

Jade objects and ritual activities of Hongshan and Liangzhu cultures

This essay outlines Hongshan archeological record before drawing parallels and comparing jade objects of Liangzhu culture and the associated ritual activities, ideology. It argues that different jade objects in their architectural and ritual contexts express a similar ideology in both cultures and that jade objects act as nexuses for symbolic meanings instantiated through public burial rituals. Understanding symbolic meanings of these objects would give a clearer understanding of the ancient ideology out of which the Chinese civilisation emerged.

The remains of the Hongshan culture (4500–3000 BC) are spread across north-eastern China [fig. 1] (Drennan et al 2017, 43). Niuheliang is an important site of religious ceremonies. It contains monumental architecture with circular compounds and square altars of various sizes, 13 burial groups and the highly decorated ‘Goddess Temple’. Most of the Hongshan burials contain jade objects as the only grave goods which are characterised by unusual shapes of birds, turtles and split rings with animal faces (Barnes & Dashun 1996, 210).

All high-level burials contain hook-cloud ornaments while these are rarely found in the low-level burials [fig. 2] (Li 2008, 85). Li believes that these ornaments are expressing the Hongshan understanding of the universe and are of two types: turtle shaped [fig. 3], bird-shaped [fig. 4] (Li 2008, 101). The turtle’s spiral body imitates the revolving heavens (Li 2008, 102). As reflected in the cosmology of the Spring and Autumn period, the dome-like convex turtle’s back symbolises heaven, while the earth is its flat bottom (Allan 1991, 103). I would argue that turtle’s model of the universe is so potent because its natural moving speed could be symbolically paralleled with the slow passing of time for the agricultural society while waiting for crops to grow.

It is precisely the agriculture that fostered new relationships between the nature and humans giving rise to the conceptions of the supernatural environment (Li 2008, 104). They were at-

tuned to the seasonal changes and were guided by the movement of stars. This cosmological knowledge was the realm of the elite which communicated with the sacred in order to guarantee good harvest (Li 2008, 115). Ideology established the social power of the elite buried in the ceremonial sites (Earle 1997, 149). Nelson interprets the burial evidence to hint at the 'three tier system' with elite buried in ceremonial areas on hills above villages (Nelson 1997, 61).

Its ritual functions of Niuheliang's unique architecture and geography are unanimously accepted due to exclusivity of the sacred buildings and high proportion of symbolic artefacts like jade (Li 2008, 90). Drennan et al (2017, 46) suggests it was a site of pilgrimage to burial ceremonies of important individuals. Niuheliang is in a low agricultural productivity area with a relatively small local population (Drennan et al 2017, 54). I would argue that the low agricultural productivity of this area enhanced the symbolic meanings of the landscape and the ritual ceremonies because such place is outside the ordinary sites. This would increase the symbolic weight of jades in burial ceremonies happening on elevated ground in a ritual designated area. This 'sacred inclination' characterises Hongshan social complexity (Li 2008, 104), and is arguably reflected not only in architecture, burial practices and jade objects but mainly rests on the concepts of the universe and the perception of nature and surrounding environment as sacred.

Barnes and Dashun (1996, 209, 214) refer to the 'relic Neolithic landscape' where Niuheliang is oriented towards the boar's or bear's head shaped mountain. This site was perhaps chosen due to the landscape containing special meanings (Li 2008, 90). That is why high soil fertility was not needed. The animal head of what is called the 'Pig-dragon' jade echoes the hogback of Mulan Shan [fig. 5]. Landscape must have made an impression on people who saw it as supernatural and sought to make jade objects symbolising the higher power. This is supported

by the Yi Jing records about the ancient belief that objects adopt forms of symbolic significance and how human and spirits affect each other (Teng 2004, 183).

