

FALLING FOR ANCIENT JADE



Jade has been prized for thousands of years in China. Ancient specimens of the precious stone, which embody history and craftsmanship, are highly sought after by collectors. But for those thinking of venturing into this field, making sure you have the genuine article is both crucial and challenging.

STORY CHRISTY CHOI

Terracotta warriors, Buddha sculptures, Chinese zitan furniture. Hollywood Road has long been the place to go in Hong Kong for hunters of antique items such as these.

On this winding hillside road in Sheung Wan, collectors have also come here to find jade from long-time dealers. Mei Ling Chiang is the director of Oi Ling Antiques, a family-run business specialising in antique furniture. While she has a few pieces of archaic jade for sale, she insists

she is no jade expert, but can relate what she has observed over the past two decades as a trader on the street.

During this time, she has occasionally helped collector friends acquire pieces and put together exhibitions. These days she only sees a good piece “once every few months” she says, as she pulls up images of pieces sent to her by friends and clients on her smartphone. Collecting archaic or ancient jade is a high-stakes game, and fakes have become all

the more common as demand has risen over the years.

“Even a dealer that has real things might sell you a fake. They will save the good stuff for long-term clients,” says Renee Chiang, a decade-long collector of archaic jade, and editor and co-owner at New Century Press.

“You need to be willing to make your mistakes,” she adds. Chiang and her husband, New Century publisher Bao Pu, have collected some 100 pieces – including more fakes than she’d

ABOVE

Openwork ornament in the shape of a dragon on cloud scrolls. Dated from the Tang or Liao dynasty, 9th to 10th century, this ancient jade is part of the Cissy and Robert Tang Collection currently being exhibited at the Art Museum of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

COURTESY THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

care to admit – drawn by the allure of the cool translucent stone.

Jade, unlike diamonds or other gemstones, is not a single type of rock, but has long been a catchall phrase used to describe tough stones favoured by the Chinese for their hardness and translucent beauty. They’re usually one of two types of crystalline rock found most commonly in shades of green or white called nephrite and jadeite. Jadeite is rarer, and can be found in a broader range of colours, including blue,

pink, mauve, emerald green and lavender.

Because of the hardness of jade, it took ancient craftsmen an enormous amount of time, effort and patience to work with the stone. A piece could take months or years to create – not so much carved as eroded down – using either bamboo, other harder stones or a slurry of sand.

“You can feel how it’s worn down,” says Chiang, as she hands over a small inch and a half diameter *bi*, a flat sphere with a

hole through the centre. The *bi* is one of the most common shapes found in the graves of ancient nobles. It was likely used in rituals, although no surviving texts from the time describe what they were used for.

The pattern continues to be used in modern day jade carvings and ornaments. Jade is still worn by some as talismans intended to ward off evil spirits. It’s believed that when a piece of jade jewellery breaks, it has protected its wearer from harm.



PHOTOGRAPHY LUNA WONG

The *bi* that Renee Chiang has brought out of a bank vault and into the café where we meet feels smooth and cool to the touch. The hole in the middle looks even, but feeling the inside edge, as Chiang instructs, I notice a difference in the depth of the groove. The inside is less worn down than the outside, resulting in a slight difference to the curvature. The difference, she says, comes from the tool (likely made of bamboo) used to carve the *bi* being worn away as the jade was polished over and over again.

It's little details like this that help Chiang decide whether or not an item is genuine. In more than 10 years of collecting, Chiang and her husband have amassed an arsenal of knowledge. What helped led to this expertise was the unintentional purchase of a fake. One day, 11 years ago, in a doctor's office, Chiang came across

several pieces of jade laid across a table. One shaped like a turtle shell caught her eye. Spellbound, she convinced the doctor to introduce her to a Kowloon-based dealer. "I always liked sculpture," says Chiang, adding that her family have been involved in the museum business.

