

Spirit Stones of China

The collecting of Chinese scholar's stones, also known as spirit stones or, traditionally, 'rare stones' (*Qishi*) or 'stones for display' (*gongshi*) can be traced to at least the Tang dynasty (618-906), and probably originated much earlier, possibly as early as the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). Recently it has experienced a revival in China, and has become popular in the West. Well aware of the traditional Daoist belief that such strange stones embody the most refined 'spirit-energy' (*qi*) of which all things are made, most collectors have focused on stones that have the most dynamic inner energy and life, and which communicate this in their extraordinary textures and forms.

A survey of traditional literature on *qiishi* makes clear that the most prized stones were traditionally those with strange and bizarre shapes, suggestive of remote and sacred mountain peaks or of Daoist paradises. Stones were seen as fragments of the primordial energies that created the world. Much stone literature emphasizes the exotic appearance of the finest examples and suggests that these stones reflect the cosmic order inherent in the Dao.



Lingbi stone, 15" H, 13.25"W
Former collection of East Corner

Historically, as stones from certain locales became scarce, other prized sources were found. For example, during the Tang dynasty, the great open-work stones dredged from the bottom of Lake Dongting (also known as the Great Lake, or Taihu, between today's Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces) became very popular, while during the Song dynasty (960-1279), most prized were Lingbi stones (from Lingbi county in Anhui province). Despite their differences – Taihu stones are usually pale grey, white and yellow while Lingbi stones are generally black or dark grey – both are varieties of limestone. Ying stone, also limestone, is another important type of spirit stones appreciated by scholars throughout the history. It bears a distinct resemblance to Lingbi – with dark grey or black surfaces (although a little rougher in its texture) – and is often distinguished by the presence of pronounced white or light-colored calcite veins.

Because stones are made of *qi*, they were believed to undergo profound changes in the course of their growth and development. This reflects the Daoist belief that all things are in a constant state of transformation and flux, stones being no exception. A Song dynasty Daoist scripture, the *Yuqing Neishu* (*Inner Chapters of the Jade Purity [Heaven]*), explains the evolution of rock crystal (*shui jing*):

In the great Dao of heaven and earth, what endures of the myriad phenomena is their primal and harmonious *qi* (*yuanhe zhi qi*). Of the things that exist in perpetuity, none surpass the sun, moon, and stars. Yin and Yang, the Five Phases (Elements), day and night, come into being out of Earth, and in the end return to Earth. They alter in accord with the four seasons, but that there should be a limit to them is also the Dao of nature. For instance, when pine resin imbibes the *qi* of mature Yang for a thousand years of irradiation it becomes pachyma spirit; in another thousand years it becomes amber, and in another thousand years crystal quartz (*shui jing*). These are all seminal essences formed through irradiation by the floreate *qi* of sun and moon.

The literati of the Ming (1368 – 1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties were highly articulate in their praise for strange stones. By the late Ming dynasty, an elementary understanding of stone lore was considered basic knowledge for any educated person.

One of the most famous episodes in the history of literati who venerated stones concerns the Northern Song period (960-1127) scholar, calligrapher and connoisseur Mi Fu (1051-1107), one of the greatest stone collectors in Chinese history. His respectful attitude toward stones was well known, and is illustrated in the tale of his bowing to a stone and calling it 'Elder Brother' (*Shixiong*).

Emperors, too, became enamored of stones. Perhaps the most striking example is Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-25) of the late Northern Song dynasty. The finest painter of all the emperors of China, Huizong was also an extraordinary collector of stones. He was a devout Daoist, and his painting *Xiang Long Shi* (*The Auspicious Dragon Stone*), now in the Palace Museum, Beijing, was created and perceived as an 'auspicious omen' (*ruiying*) – a sign of the Emperor's virtuous reign. The stone displays elements prized by traditional collectors: a twisted form with dramatic overhangs and a pocked, open-work structure.

An obsession for a strange stone plays a key role in the early Qing dynasty author Pu Songling's (1640-1715) story *Shi Qingxu* (*The Ethereal Stone*). In this case the stone is divine, with its own consciousness. The stone and its owner are fated to come together, and every time they are separated (for example, when the stone is stolen), the stone makes its way back. It was thus the karma of the stone to belong to a specific individual.

In the course of Chinese history, many stones have been so admired that they were inscribed by their owners. This predilection for inscribing names and poems on stones is evident to any visitor to the imperial garden at the



Dragon, Taihu stone, 20" H
Former collection of East Corner



Qixia stone, 14.5" H
Ian and Susan Wilson Collection

northern entrance to the Forbidden City in Beijing, in which there are a large number of fine stones collected by the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95). These include Taihu stones and rare types of coral, the latter set into marble stands carved with surface designs of crashing ocean waves. One dramatic piece, a tall, thin slab of petrified wood, has a poem composed by the Qianlong emperor carved into its surface in bold, archaic clerical-style (*li shu*) calligraphy.

In addition to Lingbi, Taihu and Ying stones, the collection of Chinese scholar's stones contains even more varieties, such as sedimentary ironstone, petrified wood, 'Thousand-layer stone' (*Qianceng shi*), 'Yellow Wax stone' (*Huangla shi*), Qixia stone, and marble (*Dali shi*), etc.

In ancient China, some strange stones were considered worthy tribute gifts; some

were worshipped as gods, and others had the power to speak and predict the weather.

At one time, the earth deity, She, was depicted as a stone altar, exposed to the rain and snow. Stone also figures prominently in the myth of Nü Wa; the goddess smelted stones to create huge building blocks of rock, with which she repaired the sky after a corner of Heaven collapsed. One block went unused, and spawned its own mythology: Baoyu, hero of the great eighteenth century novel *Hong Lou Meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, or *The Story of the Stone*), was said to be an incarnation of this stone. Closely associated with fertility as well as divinity, stones were elevated to a status more often enjoyed by great works of art such as paintings and ritual bronzes.