The notion of 'elevation' is manifested in flat and rounded platforms at the top of stepped buildings, the sites of ceremonial activity (Zhang et al 2013, 6). These purposefully elevated structures might have been tending towards heaven but also employed the circle and square shapes for symbolic meaning. This combination is noticed in the layering in tomb construction in Location II at Niuheliang where Tomb 11.4 demonstrates the circle and square [fig. 6] (Barnes & Dashun 1996, 218). Feng's (2001, 341) showed that in Hongshan culture the square cairns and round altars are constructed according to the 'round heaven, square earth' idea and are used as cemeteries. It has been suggested that Hongshan portable jades have some underlying symbolism in common with the Caomaoshan altar which consists of three layers and evokes the tortoise shape (Zhang et al 2013, 16).

The cosmology of the Spring and Autumn period interprets turtle's extremities as pillars which allow the circle (heaven) to rest on the square (earth) (Allan 1991, 103). At Sidun site of the Liangzhu culture (3300–2300 BC) [fig. 7] there is a round altar inside a square platform which some associate with the bird's eye view of a cong (Teng 183). Li (2008, 114) argues that four corners of a cong may symbolise the pillars connecting the earth and heaven. All of these notions of elevation, layering and circle-square marriage is evident in Liangzhu jade cong and its use in burials [fig. 8]. Li (2008, 104) believes that 'round heaven, square earth cosmology' was initiated around 6 000 BC because of the reliance on cosmological knowledge in the practice of agriculture (Li 2008, 101).

Unlike Hongshan, Liangzhu jades are characterised by cong, bi and yue. Cong units feature the same theme of sacred animal and sacred man where the latter is always on top of the

former while the whole structure is still one whole unit [fig. 9](Ling 2013, 592). I argue this may be a reflection of understanding of these Neolithic people of the ‘superiority’ above other animals especially the ones which were domesticated while being part of the same natural environment.

The distinctive feature of Liangzhu jades is the carved patterns of “dragon”, “sacred human and animal”, “bird”. Such elaborate carvings are not present in Hongshan finds. The first two share the technique of expression and eventually formed a ‘sacred insignia’ on jade cong from Fanshan [fig. 10]. Liangzhu elite burials are characterised partly by yue axes which marked high status besides the cong and bi, and may have been a sign of secular or military power and in conjunction with the others is also a sign of sacred power. This combination of sacred and secular greatly differs Liangzhu from Hongshan (Li 2008, 137). In Hongshan culture jade objects carry only cosmological meanings and make communication with the supernatural possible while Liangzhu yue axes also add secular or social power to the ritual context.

While only in several Hongshan sites bi jade discs were unearthed, the proportion of Bi discs in Fanshan cemetery is usually around a quarter and also directly correlate with high status of the buried (Ling 2013, 592). They are believed to have represented the heaven similarly to the Hongshan turtle jades (Li 2008, 103). Teng (2004, 182) suggests the bi shape replicates the path of the sun and was a powerful medium for communication with ancestors and deities for both cultures. In Confucian classics bluish-green bi are for heaven worship while yellow cong were for earth worship (Teng 2004, 181). The oracle-bone script the character for ‘sun’ is sometimes represented as a circle with a dot (Teng 2004, 180). The pupils of eyes of the life-sized clay mask from the ‘Goddess temple’ in Niuheliang were defined by spherical blue-green jade [fig. 11]. I would argue that bi discs may have derived from the changing ratios of

human eye pupils, the perfect roundness of which would be compared to the roundness of the setting sun. Besides, the act of seeing is related to daily light fluctuations and spiritual enlightenment.

