

# Art and History of Myanmar Jade

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**Abstract**— This dissertation is one which presents a history of jade production in Myanmar from 1780 to 1995. It stresses the jade production from Konbaung period to the present the monarchical days to the Colonial period, the period after the independence and the period before the Revolutionary Council had taken power had brought little benefits to the nation, that since the Revolutionary Council had taken over the country, the jade production was placed under the control of the government and therefore, yielded many benefits towards the national economy and that at present under the State Peace and Development Council, the citizen owned companies and joint-venture companies associated with the government were given free trade and thus contributed towards the promoting of the national economy. All available source materials on jade are collected and studied primary sources have been referred to, and statistics, maps and photos have been collected and included as evidences as exhaustively as possible. Formerly, Myanmar jade was known as the China jade, but now it has become the Jade of Myanmar in the world's jade market, and has been contributing towards the economy of the State.

**Index Terms**— Art, Culture, Handcraft, History, Jade, Myanmar, Tradition

## INTRODUCTION

Jade is called *Kyauk-sein* in Myanmar because of its having the green hue. However, jade has some other hues. Generally, there are two types of Jadename, jadeite and Nephrite. Jadeite is called "*Fei Cui-Yu*", and Nephrite "*Lao Yu*" in Chinese. The term "*Yu*" in Chinese means "the Stone of Heavens". Of these two types, Jadeite was first discovered in about 7000 years ago, while Nephrite was first used in the reign of King Honti in China about 5000 years ago as a revered stone. On 1 April 1948, at the board meeting of the Union of Myanmar Government Ministry, the new bill was tabled for discussion. It was decided that should the Minister of Kachin State, Minister for Forest and Agriculture and Minister for Finance Affairs and Tax Department re-consider the bill and given their approval, it would not be necessary to table the agreement once again to the Myanmar State Ministry. Then that law was discussed for the final decision on 24 April 1948, and the Union of Myanmar Government issued the 1948 jade Mine law on 4 May 1948.

The district chiefs divided the area of the jade mines into four:

- (1) Hmaws in the environs of Lonkhin
- (2) Hmaws in the environs of Phakant
- (3) Hmaws in the environs of Tarmakhan
- (4) Hmaws in the environs of Wekha

During six months of Hmyaw Season, from May to October, one person was to pay one kyat per month and ten kyats for one Hmyaw plot.

## JADE ORIGIN

In Myanmar, jade was first discovered in Beikthano (Vishnu City), which flourished between the 1st and 4th century A.D. The city dwellers there wore as necklaces beads of jade, amber, agate and coral, etc. Also in Srikestra and Hanlin, known as the cities of Pyu, jade beads and small jade pieces resembling the shape of elephant was discovered.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it can be assumed that the Pyus had used jade since the prehistoric period. The discovery of jade beads and jade pieces re-

sembling, the shape of elephant in ancient Pyu cities confirms the use of jade in the Pyu periods. The records discovered, have also showed as where jade was found in Myanmar and how jade trading had flourished. In the Bagan Period, which is known as the Myanmar Armatice Kingdom, however, no evidences of Jade trade and the use of Jade have been discovered. It was only in the 13 century that Jade was first discovered, but yet, evidences have been lost through the course of time. It was only in Nyaung Yan Period that the term "*Kyauk-sein*" was first found in literature and the following lines are one of them. The word "*Hmaw*" comes from the Shan language, meaning "*Jade Mine*". A Hmaw Chief was appointed for supervising each Hmaw site, and was responsible for excavating jade.

## Production

The jade mines or Hmaws are located in Kachin State. Now a lot of jade can be produced not only in Kamai of Kachin State, Phakant, Lonkhin, Tarmakhan, Tawhmaw, and Wekha, etc., which are the principal areas of jade mines, but also in Indaw Township, Khamti Township in Sagaing Division, which has new jade mines.<sup>17</sup> The methods of jade production used in Phakant, Tawhmaw and Wekha are of two kinds, depending on the location of jade: (a) underground source digging (b) underwater digging. The methods of jade digging are described as follows: along the underground source of jade in outside the ground and former Kachins tried to dig out, and the jade mine went wider and deeper. This method could change the colour of the jade, caused cracks and devalued the piece. Later, steam-power water pump, use of explosive by means of a drill, use of crane to take out the earth and stones, and props of wood were used. However, despite the use of machinery, because of severe weather of Kansai and Tawhmaw, outbreak of malaria, dense forests, wild animals and the strong current of the water seeping into the mine, the jade mining had to be postponed annually from May to October. The colours of the layer are white, yellow, crimson, onion-colour and rust-colour. The jade layer from the crimson layer has crimson or onion colour, and is not as thick as that from

the yellow earth layer. Among the inland jade mines, Phakant, Sama, Masa, Mayankan, Mana, Hmaw -Wungyi, Hmaw Wun-lay, Myauk-phyu, Shayaungkha, Taung-Sho and Hmaw taung are famous for finest quality jade. The underwater jade sources between Kansai and Haungpa, Uru Creek valley, and Wekha region can be roughly divided into four divisions:

