

# Hongshan Design



Seven Yellow Jades

Ashley Hall

Hongshan Design  
Seven Yellow Jades  
Ashley Hall©2024  
All rights reserved  
Royal College of Art  
London, UK



## Contents

Introduction.....	1
Method.....	1
Representation.....	1
1. Chameleon Cat.....	2
2. Bovine Form.....	4
3. Bird.....	6
4. Masked Head.....	8
5. Face Slider.....	10
6. Kneeling Helios.....	11
7. Sinuous Kneeler.....	12
Comparison.....	13
References.....	15





**INTRODUCTION** While many researchers have covered the history, culture, geochemistry and archaeology of the neolithic Hongshan culture from northeast China, very little attention has been paid to the design features of Hongshan jades. Controversy still rages around authentication, weathering, and originality however my aim here is to focus specifically on a small range of seven yellow jades that appear to be made from the same material, and possibly the same maker or makers.

For readers unfamiliar with Hongshan culture I would recommend reading Sarah M. Nelson, Zhu Da and Guo Dashun [1,] and for jade analysis Anderson [2] Crisci [3] and Qiang [4].

While I may refer to historical, cultural, and archaeological sources my aim is not to make a claim for these pieces in terms of originality or emerging from a particular time but to do the opposite, to focus only on the making and aesthetic factors to try and gain insight into the relations and meanings of forms independent of time.

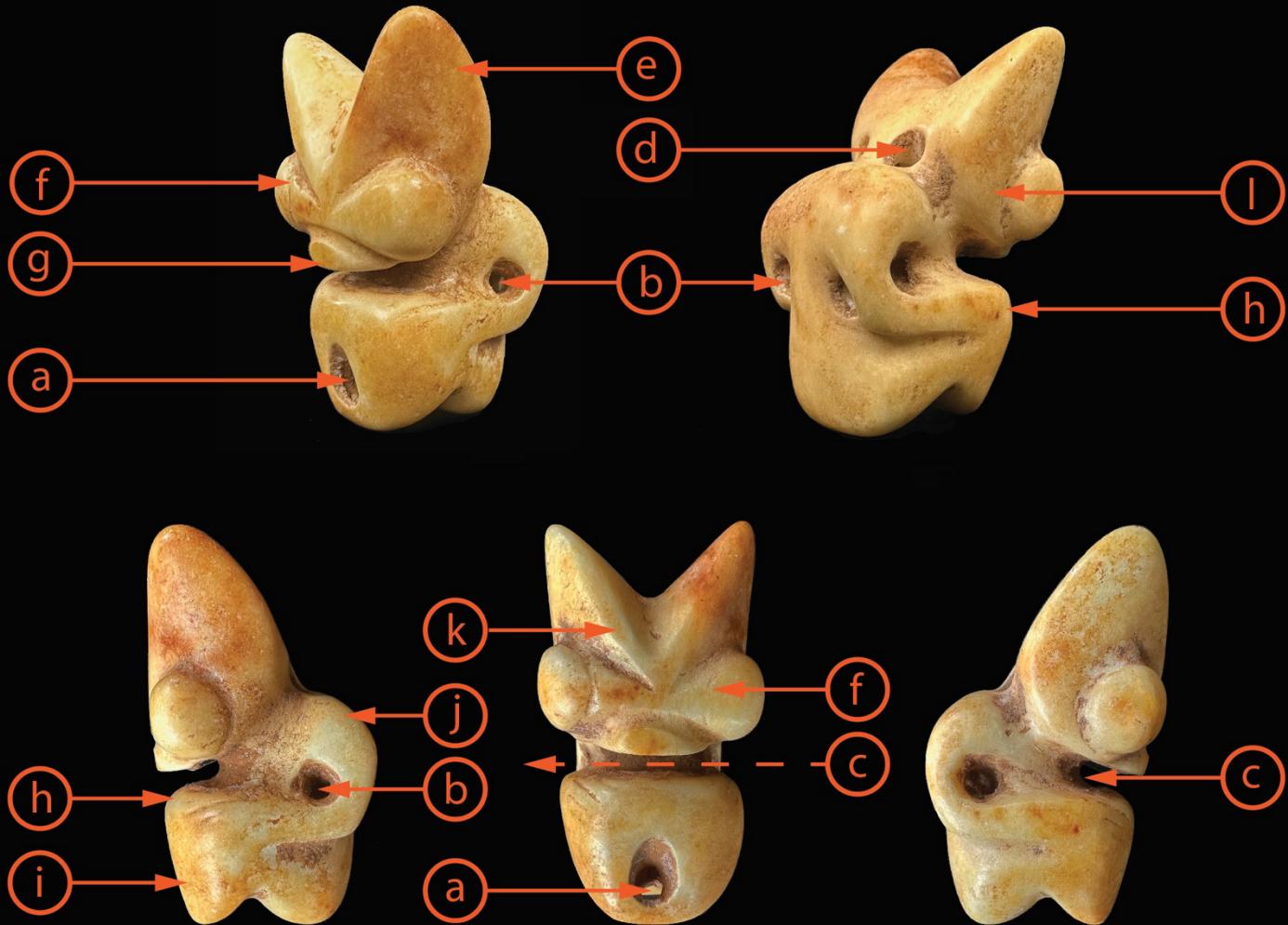
This publication is designed to be read as a series of visual notes alongside a paper I published on 'Hongshan Culture: Numbers, Controversy and a Proto Industrial Design Society' at the International Association of Design Research Societies conference in Taipei, 2025.