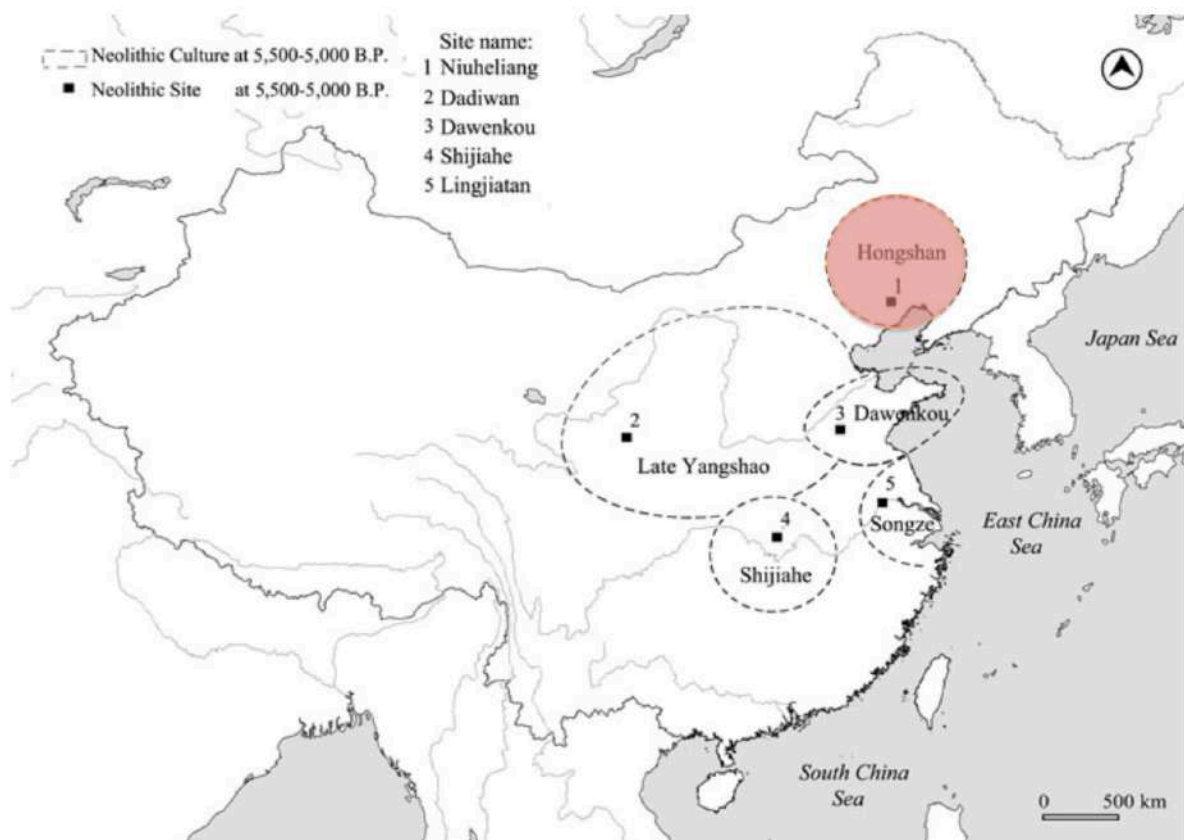
Li argues that the differences between jade objects seen in different regions point to the exchange of the 'most important commodity' - sacred knowledge (Li 2008, 136). This argument may be stretched to both Hongshan and Liangzhu cultures. It seems that similar sacred knowledge was passed by sometimes rather different objects. I argue that they sourced their beliefs from the outside world which informed the shapes of jades and reinforced the beliefs. The natural structures like mountains were interpreted in symbolic terms which resulted in portable materials, vehicles and nexuses of ideas. Symbolism was contained not only in physically ungraspable structures but also in portable objects which would aid an individual in the grave and beyond.

While Liangzhu burial jades had an additional secular component, the two cultures seem to share some symbolic ideas which permeated jades, architecture, burial practices and landscape. Despite that Hongshan burials contained more percentage of jades and of different types, this stone seems to carry the common power of the sacred knowledge making it the most evocative symbolic material for both cultures.

