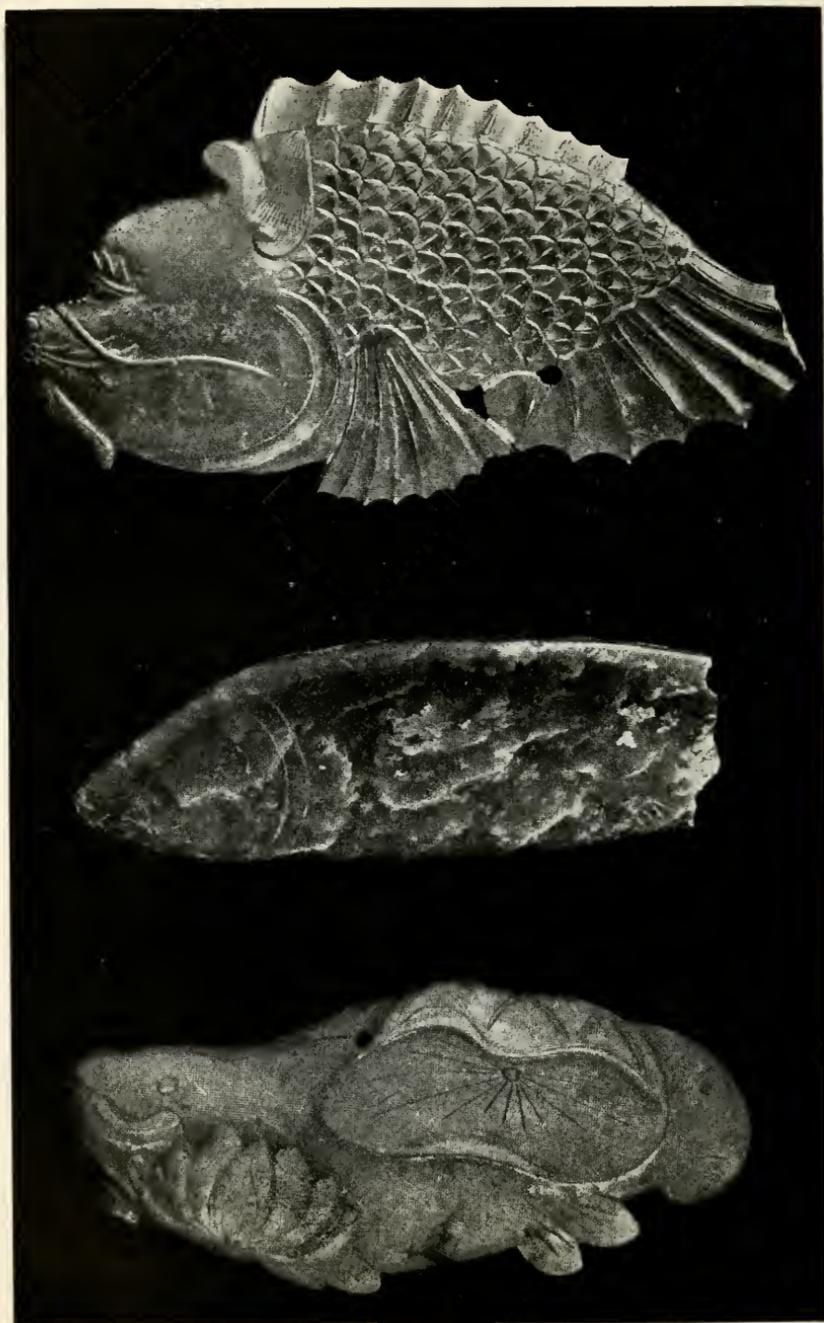
The middle figure on the same plate, a fragment, perhaps only the half of the original figure, is represented carved in the shape of a fish of leaf-green jade clouded with white specks, on the lower face covered with a thick layer of hardened loess. It is 11.5 cm. long, 4.2 cm. wide, and 9 mm. thick.

In the July number of the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Tokyo* (Vol. XXVII, 1911), there is an article by Prof. S. Tsuboi describing some interesting figures of animals of chipped flint, one of them representing a well-formed fish (p. 132).

While the religious symbolism formerly connected with the fish has almost disappeared it continues as a favorite ornament, and jade girdle pendants in the shape of fishes are still much in use. The third figure of the same plate represents such a modern carving of white jade showing a fish surrounded by lotus-flowers (9.8 cm. long, 4 cm. wide). The contrast between this modern and the two ancient pieces in design and technique is evident.