**METHOD** My approach to studying these jades is to use the aesthetic analysis skills I have developed through a career as a designer and academic and where possible I will try and draw on the various approached and methods that I rely on and describe them. Some though will be speculation or provocation in order to open up new directions of thought. I see this approach as a form of practice based analysis combining wherever possible references to existing works but also creatively exploring alternative theories as to meaning and cultural function.

The first part of the study takes each jade in turn and produces a forensic aesthetic analysis on the entire form with references to other forms with similar or related features. The second looks at the collection as a whole to begin drawing speculative cultural narratives across groups and the whole range of pieces.

**REPRESENTATION** All images are captured in daylight and corrected using photoshop and the background removed. Due to the translucent nature of jade and what appear to be some chatoyant (tigers eye) characteristics in some pieces colours and surface textures vary slightly from the originals. Relative scales in group images are approximate and full dimension are given.

Each piece has been named relative to known zoomorphology, much of which is assumed from the agricultural context and evidence from archaeological sites and collectors. With some pieces this is relatively straightforward but with others it is less clear and there are several divergent potential sources and where this is the case it is discussed.



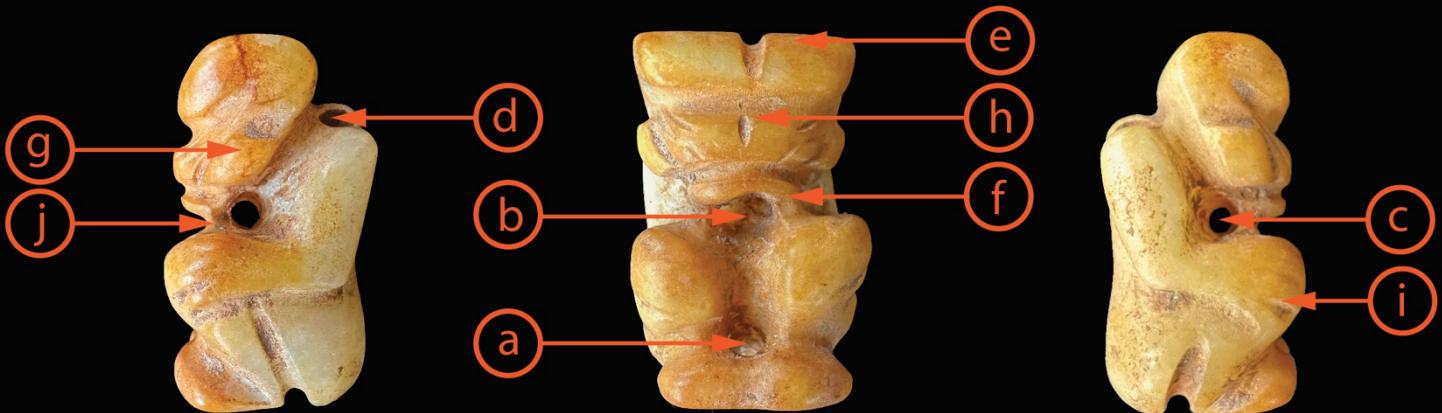
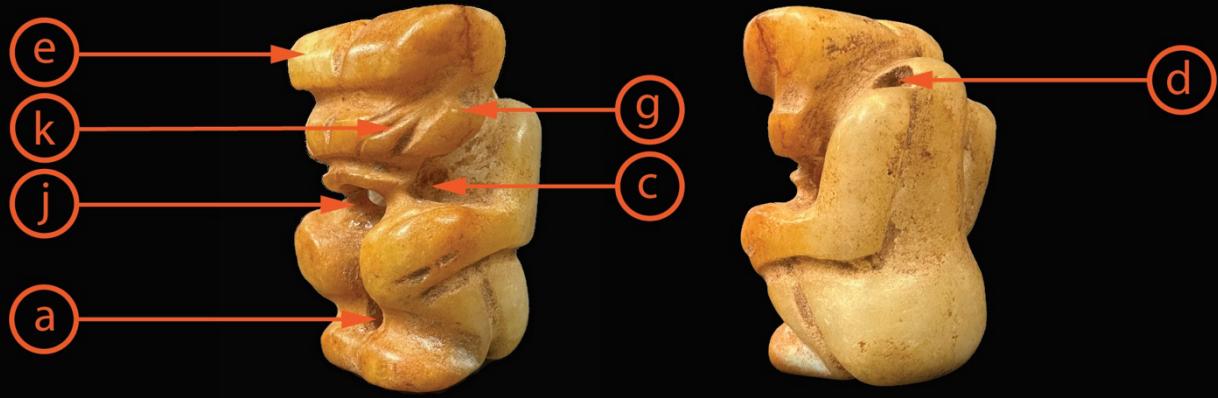
## 1. Chameleon Cat (H 65mm, W 34mm, D36mm)

The material for all seven pieces is a white-yellow jade which has surface staining indicating that the original underlying colour is much lighter. All seven have a significant amount of translucency when backlit, particularly on thinner sections. Some pieces have chatoyant inclusions which appear as reflective crystallised structures under the surface. This first jade is one of the most enigmatic and is highly original in the broader Hongshan oeuvre with nothing similar that I have seen after reviewing thousands of jades. It has the typical Hongshan bow drilled holes between the feet (a), under the arms (b), what appears to be a hole under the jaw (c) that has been widened possibly with a string or rope saw, and finally a double 'bull's nose' amulet suspension hole set in the back of the neck (d). The tooling marks overall are very subtle with hardly any signs on the main body and a few very faint marks in the facial areas around the eyes and top lip.