Soon she and her husband were the proud owners of several pieces of what they thought was Neolithic Hongshan archaic jade aged between about 5,000 to 6,000 years. Hongshan sites have been found across an area stretching



"YOU CANNOT TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS; YOU REALLY NEED TO STUDY"

— Renee Chiang

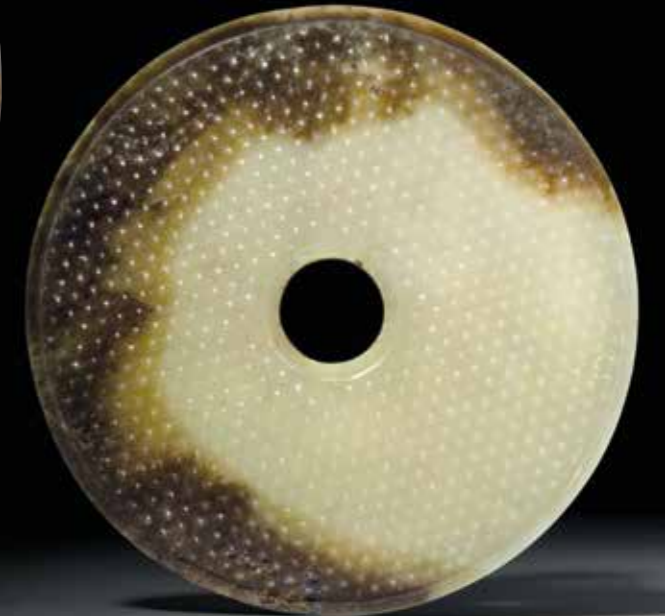
COURTESY RENEE CHIANG

from Liaoning to Inner Mongolia and the culture, thought to be one of the oldest to feature carved jade, is said to have influenced that of early China and Korea. But after months of studying, poring over books and catalogues alike, the couple felt something was wrong. "We felt like such stupid dupes," says Chiang. The price they paid, Chiang says, should have tipped them off. They paid just a few thousand for the pieces, which would normally have much more. Despite being stung, they did not want to be beaten and caught the collector's bug. They spent a lot of time learning about ancient jade; reading books and catalogues, visiting museums, talking to curators, dealers, academics, auction house experts and more. "You cannot trust your instincts, you really need to study," says Chiang. And that's a point that dealers, collectors and auction house experts all agree on: Study, study, study.

COLLECT WITH CARE

"Archaic jade is a minefield at the moment," says Tsang Chi-fan, a specialist in Chinese ceramics and works of art at Christie's. Unlike paintings, mummies and pottery, whose age can be gauged using radiocarbon dating, ancient jade is notoriously difficult to date. That's because carbon dating reveals the age of the rock itself, not when it was carved.

As a result, curators and collectors must closely examine the items themselves, with reference to the observations of archaeologists who have carefully catalogued items and put together guidelines based on such pointers as carving patterns, forms, tool marks and techniques to differentiate whether a piece is from the Song Dynasty,



ANCIENT JADE IS NOTORIOUSLY DIFFICULT TO DATE. THAT'S BECAUSE CARBON DATING REVEALS THE AGE OF THE ROCK ITSELF, NOT WHEN IT WAS CARVED

OPPOSITE TOP Mei Ling Chiang, director of Oi Ling Antiques on Hollywood Road

OPPOSITE BELOW Han dynasty scabbard slide and Liangzhu ceremonial *bi* disc

ABOVE Openwork dragon pendant from the 4th century BC China Warring States period and *bi* disc from the Western Han dynasty, both from The Collection of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, sold by Christie's in March 2015, New York

Neolithic or other time period. For example, if tiny particles of metal from modern grinders are embedded in the jade, it's unlikely the piece is ancient.

And even if a piece satisfies certain guidelines, there's no guarantee they are of a certain era. Much as art students in the present day might imitate van Goghs and da Vincis, craftsmen of later eras reproduced ancient styles; not necessarily as fakes, but as a tribute to early craftsmanship. Two renowned experts can disagree about the age of a piece. Even if they agree on a time period, that period could span several hundred years and Chinese

dynasties. Tsang advises anyone who wants to take up collecting jade to get a real hands-on feel for the ancient stones. The British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum will arrange jade handling sessions for those who make appointments ahead of time, she says.

But with the threat of the destruction of cultural heritage by grave robbers, the sale of Chinese antiquities – normally pre-Song dynasty items (ie before around the 10th century) – is not permitted in mainland China. Such items, which can include early jades, bronzes and pottery, are classified as special Chinese cultural relics.



“You’re not allowed to sell archaic jade in China,” says Tsang. “You’ll get in big trouble with the cultural relics people.” But despite this, collectors and dealers say there are still items up for sale on the mainland. They remain available in stores on Hollywood Road, although they are much more rare than they were in the heydays of the 1970s and 80s.