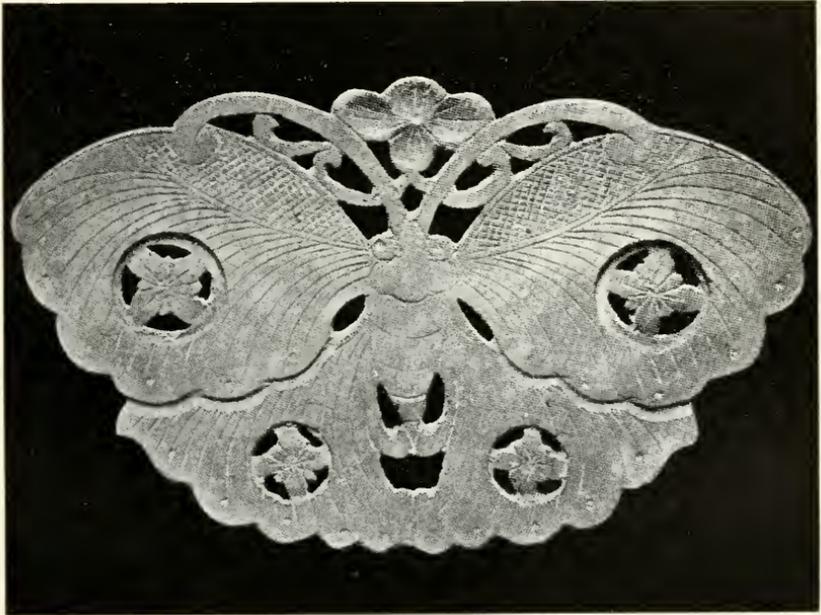
⁵ The upper figure in the adjoined plate.

⁶ *Si king tsa ki*, quoted in *P’ei wên yüin fu*, Ch. 100 A, p. 6 a.



JADE CARVINGS. FISHES.

The butterfly carved from white and brownish-yellow jade is a unique specimen among mortuary offerings. It is alleged by those who found it that it was taken from the grave-mound of the famous Emperor Ts'in Shih (B. C. 246-211) near the town of Lin-tung which is 50 *li* to the east of Si-ngan fu. I am not fully convinced that this is really the case, though any positive evidence *pro* or *contra* this assertion is lacking; but there is no doubt that, judging from its appearance and technique, this is a burial object of considerable age and unusual workmanship, such as is likely to



MORTUARY JADE CARVING. BUTTERFLY.

have been buried with a personage of high standing only. It is a flat carving (12.6×7.6 cm., 0.5 cm. thick) both in open work and engraved on both faces, the two designs, even in number of strokes, being perfectly identical. The work of engraving is executed with great care, the lines being equally deep and regular. We notice that a plum-blossom pattern is brought out between the antennæ of the butterfly; it is the diagram of a flower revealing a certain tendency to naturalism, which seems to bring out the idea that the butterfly is hovering over the flower. We further observe four designs of plum-blossoms, of the more conventional character, carved

à jour in the wings. The case is therefore analogous to that illustrated on a Han bronze vase (*Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty*, p. 283).

It is known that in modern times the combination of butterfly and plum-blossom is used to express a rebus (*mei tieh*) with the meaning "Always great age" (W. Grube, *Zur Pekingener Volkskunde*, p. 139).⁷ It is difficult to say whether, in that period to which this specimen must be referred, this notion was already valid, though the possibility must be admitted in view of the early rebuses traced by A. Conrady (preface to Stentz, *Beiträge zur Volkskunde Süd-Schantungs*). It would, however, be erroneous to believe that the rebus in all cases presented the prius from which the ornament was deduced, for most of these ornamental components are much older and may even go beyond an age where the formation of rebuses was possible. The rebus was read into the ornaments, in well-nigh all cases; while other single ornaments were combined into complex compositions with the intention of bringing out a rebus. It is not the rebus which has created the ornaments, but it is the ornament which has elicited and developed the rebus; the rebus has merely shaped, influenced and furthered the decorative compositions as, e. g., occurring in the modern Peking embroideries figured by Grube. In the present case, it is quite obvious that the association of the butterfly with a floral design rests on natural grounds, and was originally not provoked by a mere desire of punning, which is the product of a subsequent development.

A very curious feature of this specimen is that the two upper large plum-blossoms in the wings are carved out in loose movable rings turning in a deeply hollowed groove but in such a way that they cannot be taken out, a clever trick such as the later authors designate as "devil's work" (*kuei kung*). This peculiarity certainly had also a significance with reference to the mortuary character of the object. Such movable pieces are designated by the Chinese as "living" (*huo*); so we have here two "living" plum-blossoms in distinction from the two "dead" plum-blossoms below, and the two former might have possibly conveyed some allusion to a future life.

⁷ There is also the interpretation *hu-tieh nao mei*, "the butterfly playfully fluttering around plum-blossoms," alluding to long life and beauty (*Ibid.*, p. 138, No. 15).