The most striking feature is the face which has a couple of direct zoomorphic references. The most obvious facial similarity is that of a cat with its perked ears, yet a second reference lurks, the chameleon. The chameleon or more accurately a chameleon's tail [3,p.57] appears in a number of Hongshan jades. Hongshan spirituality revered space and shape shifting transformation as evidenced by Hawks, Turtles and the Chameleon with its camouflage

reactive skin pigmentation. Most of the chameleons are represented by the tail with none I have seen showing a head. A conjecture could be made here that we are looking at a zoomorphic hybrid with elements of both, the chameleon's central skull ridge has been replaced with a cat's double ears (e). Cats or what look like leopards can be seen in some Hongshan carvings. What is even more striking are the eyes which seem to come directly out of the centre of the ears and are formed from a cylinder which is embedded across the face with rounded ends. The front elevation of the face (k) reminds somewhat of the later Sanxingdui culture's carved stone and cast bronze heads [5].

The body is crouching yet alert with a physiognomic perception [6] indicting that it is ready for animation. The alert ears and protruding eyes are form indicators of sensory heightening with anticipation. The head is slightly bowed giving the impression of being in front of revered or respected spiritual source or hierarchical figure. The representational function is curious as many Hongshan figures of this type are broadly referred to as a Helios or sun-god, yet this figure appears to be worshipping or in awe of another power so clearly not in the classic assumption of a god-like entity with power over humans. In fact, it almost appears to be an avatar of the owner and worshipping on their behalf or transformed with additional zoomorphic powers for a higher level of prayer or devotion.