- (1) Plots in Kansai and Lonkhin, and environs
- (2) Plots in the environs of Phakant
- (3) Plots along the Uru River
- (4) Plots in Wekha region

The procedures involved in these methods are as follows

- (1) digging the upper layer
- (2) removing iron pieces and small stones
- (3) searching the jade layer carefully
- (4) removing the water seeping in
- (5) digging until it reaches the rock layer

The mechanical-pumping jade mine requires the greatest labour and capital. This type of jade digging is found on both sides of the Uru Creek and its rivulets. Infact, it is a kind of water power jade mine. It is usually done in summer and the cold season when water dries up. A site is chosen: it is close to the jade layer source and deposits of jade can be found. If no water is available, the manual method is used. If water is available, circular bamboo baskets called Paukgwe are placed with rocks around it. Water inside is pumped out. When the hole is water tight, then two or three water pumps are simultaneously used to pump out the water inside. From twenty to 100 people are employed so as to prevent the water from coming in from around. However, it takes a long time to get the water pumps to the site. Moreover, in April, if rain falls, the mountain torrents can come in, and the pumps have to be moved in time, so there are problems of scarcity of time for searching for jade. Sluicing method is usually used in rainy season, from May to October. The strong current is used for searching for jade. The Wakye Hmaw is located about one mile up the Wakye Creek, a rivulet of the Hsan-Kha Creek. There are manually dug dry pits and sluicing mines. In recently, in a few years, this Hmaw has moved to the Hsan-Kha plot<sup>30</sup>. A gutter, locally called "Ye-Hmawn" <sup>31</sup> is dug along the high cliff, and the current of water is used for sluicing. It is located about 8 miles far from TawHmaw. The Nam-ma-yan Creek is a creek that originates from the TawHmaw Hill. Geographically, there are the maximum numbers of draining mines. The names of the mines are Nan-Hmaw-Chaung, Kadon-yat, Maka-pin and Hmaw katon, which produced precious jade. However, those plots are about 18 miles far from Phakant Town, and it is difficult to travel to those sites since it is to go over the about 2000 feet high Kathai Mountain. The jade mining industry requires a lot of capital, so the national traders who do not have much capital pool their money, but it is not easy to compete with the Chinese jade merchants. The rest are daily wagers, or down-to-earth labourers, who are the Shan, the Kachin and the Myanmar. Although they toil hard, they do not have a chance to benefit from their work, as much as they should here. It is a very risky kind of work to do jade mining, since there is no guarantee about finding a piece of jade of fine quality despite the investment of a large sum of money. But sometimes, with a stroke of luck, one can strike a good fortune with a small amount of investment. So it's all a matter of pot-luck-business.

### Utilities

The jade polisher may use his artistic eye, as well as his

skilled limbs, in carving an artistic piece of jade so that the piece will look artistic and symmetrical. His legs control the spinning wheel while his hands skilfully handles the piece and his brain and imagination work over the formation of the figure. In the past, jade carving was very rare, since the tools used in carving other pieces of sculpture do not work on the piece of jade. Since the texture of jade is so hard, tools with points of diamond powder and such turner's lathe with the spinning wheel of iron and stone powder are to be used in polishing and carving the piece for long hours. Formerly, the Steel Rope Cutting was used in cutting the rock of jade. Now modern turner's lathes with a circular saw are in use. The methods of cutting and tools for cutting are as follows: (1) The Steel Rope Cutting (2) Cutting with the Circular Saw (3) Cutting the Quality Layer. In the first method, the steel rope is drawn back and forth by two workers on either side, just like sawing. But it is not like sawing an ordinary log. The sawn cut is to be always filled with rough diamond powder and water while in the process of sawing. The rough diamond powder is black powder called Hmat-sa. Thus, with the combination of the sawing steel rope, Hmat-sa and water, the rock of jade is cut little by little. The circular saw has two types: steel circular saw and circular saw with teeth of diamond. While an ordinary circular saw is in use, water is to be poured continuously, as well as the Hmat-sa. But when the circular saw with teeth of diamond is in use, there is no need to add Hmat-sa, but the continuous pouring of water. An ordinary saw can make a wide cut, and so if the rock is of quality jade, it would be a waste of quality jade pieces. Thus, it makes a great difference. The kind of Hmat-pyin made by the hand is done as follows: first, the wood is cut into the shape of a small slate in square shape, about over one foot long and six inches wide. The lines are curved on the wood with a one-inch margin. In this groove is placed the mixture of Hmat and lac fully and evenly with the use of wet blade of knife. The jade market which first originated from the Yuzana Kyauk-Wai has now developed more and more year after year from the Twe-Period, when the sale of collections of jade pieces prospered, to then the Gwin-Period, when particular jade found its own market, to the manufacture of flat pieces for making bracelets and Ayi-pwint (polished jade pieces). Later, the dealers of jade rings and A-pwints moved to the Banda Glade on 34<sup>th</sup>, between 85<sup>th</sup> and 86<sup>th</sup> streets. At Yuzana Kyauk-wai, only dealers of Gwin-jade and A-chat tha flat pieces for making bracelets) remained. Beads and Twe-lon are polished on the turner's lathe driven by the leg and or the one driven by the electric motor. The ear-lobe and the jade piece for the ring are polished from quality jade as it is called "Let-pyin-phaw". There are many people and time which participated to get a statute. Firstly, an artist specialist must mark with a pencil on the rough stone after cutting it. Then a sculpture must cut and finalized the rough stone to become a good jade stone. The idea for the design can take shape only through the craftsmanship of the sculptor. After observing the quality of translucence, colour and tone, etc., of the jade piece, the sculptor decides what kind of design and figure should be carved out of the piece before him. This depends on his experience and skilled craftsmanship.

