



GLASS PIERCING JEWELRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND CHINA



JASON PFOHL
Gorilla Glass
Oaxaca, Mexico

Photos by Victor Mendiola

I am sometimes surprised at people's assumption that piercing and body modification has its roots and history among "primitive" tribal people living in the jungle somewhere. I live in Mexico, and I am regularly reminded by the public that my stretched ear lobes are "like the Africans." My typical response is, "actually, they are just like your Zapotec and Mixtec ancestors." The Zapotecs were not hunter-gatherers; they had large urban centers, advanced calendar systems, elaborate burial rites, and practiced cranial and dental modification as well as tattooing and piercing. Advanced societies throughout the world practiced piercing in Egypt, India, Southeast Asia, China, and Mesoamerica.

These ancient Vietnamese ear weights (*see images 3 and 5*) clearly demonstrate that piercing was not exclusively part of primitive cultures but also took place in highly advanced civilizations. These particular pairs are from the Sa Huynh culture, which flourished

between 1000 BCE to 200 CE. The Sa Huynh were seafarers and master craftsmen, producing magnificent jade and glass ear jewelry. They had an extensive trade network, and as such, Sa Huynh ear ornaments have been discovered in archaeological sites throughout Southeast Asia.

They had a special connection with the Philippines, where Sa Huynh ear weights and ceramics were discovered in the Kalany Cave complex. Other discoveries of Sa Huynh artifacts have been found on Orchid Island in Taiwan, in Thailand, as far north as Hong Kong, and as far south as Java. Conversely, many of the beads discovered in Sa Huynh burial sites, carnelian, agate, zircon, gold, and garnet, are made from materials foreign to that region but traded from as far away as India and perhaps China.

My particular focus is on glass, and this group of pieces is an excellent opportunity to put early glass making into historical context.



Glass making was not invented by accident, and the technology and physical forms of the jewelry were based on pre-existing technology and regional styles respectively. Historically, the spread of glass technology in ancient India follows the spread of iron working, and this pattern is repeated in Vietnam. The Sa Huynh specialized in iron tools and weapons, in contrast to the contemporaneous Dong Son culture in Northern Vietnam who specialized in bronze artifacts. It seems probable that the high temperatures and powerful furnaces necessary to smelt iron were a prerequisite for melting glass as well. The greenish color common in much of the Sa Huynh glass is the result of iron being mixed into the glass batch as a colorant.

There are many styles of Sa Huynh ear weights, several of which are shown here (*see images 3 and 5*). One classic form used by the Sa Huynh was a rounded ear weight with a small hook that passes through the ear, with three protruding diamond shapes coming off the bottom and sides. Two variations of this style are represented, one with small diamond shapes and the other with dramatically long pointed ends (these are called *linling-o*). The Ifugao peoples in the

Philippines still manufacture this style of ear weights and call them *bung* or *boong* and trade them with their neighbors, the Bontoc, Kalinga, and Gad-dang.

The first *lingling-o* weights shown are made of stone (*see image 1*), the second image is of nephrite jade (*see image 2*), and the third image is of glass (*see image 3*). The same shape and composition was used in all three materials. The glass was carved from a cast block, in the same manner that jade was carved. This illustrates how lapidary skills were also a precursor to the manufacture of early glass ear weights.

It is worth noting that the Sa Huynh seem to have shared the same respect for jade as the Chinese. Jade was considered a magical and sacred material that increased longevity. Early Chinese experiments in glass making were made by Taoist alchemists trying to invent man-made jade. And in this context glass was not considered imitation but creation, working within formal aesthetic restraints informed by earlier jewelry traditions.

These last two pieces (*see images 5 and 6*) are rare examples of the exaggerated diamond shape in long points.



The other style of glass jewelry included in this article from the Sa Huynh are the glass crescents (*see photo on page 14 and image 7, above*). These are interesting because of the wide variety of colors and sizes. Several shades of green, blue, purple, and black can be identified. This range of colors illustrates an advanced understanding of glass chemistry. These particular pieces appear to have been manufactured hot in a flame and later ground down and polished to form the triangular shape. This shows a further sophistication in glass working, as it is more complicated to manipulate hot glass than to carve it after it has cooled to a solid. The discovery of glass workshops and pits of white sand at Giong Ca Vo archaeological site in Ho Chi Minh City is further proof that they melted their own glass, although it is probable that they also imported glass blocks from India. Stylistically, the Sa Huynh ear crescents resemble the popular leech motifs found in Dayak imagery from Borneo and may point to a common ancestry of the two cultures. Similarities between ancient burial sites in Borneo and Vietnam also support this theory.

In conclusion, the Sa Huynh were a highly sophisticated civilization with urban centers, wide-spanning trade, complex burial rights, and advanced technology. They achieved a highly advanced level of glass working technology more than two thousand years ago. This development—viewed in the context of iron working and lapidary traditions—helps us to understand how glass technology has evolved and how earlier jewelry forms were replicated in glass.



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The focus on glass as a raw material and as jewelry highlights the extensive trade relations the Sa Huynh had in the ancient world.

CHINESE GLASS PIERCING JEWELRY

The Chinese have one of the oldest glass traditions in the world. Taoist alchemists experimented with various formulas to try to create artificial jade. Jade was precious to the Taoists as they thought it had special powers to preserve the human body and spirit and attain immortality. Recent studies at Stanford have connected the “Chinese Purple” used to paint the famous Qin terracotta warriors as a by-product of barium glass making formulas. The Chinese were also the first to use lead and barium in glass making.

These three Chinese glass plugs (*see images 8, 9, and 10*) are all likely from the Warring States Period (479 to 221 BCE). The blue plugs are an example of crizzling, a result of an imperfect glass formula that causes the glass to break down over time in humid environments. The other two pairs are called “erdangs” and have a tiny hole in the middle, they were probably formed on a torch with the glass being wound around a glass wire. Colored beads may have been strung through the ear-plug, and are called “yuandangs.” The multi-colored pair may be an application of lusters to the surface of the glass, or may be a natural iridescent effect of having been buried for a long period. **P**

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 1388 HAIGHT ST. #249
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