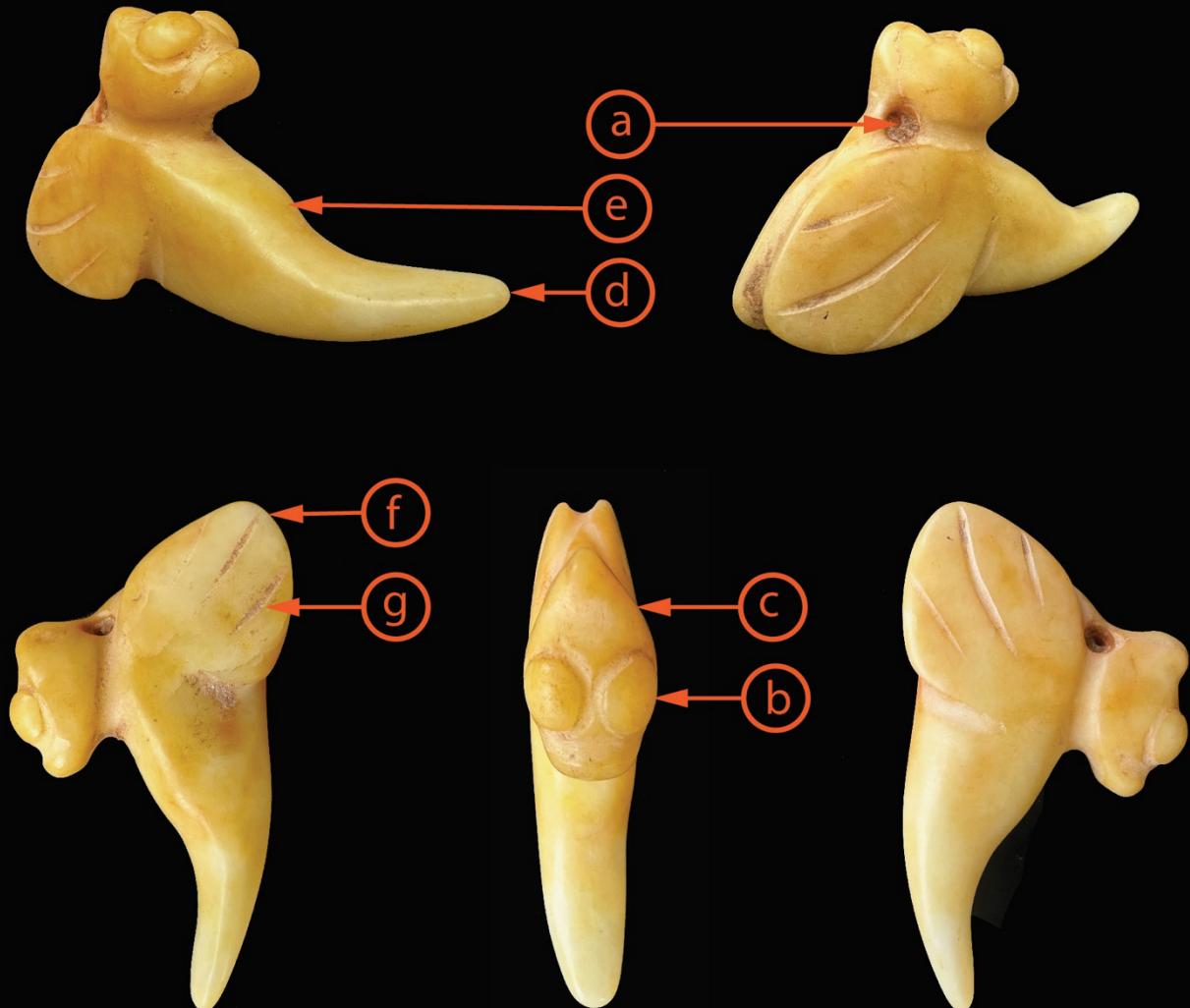


## 2. Bovine Form (H51mm, W32mm, D28mm)

As an agrarian society Hongshan people would have considered livestock and domesticated animals to be of great importance. Here we see what is often called a bovine (cow) form of Helios. There are four main holes comprising of a standard hole between feet (a) followed by an upward hole under the jaw into the neck area (b), a lateral hole (c) which intersects the under jaw hole and standard double bulls nose hole at the back of the neck for hanging (d). Holes (b) and (c) make a complex set of spaces liberating a significant surface area under the chin and neck area. Some later jades have much great material subtraction and these 'hollowed out' jades can be thought of as more powerful as the greater surface area allows wishes and blessing to mix with greater ease following the supposition than holes are prayer receiving and blessing receiving conduits. The bulls' nose is drilled (d) into a rare, hunched back section between the shoulders almost giving the impression that the skin has been stretched by the holes and the string that would eventually pass through it. The intersection of the holes (b) and (c) also leaves two small pillars behind (j). These must have been difficult to spatially adjust when carving and almost have the appearance of fangs hanging under the jaw. They are unnecessary for any structure and if anything, are a carving difficulty so the preservation of the double hole appearance must have been very important. The lip or mouth (f) is sat just above this area though it is not clear where the mouth actually is, whether it's represented by the closed lips, above it under the eyes or even conceivably the pillared hole (j).

Unusually the horns are less represented for bovine form and what can often be seen in some forms as double hair cones are seen here to be folded flat across the top of the head (e). Their eyes are also unclear as there appear to be several features which could be counted as eyes either cut into the stone or as bulges as indicated by (g). There are at 3 additional cut lines here that would have been difficult to achieve in a small space and these again must be significant giving some identity to the zoomorphism of the jade though it would seem less significant if it were implying a bovine form. (h) seems to mark a furrow in the lower forehead or above a presumed nose area (which is missing graphically). The fingers and hands are again very closely blended into the knees and appear heavily worn or faint such that they are not very clear with four fingers visible on the left but only two on the right.

The zoomorphism appears to be a bovine form with some human attributes but again as with many Hongshan forms there lurks additional subtle animal forms that morph between these and give additional undefinable impressions, especially around the face and head. The physiognomic perception here is very static unlike the chameleon cat. This form has implied mass and static projection of solidity. Its face is more evenly level with the viewer and although it is crouching it is much less acquiescent in its projection. If it is not a commanding form it is a form that supports projection of power or command. Possibly this narrates the nature of cows as perceived by Hongshan people.