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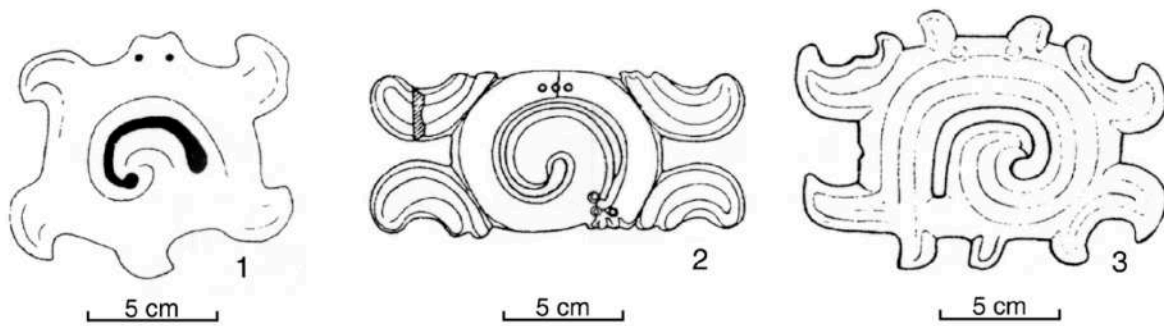
Figures



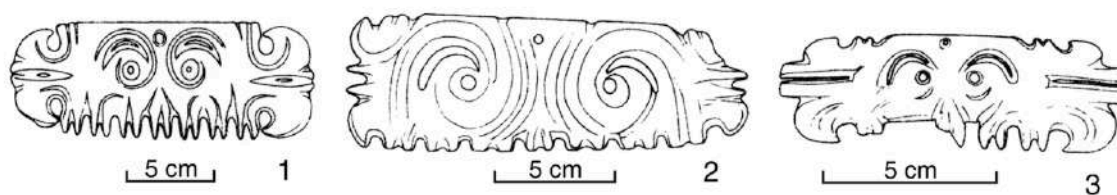
[Fig. 1] Map showing Hongshan and Niuheliang locations. Source (Zhang et al 2013).



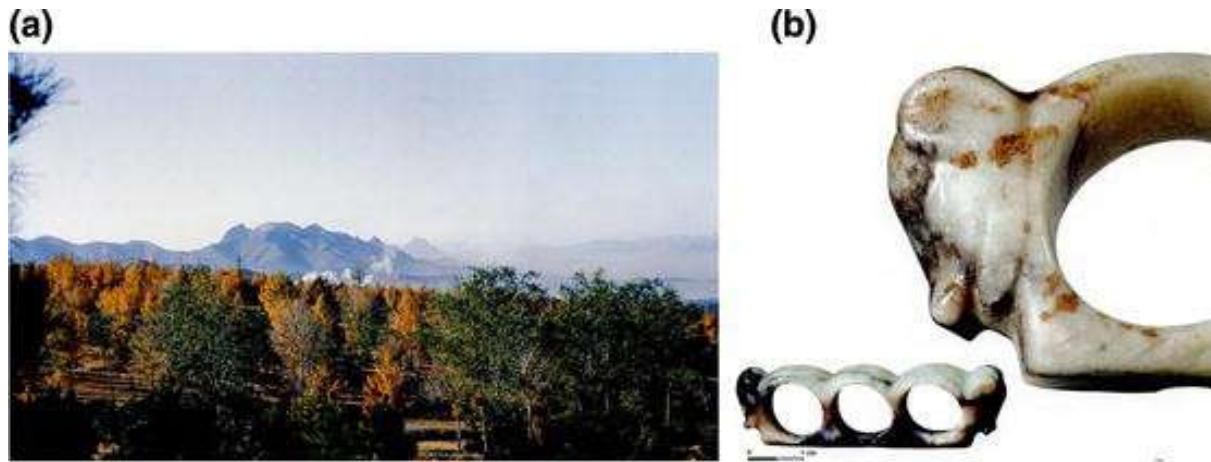
[Fig. 2] Hongshan remains at Nihueliang, larger tomb <http://hongshanren.com/history>, accessed on 16/02/2022.