## Exporting Jade

From the point of view of manufacture and export value, jade is the most important gem in Myanmar, where the maximum number of quality jade is produced. Although the jade market is in Hong Kong, Myanmar has been earning a lot of foreign exchange from the emporiums from the sector of jade. Since the Myanmar monarchical days, China purchased both natural jade and polished products of jade from Myanmar and, as main distributor of Jade, has been in control of the world's jade market. A very recently opened jade market is Bangkok, Thailand. Myanmar gems and jade have been black marketted to the neighbouring country. Since the official foreign exchange rate is quite different from the black market exchange rate, the black market has come into existence. There have been great losses to the sector of foreign exchange of Myanmar. The unfavourable circumstances have gone so far that the natural resources of gems produced in Myanmar would no more exist in the future. In the economic aspect, the most important strategy is the system of manufacture and trading. Review should be made on the conditions of market, while raw materials may be placed under control according to the fluctuations of the demand. The manufacture or production policy is the policy based on the demand. If a lot of jade is in market, people or customers would have the decline of trust on jade and the value of jade would also go down. What distinguishes jade from diamond in the world's gem market is that the market is very narrow. It can be assumed that it all depends on the Chinese gem merchants. In the present, the rich Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and Macao make demands of jade in large numbers. Therefore, the jade merchant is more prosperous than in the former times. One defect about the plentiful supply of jade market is that the merchants visiting the gem emporiums are inclined to reduce the price too much, and as result, there has been a state sale of jade at times. So the State has been trying to stabilizing the market by selling only some and keeping extra ones at stock for sale only when the prices are high. Being the only country which produces jade in large numbers, Myanmar is responsible for fulfilling the demand of the customers according to the kinds of jade they need. It is also necessary to consider the traditions and fashions that the customers highly value in manufacturing finished products of jade.

## Conclusion

Since jade was found as jade beads and jade elephant figures in Vishnu, Sriksetra, Hanlin, and other Pyu towns, it is evident that there existed the use of jade in those times. However, no records have yet been discovered, which showed the trends of jade trading. In Nyaung period, records show the use of jade as recorded in the forms of literature. Jade had come to play an important role since King Badon (1782-1819) in Konbaung Period. Throughout the Konbaung Period, with the aid of the nationals Kachin, Shan and Myanmar, the Chinese had begun to monopolize the jade trading. The fact was that the Myanmar kings of the ancient times had valued ruby more than jade, as ruby being valued as the royal gem and jade not as some precious stone. It was only in the reign of King Badon, that jade trading had begun to prosper, and that,

since 1806, one tax officer and 30 soldiers were appointed at Moe Kaung to levy tax on jade trading and production. It was from 1831 to 1848 that jade trading was the most prosperous business. As jade trading prospered more, the more tax for the royal treasury had increased. Since the jade market had been centered in China only, the fluctuations in the prices and conditions of market had depended upon the peace and stability of the regions in China. In the reign of King Mindon, in 1869, the Jade Law was prescribed, and systematic measures were taken over Jade production. In the reign of King Bodawpaya and King Shwe Bo, when dealing with China through the envoys, large jade pieces were given as the royal presents. Similarly, when sent on envoy in the reign of King Mindon, jade was used as a royal gift. This indicates that attention had been given to the value of jade as the precious stone.