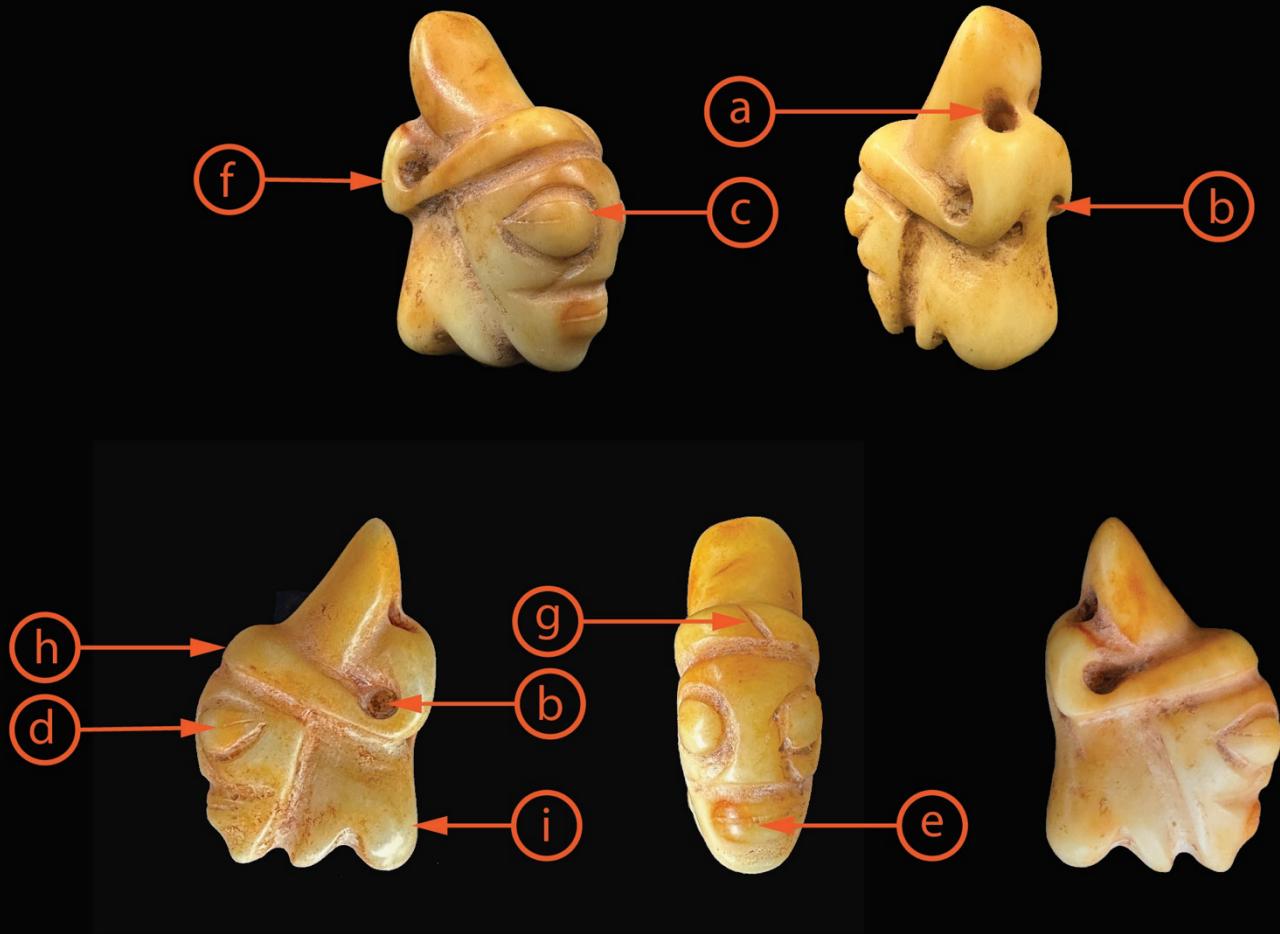


### 3. Bird (H77mm, W16mm, D42mm)

Many Hongshan jades show bird forms with hawks and owls common and also what looks like parrots or eagles. This jade is less aligned to these types and if anything, the overall aesthetic gives the idea of a hummingbird in flight. Hummingbirds are not native to China but several native species of birds have similar characteristics. The short high wings and elongated body give the impression of flying captured. Interestingly it only has two classic pendant bull nose holes (a) at the back of the neck and no other indications of drilling. If the mixing of blessings through holes was a major Hongshan requirement for carved forms this as many other bird forms has very little to support this unless other physical powers or transitional powers like flight replaced this.

The eyes are round, large and protruding (b) similar to what is sometimes claimed as later Hongshan culture where the eyes sometimes appear as something close to spheres attached to a surface. The head shape is curious (c) as it ends in a slightly pointed rear and is slightly disconnected to the body with an indication of animal features that gives the impression that it is less bird like and has some subtle zoomorphic hybrid quality. It also lacks a beak and in its place is a clear mouth which again suggests a stronger zoomorphic combination. The top rear of the head has a deliberate indent either side as if indicating ears. The wings (f) are quite short for the body length and feathers are suggested by three small cut lines (g).

The body shape is generally in bird form with a tapering of thickness between tail (d) and body (e). The lack of detail on the body which could have had feet or feathers indicated can lead the viewer to believe the body is elongating or emerging and the tail almost has an animal rather than a bird quality. It can also be interpreted as a kind of embryo emerging form which is also a common Hongshan symbol. This has also been hypothesised through the classic 'Zhulong' or pig-dragon form which is sometimes aligned to embryo emergence, birth and regeneration. The form making is very smooth with few tooling marks and the surface appears to have some wear and softening after making. Several age related cracks are evident on one side along with weathering and some small scale crystallisation in depressions and in the ox nose holes.