Ancient jade is sometimes available through established auction houses such as Christie’s, Sotheby’s and Bonhams, outside of mainland China. Often they are sourced from collections built up

“I TEND TO BE AN IMPULSIVE BUYER. IF I SEE SOMETHING THAT I LIKE, I MAKE UP MY MIND IMMEDIATELY. IF I TAKE LONGER, IT’S BECAUSE I’M THINKING HOW ON EARTH AM I GOING TO PAY FOR IT”

— Mr Justice Robert Tang

by British and American collectors before an import and export ban on Chinese antiquities was implemented by US and Chinese authorities in 2000, says Tsang. “We keep seeing [ancient jade] coming out of the second and third generations [of wealthy Western families],” she adds.

Many were probably acquired in the 1920s and ’30s by wealthy Western collectors like the Rockefellers and the Sacklers in the US, when a flood of archaic jade hit the market when China began excavation works for new railways, says Tsang. Engineers sold off the pieces they dug up.

But such buying opportunities are now few and far between. Collectors aren’t likely to part with their collections too easily.

A CONSUMING PASSION

“I find I can only buy things these days when there’s some kind of catastrophe,” said Robert Tang, a permanent judge on Hong Kong’s Court of Final Appeal and long-time ancient jade collector, while speaking at a guided tour of an exhibition of his and his wife Cissy Tang’s jade collection at the Art Museum of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in December. The exhibition, which features more than 100 pieces of archaic jade spanning Neolithic times to the late Qing period, is being held until February 28. Tang said his last purchase at auction was in New York after the Lehman Brothers went bankrupt in 2008.

Chinese Jades From the Cissy and Robert Tang Collection, a large coffee table-sized book which showcases the couple’s special collection, was published late last year. At a book launch event hosted by Christie’s in September, Tang shared anecdotes about how he built up his collection in discussion with Jenny So, Adjunct Professor at the Department of Fine Arts at Chinese University



COURTESY CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

COURTESY CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG



TOP Mr Justice Robert Tang and others at the opening ceremony for the ‘Restrained Lustre’ exhibition at The Chinese University of Hong Kong on 30 October 2015

and a former senior curator of Chinese art at The Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M Sackler Gallery. Tang’s passion as a collector is clear. “I tend to be an impulsive buyer. If I see something that I like, I make up my mind immediately,” he said. “If I take longer, it’s because I’m thinking how on earth am I going to pay for it.” He is so attached to his jades that he finds it difficult to temporarily part with them.

“Every time the subject [of an exhibition] came up, I would pick up my jade collection and go: ‘I can’t bear to part with them.’” His notable acquisitions include a pair of dancing figures that had been part of the Sackler collection and went up for sale in 1994. The estimate was set low, at US\$30,000 to US\$40,000. When Tang called So to ask what price he should pay for the piece she said, “If you want it, you’ve got to go whole hog.” Tang suspected someone with a deeper pocket could outbid him.

Tang ended up successfully bidding for the piece through well-known New York-based Asian art dealer, who got it for Tang at a hammer price of about nine times more than the lower estimate. The ultimate price was in fact somewhat lower than he expected, Tang recalled. Later that day, Tang went to visit the renowned Manhattan-based Asian art dealer Robert Ellsworth, who happened to be in Hong Kong. “When I told

Rob [Ellsworth] I had got that piece, he said I had ‘come of age,’” said Tang. But the collector who missed out, who So later met, was furious. “I’d never seen him so upset,” recalled So.

Throughout the talk, So and Tang joked good-naturedly like old friends. Describing a time when he came to her, hesitant about buying a piece that had a fragment chipped off, So said: “Come on Robert. This is a 2,200-2,330-year-old jade pendant. If that’s the only imperfection, and you’re quibbling over it, you shouldn’t be a jade collector.” She added jokingly: “I was very disappointed in him, and I almost gave up on him.”

Tang bought much of his collection through auctions and dealers on Hollywood Road, with whom he built up good relationships. but demand within China and high prices mainlanders are willing to pay make finding genuine pieces in Hong Kong much harder these days. “I don’t get those calls much any more,” said Tang. ㊟

COLLECTING TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS

When considering a piece of ancient jade, consider the following:

- 1 Are the designs from the right period?
- 2 What’s the provenance?
- 3 Is there documentation or study of the piece?
- 4 Is there evidence of modern tool work?
- 5 Is there documentation from dig to sale?
- 6 What do the experts say?
- 7 What is the dealer’s reputation?
- 8 Age doesn’t necessarily equal value.