89 On 20 November 1885, when the whole Myanmar fell under the annexation of the British, the British government, which had been attracted by the bountiful supply of rich mineral resources of Myanmar, quickly revived the jade trading. The administration of the regional inscription of Karmai. He worked under the District Commissioner of Myitkyina, and both were under the administration of the Commission of the Sagaing Division. But the rights of the Kachin national Duwas had still been retained. The 1940 Jade Law was prescribed, and then, the rights of the Duwas were deprived, and as compensation monthly salary was awarded to them. The 1940 Jade Law had functioned as the Law for the benefit of the capitalists, and in March 1946, the World War II broke out, which caused the cancellation of all jade mine and jade trading. Some Duwa Hsin was Naung tried to revive the jade trading which had stopped because of the World War II. In 1948, the Jade Law, which considered the benefits of the people, was approved, and the jade trading came back into functioning again. From 1948 to 1964, jade trading had been exploited influentially, by the non-national capitalists only. In 1962, the Revolutionary Council had gradually developed the jade trading phase by phase. In 1964, the jade trading was nationalized. Then, according to the policies the Socialist Economy System, the jade trading was administered by the government. At present under the State Peace and Development Council, the Open Market Economy, System was introduced. The national entrepreneurs have been allowed to do free jade trading and production, and there also have joint ventures trading and production in collaboration with the government. Thus, jade trading and production has been contributing towards the economy the state. In 1964 onwards till the present, the Jade Expos have been sponsored, and foreign jade merchants were invited to these expos. Thus, the Myanmar Jade Market has already been established in Myanmar. Myanmar jade trading is expected to grow in larger markets every year because of being available, depending on the

90 demands, at prices of the piece of lowest to highest, and the convenience of keeping jade pieces as investments. The government digging licences to the companies and these companies dug with the machines. So the layers of soil were to be depleted and situation of weather begun the most because

of the lossing trees. Thus, the maintenance of natural environment must be first priority case. In a raining season, there are many land slides and soil erodisions. The situation of the people's health had down daily. The people living in the jade mine lonely depended on jade industry and weakened to do other economic development sectors. In the educational sector, they prefer to get income or money than education. It's is right that market economy had improved the nation's gross domestic product. But gems are not a regaining resource as a tree. Thus we all the people should maintain these gems.

**Figure**



Polishing jade



Raw jade cut



The making of jade rings





Further polishing of jade by bamboo



Jade sculptures together with other jems at a stall



Jade cutting process with medium-sized machine



Smoothing jade





Jade cutting process with large-sized machine



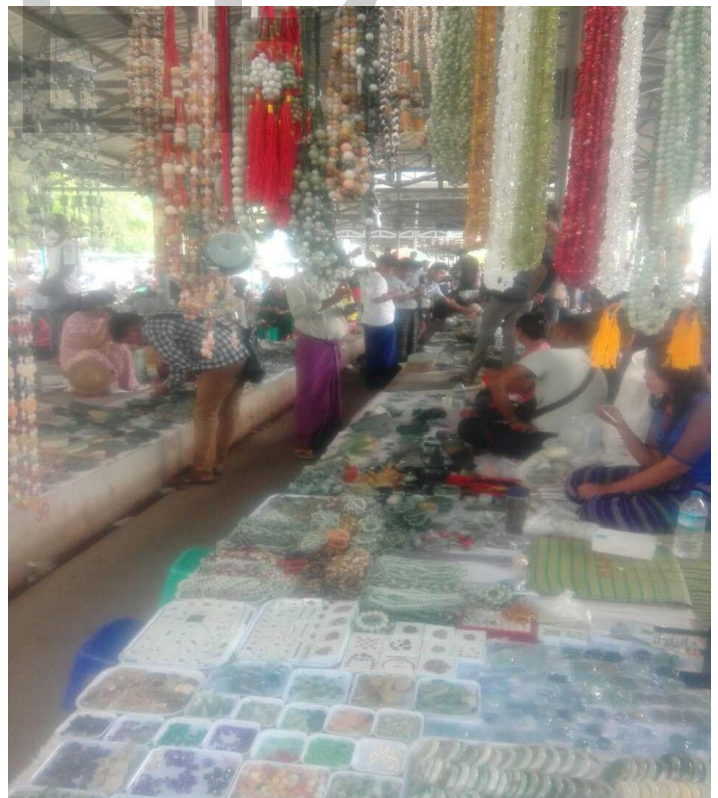
Splinters of jade



Removing the rough skin of jade



Sets of polished jade ready for sale



Jade market comprising various jems and jewellery

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