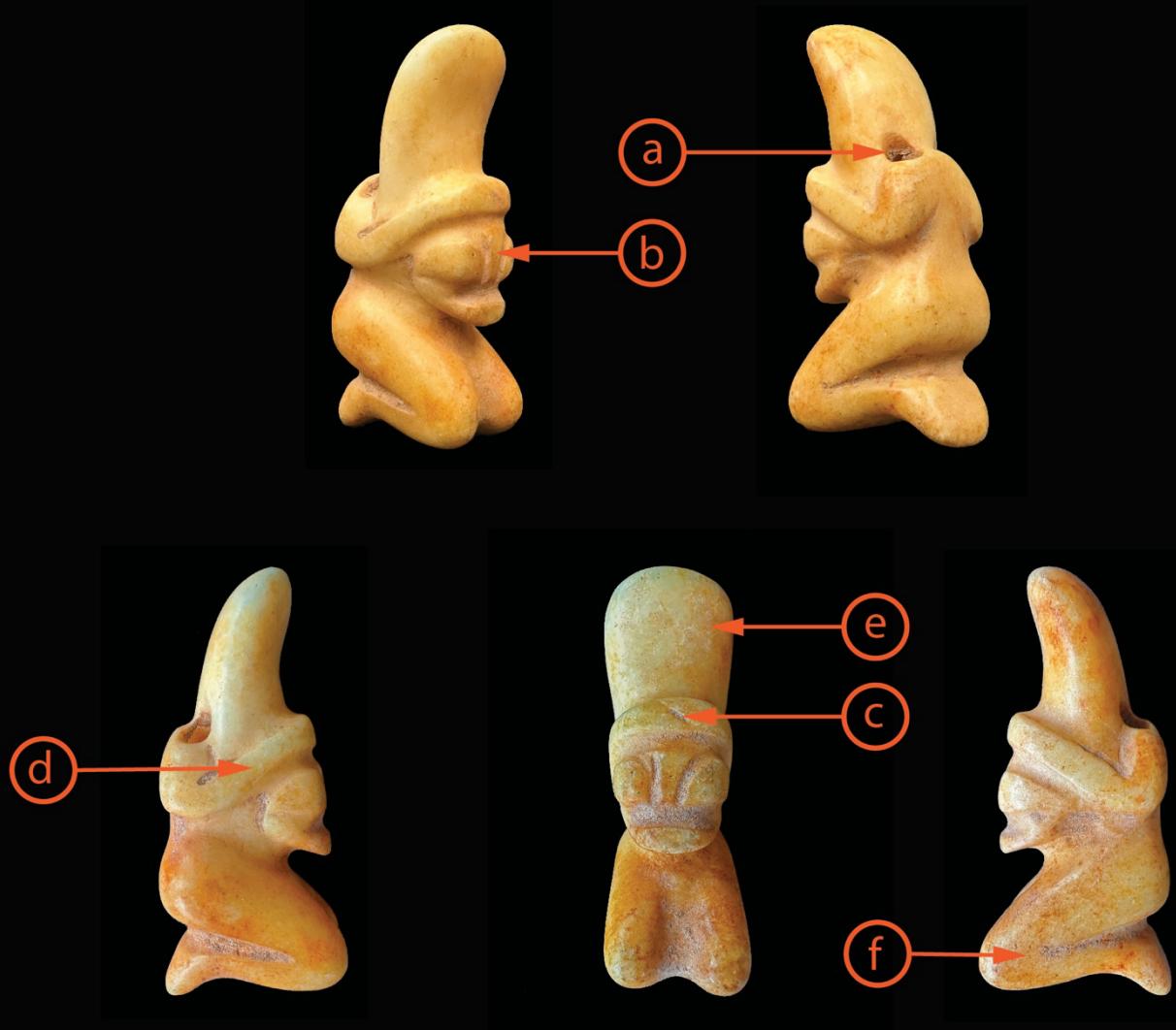


#### 4. Masked Head (H55mm, W21mm, D36mm)

This is rare jade form that appears to show a mask being put on or taken off. The proportions of the face clearly indicate that it's a mask as does the continuous edge around the face which also follows the head or hair line above and its inanimate expression. The rounded quality of the face increase the impression that it has been magnified in some way. A set of pendant ox nose holes (a) are on the upper part of the form in an unusual position that appears to be half-way up the head or hair style. A second pair from the back through under the arms (b) is typical Hongshan but the angle and positioning is unusual at an oblique angle. Both eyes (c) have an incised line horizontally (d) about halfway across the centre of the eye. This again is quite unusual on Hongshan forms, and the significance is unclear. It seems unlikely that it's a making error being so prominent. It could indicate winking, blinking, or in zoomorphic terms a cat's eye type second eyelid. Appearing on a mask makes it even more curious. The lips (e) are also quite prominent.

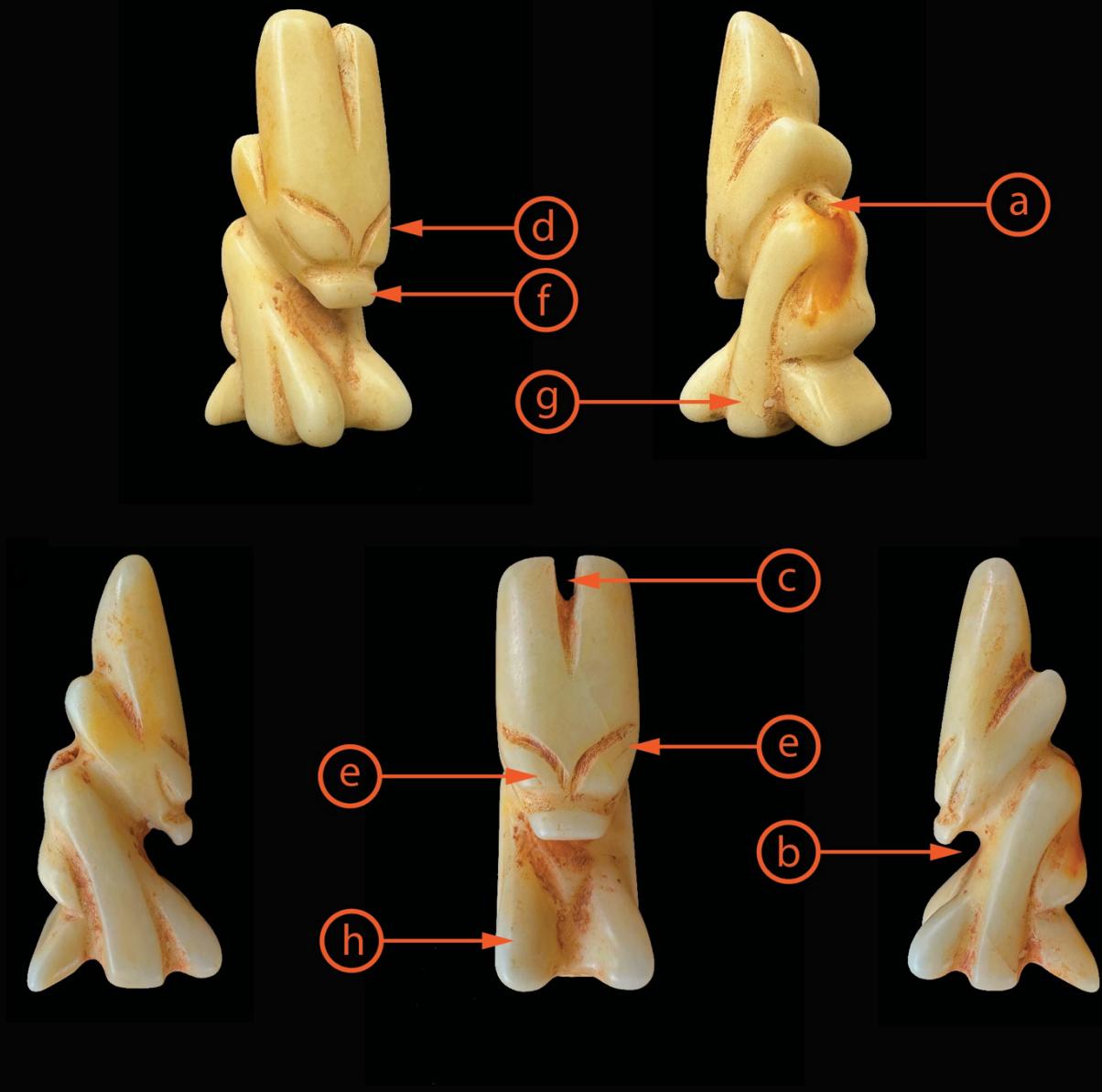
The arms (f) seem to be holding or resting on top of the mask at the top edge and hands joining are indicated by the diagonal line (g). It's almost as if the mask is being pushed down over the face or body. Proportionally the mask is almost as high as the body which crouches behind it (i). The arms also thicken and are much longer than human arms proportional to the body. The overall typology is that of the helios or sun god but in a very condensed form as these are often standing or kneeling up.