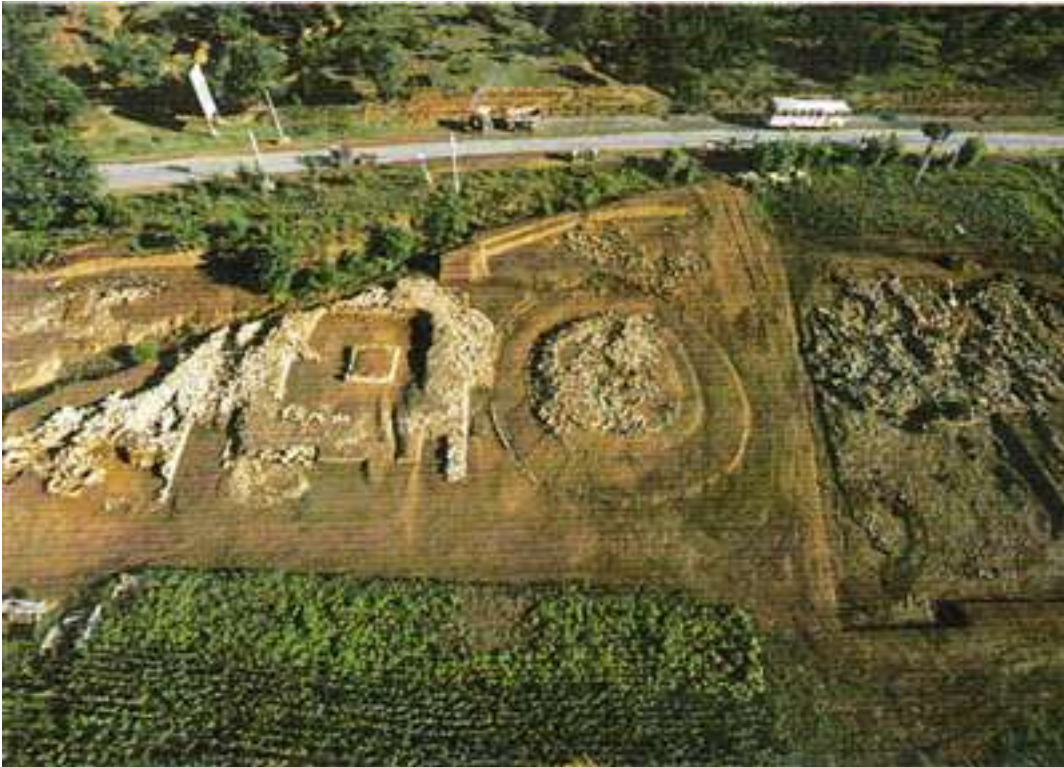
[Fig. 3] Turtle-shaped hook-cloud ornaments of the Hongshan culture. 1. from Tianjin museum; 2. from Niuheliang; 3. from Balinyouqi museum. Source (Li 2008).



[Fig. 4] Bird-shaped hook-cloud ornaments of the Hongshan culture. 1. from Ferlier art museum; 2. from Tianjin art museum; 3. from Boston art museum. Source (Li 2008).