Many exhibitions play a key role in demystifying and furthering awareness of the esoteric phenomenon of stone collection in China and around the world. The phenomenon was inextricably linked to the ancient Chinese veneration of sacred mountains and landscape, and the renaissance it is enjoying today is a tribute to the longevity and integrity of this ancient tradition.

Adapted from Stephen Little's *Spirit Stones of China: the Ian and Susan Wilson Collection*
Orientation magazine, Hong Kong, May 1999



Hippo, Lingbi stone
Former collection of East Corner

Chinese Scholar's Rock

The Chinese look at unusual, highly textured hunks of stone the way Westerners gaze at billowing white clouds in a summer sky: as sources of inspiration and fantasy. For those with imagination, rocks can embody animals, people, mythological dragons, craggy mountains, just about anything.

The Chinese collect ancient stones for their abstract, formal and spiritual qualities. Robert D. Mowry, head of the department of Asian art at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard, once wrote that the most prized rocks were "descriptive enough to suggest natural forms – weathered trees, lofty peaks, aged scholars – but abstract enough to leave actual interpretation to the viewer's imagination."

The Chinese have traditionally collected two kinds of rocks: huge limestone garden rocks and scholars' tabletop rocks. An appreciation for garden rocks goes back to the Tang dynasty (618-906), when special boulders became the subjects of essays and poems. Large weathered rocks were installed outdoors, where they could be admired in groups or alone. In New York, such rocks are at the Astor Court in the Metropolitan Museum and the New York Chinese Scholar's Garden at the Staten Island Botanical Garden.

Rocks moved indoors during the Song dynasty (960-1279), when literati began taking what were called spirit stones into their studios. The Chinese valued these tabletop rocks more than garden rocks. Even if a Confucian scholar could not go out to the mountains, he could always find inspiration in his studio," Christie's vice president in the Chinese works of art department Laura B. Whitman said. "The rock provided a mind's landscape. Abstraction was not new to the Chinese."

The scholars' rocks, ranging from an inch to five feet tall, were mounted on custom-made wooden stands and sometimes served as censers, brush rests, ink stones or seals. Did the scholars go out into nature looking for such odd rocks?" It seems that from the beginning there were finders, like antiques dealers," Ms. Whitman said. "As early as the 11th century, rocks were in the antiques markets; we read about them in poems. By the 17th century, there were whole books on rocks. 'Chats on Rocks,' for example, discusses both where elegant gentlemen and the nouveaux riches collected theirs." Liang Jiutu, the author of that 19th-century book, offers advice: "In collecting, it is the choice of rocks that comes first. If the rock does not seem like a painting by the powers of nature, then you shouldn't choose it."

Scholars' rocks encompassed different kinds of stones, shapes, colors, textures and sizes. They were ranked according to strict criteria. The preferred rock was a dense black limestone from the subterranean quarries in Lingbi county of Anhui Province. Lingbi rock, fine-grained and textured, seems moist to the touch. The rock is also prized because it sometimes produces a metallic, bell-like sound when tapped, a feature important to connoisseurs.



"Yellow Wax stone" (silica)
21" H, 19" W
Ian and Susan Wilson Collection

Over the centuries, the supply of Lingbi rock dwindled, and scholars turned to Taihu stone and Ying stone. By the Ming period (1368-1644), more stones had become acceptable: marble, malachite, yellow quartz, soapstone, turquoise and coral. The Chinese at that time thought coral was a rock. And, even petrified wood was collected and displayed as scholars' rocks.

Scholars' rocks always had custom wooden stands, which varied in style according to the region and era. Usually the stand was fitted for a specific rock, with a cavity, if necessary, to cradle an uneven bottom. The carved hardwood stand was meant to raise the stone from the mundane realm to the sacred. A great stand affects the quality of the rock. A stand also helps orient the gaze. Some stones have only one view; others work like sculptures in the round.

Who buys scholars' rocks? People aren't buying them the way they buy other art. It's very personal. They treat it like they do sculpture; you either like it or you don't. Collectors have included Roy Lichtenstein, Brad Pitt, Brice Marden. The most widely known collection, which belonged to the artist Richard Rosenblum, inspired one of the best books on the subject: Mr. Mowry's catalog "Worlds Within Worlds" (Harvard University Art Museums, 1997).

"The rocks appeal both to classic old-style Chinese collectors and younger people who are more interested in their graphic qualities," Ms. Whitman said. The estimates for the scholars' rocks at Christie's start at a few hundred dollars apiece. For the garden rocks, the range is \$10,000 to \$50,000.

Adapted from Wendy Moonan's *Seeing Beauty in Rocks*,
The New York Times, 16 August 2002



Acrobatic dog, Lingbi stone
9.25" H
Former collection of East Corner

Rocks, having an intertwined relationship with mankind for hundreds of thousands of years, were used by our ancestor for making tools, weapons, buildings and even jewelry. Rocks, being resolute, strong and full of stability, impact our life and culture beyond the limit of time and space.

For over thousand years, Chinese scholars and craftsmen have recognized aesthetically humankind's relationship with rocks and their worship for rocks. As products of natural forces, rocks are collected and displayed to beautify the daily routine and emotion. Surrounded by architecture, furniture and plants, rocks are appreciated with their natural beauty.

Chinese scholars have long been strongly educated and influenced by the philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. They believe that appreciating and being exposed to natural elements is one of the key components to maintain a good health and a pleasant mind. Being harvested from nature, rocks seize the hearts of Chinese scholars with their inspiration, elegance and eternity.