The shoulders are higher than the neck from the back enhancing the crouching position but also giving the impression that the arms have slid the face down the body. The body itself has very little detail and the front is mostly obscured by the mask.



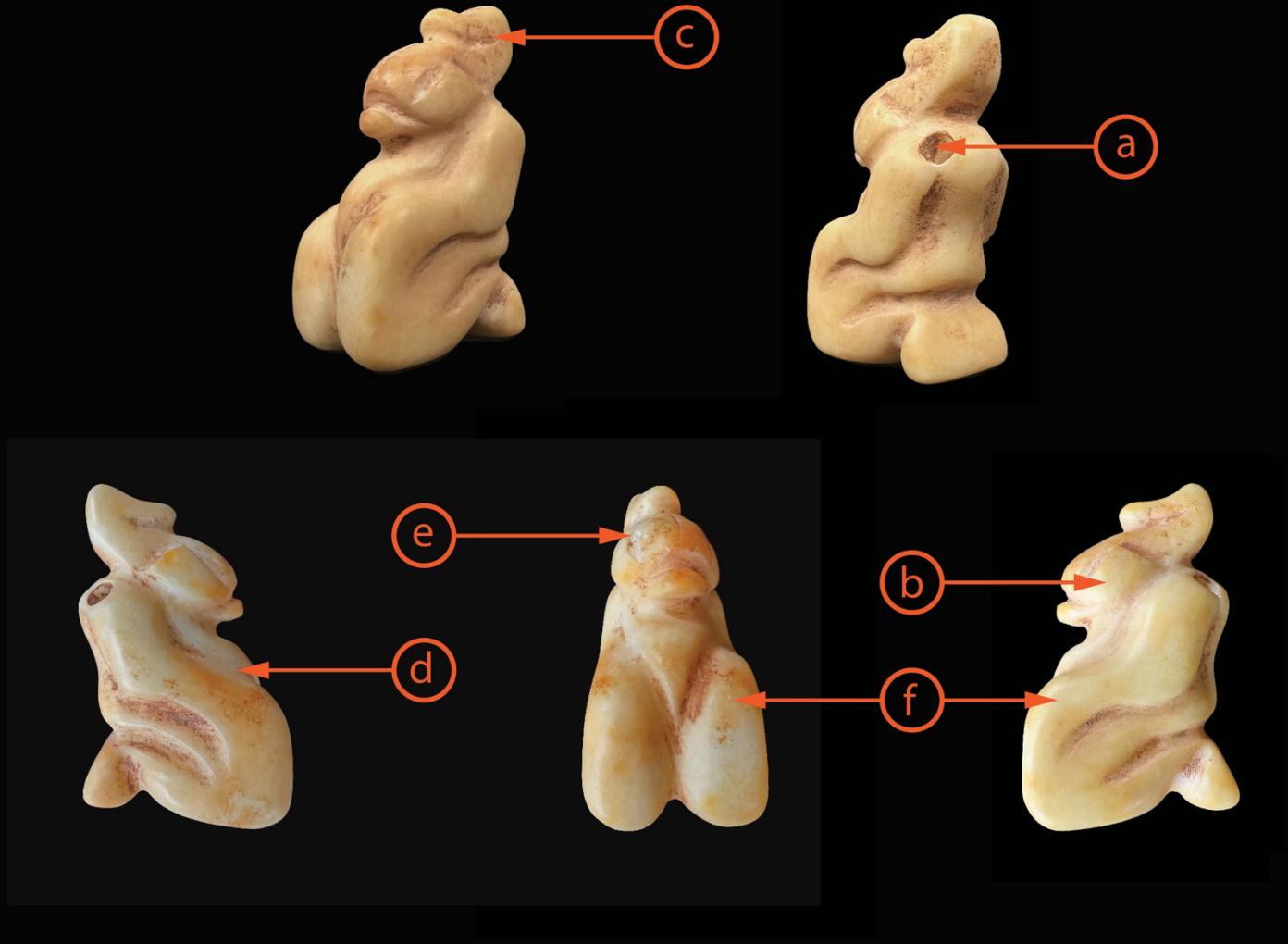
## 5. Face Slider (H67mm, W22mm, D28mm)

This jade in terms of its typology appears as a simple kneeling form with arms wrapped around its forehead. It has just a single pair of amulet pendant holes (a) for suspension and is missing holes between its feet which is common on many Hongshan Helios forms. The physiology is curious as the face almost seems to slide down the head possibly indicating a mask. The head is in the wrong position for kneeling and the hand-arm position (c)(d), face (b) and hair/comb (e) all appear significant. On closer inspection this gives the of a missing body as the head rests on the hips. The portion that sticks up could be some form of hair piece of hat or an abstraction of a body but compared to other Hongshan jades the latter seems less likely. The stone has some mild infiltration staining of orange colour and the underlying material is lighter.