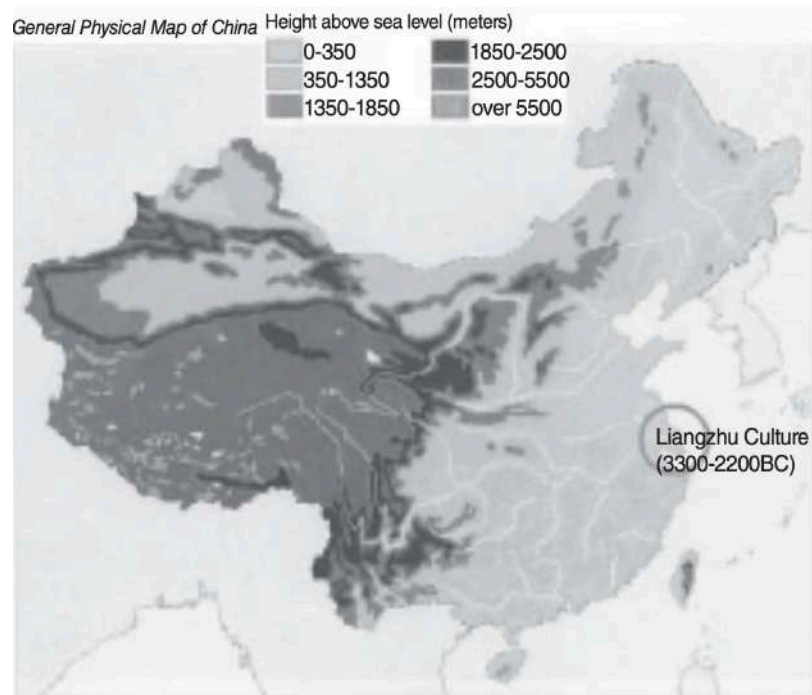
[Fig. 5] Animal imagery associated with Niuheiliang. Mulan Shan, a mountain whose outline on the horizon has been likened by some to a boar, pig or bear; b jade object from a Niuheiliang tomb, thought by some to be in the shape of boar or bear, (Zhang 2013).



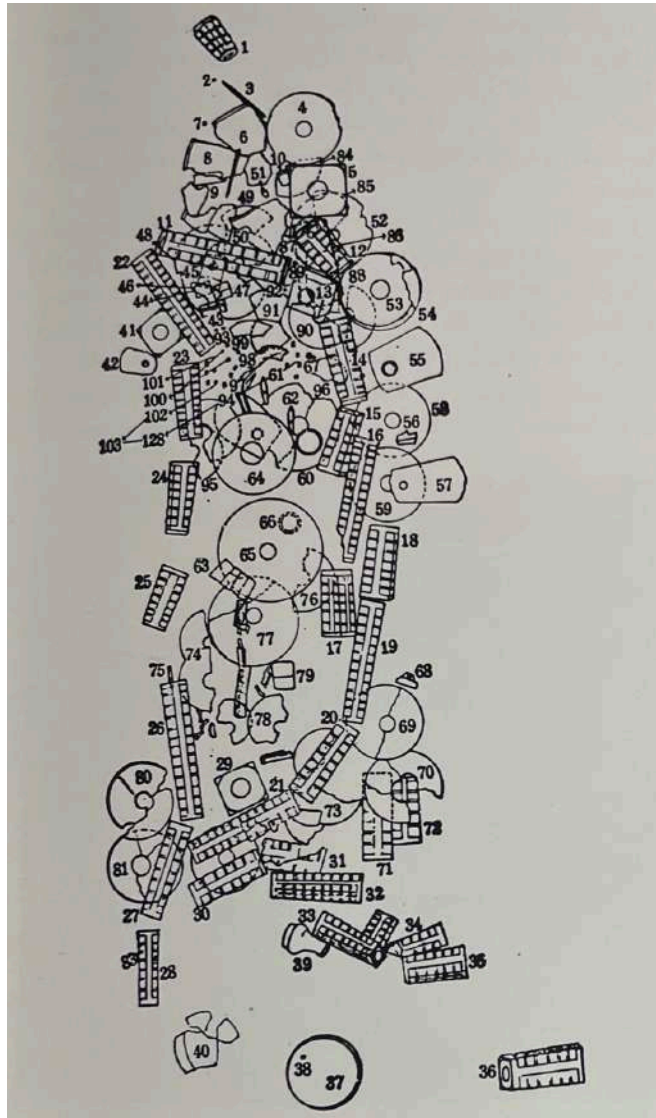
[Fig. 6] Location II, Niuheliang <http://hongshanren.com/history>, accessed on 16/02/2022.