## 6. Kneeling Helios (H74mm, W26mm, D33mm)

The main holes in this form are the bull's nose (a) and possibly a hole under the chin (b). Other holes usually found under the arms and between the feet are missing. In common with the other pieces in this set the humanoid aspects of the form has exaggerated proportions and features. One of the most obvious features of interest are the hands that wrap right under the legs with even the hand separation line visible on the bottom. Again, this is an anatomically very difficult form and the wrapping of the hands lowers the head and produces a deference of form. The face and head have a rodent/rabbit form with split ears that appear to have some sawing marks between. The body has hardly any length similar to the other pieces in this series and the feet are joined as one form as are the second rear set of ears or hair design which wrap around the back of the head. The back has a large infusion stain, and the surface is very smooth and soft.



## 7. Sinuous Kneeler (H56mm, W26mm, D34mm)

Hongshan figures have a large variety of head forms and this example seems to have a 'duck's head' form (c) with what looks like a topknot hair design swept forwards. It has the usual bulls nose hole pair (a) with no other obvious holes and seems to be pregnant (d) judging by the stomach form and tendency for Hongshan jade designers to visualise fertility. Eyes are difficult to identify and may be large (b) or if closed much smaller around this area. The arms and hands blend fluidly into the knee area (f) providing a very sinuous side elevation that emphasises the rhythmic sets of arm, body and leg curves. The overall posture is slightly reclined giving the impression of more confidence than some of the other forms in the set.



## Comparison (Jade numbers top left to right 4,6,7 and lower left to right 2,1,5,3)

A number of interesting features and comparisons can be made across this group of seven jade figures that might indicate some cultural beliefs via form based analysis.

One of the most obvious visual features is the lack of 'prayer holes'. Only jades 1 (a)(b), 2 (a)(c)(j) and 4 (b) have holes in addition to the bull's nose pairs with 1 and 2 the only ones with feet holes. This is quite significant as the majority of Hongshan jades have several holes and the more complex carvings have more holes with the assumption that these were more powerful in exchanging wishes and blessings.

The hair and ear combination for each piece is unique ranging from pairs to singles piece with number 6 having additional ears. The range of base zoomorphic forms is also diverse with rabbit, cat, rodent, bovine, duck, chameleon and birds amongst some of the more obvious forms. The eyes are also diverse in design with pieces 4,7 and possibly 6, and 3,4 and 5 in similar groups. 1 is quite distinct from the rest and from many other Hongshan pieces. Two jades 1 and 3 clearly have round eyes, three including 4,5 and 6 have oval and two have diamond shaped 2 and 7 (if these are in fact the eyes). Separating eye shape into gender definitions as some researchers have suggested is more difficult to do in this instance. Many pieces also lack noses with only number 4 having a clear indication through how the head is designed.

Jades 4 and 5 have an obvious similarity with hands placed above the face or mask. These almost look like animations of each other with the mask sliding over the head and over the face. On 4 the mask is so dominant it's almost as if the intention is to design this as an animated mask. The use of mask and mask wearing aligns with Hongshan ideas of shape

shifting, form varying (cicada) and spatial transitions (birds and turtles). Jade number 6 appears to be the only one that is pregnant.

What could this say about the owner for which these pieces were designed and whom presumably was interred in a grave? Some of the pieces seem to indicate a role in ceremony as all apart from the bird form 3 are crouching or kneeling indicating deference. Yet within this group of six numbers 1, 5 and 6 are head down indicating deference or prayer with 2 which is also head down appearing to have a kind of squatting energy that is much less deferential. Number 3 has a similar neutral pose with 5 and 7 having level heads with the bird form possibly looking the least deferential. Deference is also reinforced by some forcing of humanoid postures like the face sliding, mask wearing and hands wrapped under knees 4,5 and 6. One wonders if each of these are intended to be the owner projected into different states reflecting their own life roles or preference to individual god forms, or whether they link to potential after life intentions.

The underlying zoomorphic forms are also very significant with the bovine providing strength, rabbit, rodent furrowing and burrowing, chameleon colour changing, duck aquatic and bird breaking earthly bonds. Only 4 and 5 appear to lack a direct zoomorphic reference and are closer to human base forms. That is unless 5 is discounted as a mask in which case it is closer to a duck or rodent form.

## References

- [1] Nelson, S., Bell, C. (2014) The Hongshan papers: Collected studies on the archaeology of Northern China, Archaeopress, Oxford, ISBN 9781407312538
- [2] Anderson, D. (2012) Hongshan Jade Treasures: The Art, Iconography and Authentication of Carvings from China's Finest Neolithic Culture, Editrice Tau, Italy. ISBN: 978-88-6244-215-2
- [3] Criski, K. (2021) Hongshan Jade: The oldest, most imaginative jades full of mysterious beauty (Ancient Chinese Jade), Independent, ISBN-13: 979-8459534115
- [4] Qiang, X. (2007) Identification of Ancient Jade from Hongshan Culture, Huayi Publishing House, Beijing, ISBN 978-7-80142-865-3
- [5] Shuyuan L., Huimin, W., (2024) Visual Worship and Elemental Analysis of Sacrificial Objects in Sanxingdui of the Ancient Shu Civilization, Frontiers in Art Research ISSN 2618-1568 Vol. 6, Issue 2: 19-28, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2024.060204 Francis Academic Press, UK.
- [6] Nęcka, E. (2011) Perception and Creativity, Editor(s): Mark A. Runco, Steven R. Pritzker, Encyclopedia of Creativity (Second Edition), Academic Press, Pages 216-219, ISBN 9780123750389,