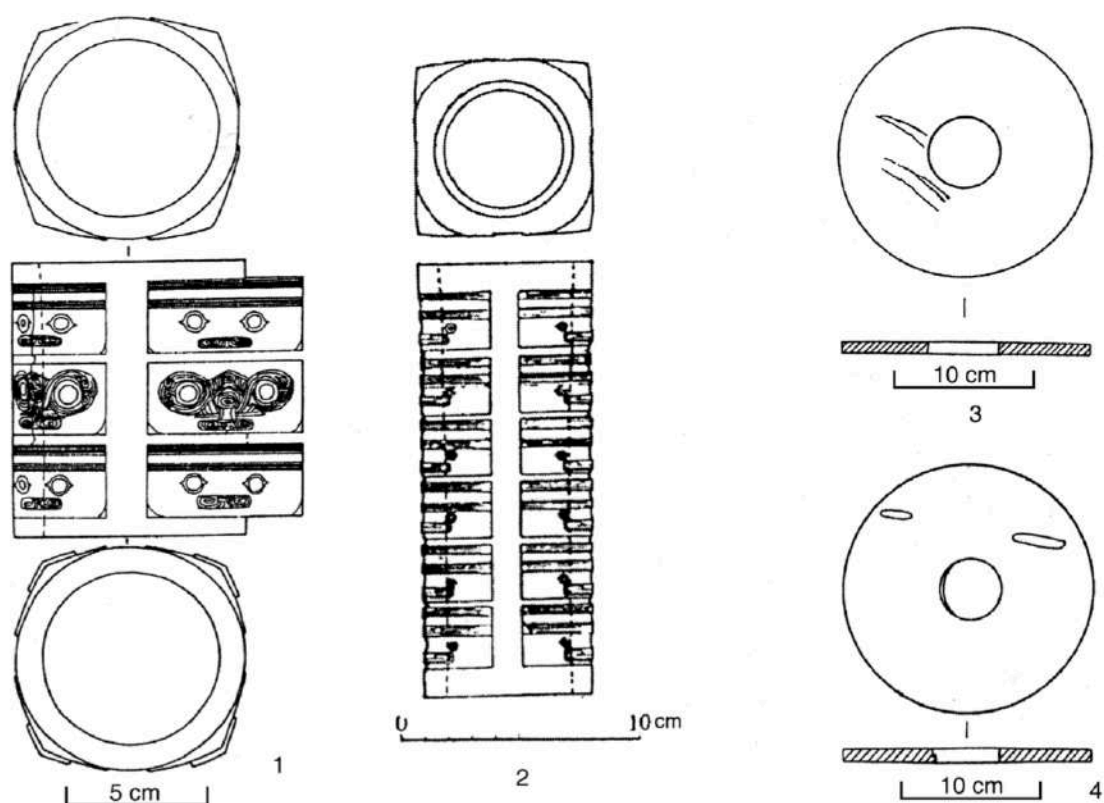
Hongshan circular platforms (Drennan et al 2017).



[Fig. 7] Map showing the location of Liangzhu culture. Source: (Ling 2013).



[Fig. 8] Plan of tomb M3 at Jiangsu Wujin Sidun showing the arrangement of axes, discs and cong along the length of the body. Neolithic period, Liangzhu culture, c. 2500 BC. After Kaogu 1984.2, pp. 109-29, fig. 5. Source: (Rawson 2002).



[Fig. 9] Jade Cong tubes and Bi disks of the Liangzhu culture. 1. Cong tube (from Fanshan site M2); 2. Cong tube (from Sidun site); 3. Bi disk (from Fanshan site M20); 4. Bi disk (from Fanshan site M23), Source: (Li 2008).



[Fig. 10] Drawing of the sacred insignia. Source: (Ling 2013).



[Fig. 11] 'Goddess of Hongshan', Niuheliang, Hongshan culture, www.chinadaily.com.cn/html.old/epaper/cndy/html/2007-03/07/content_3165 , accessed on 16/02/2022.