



A jadeite jade brooch from the Lee family collection, of top “Imperial Jade” quality. All photos provided by Dr. Richard S.K. Lee.

Jadeite Splendor - the Legend of the Lee Family

by Julius Zheng

The jade trading and manufacturing industry is one of the oldest in Hong Kong. However, it wasn't formally structured until June 1965, when the US government imposed an embargo on Hong Kong jadeite jade (Fei Cui) goods, causing \$20 million in annual revenue losses and numerous job cuts. In response, J.D. McGregor, the Deputy Director of Commerce and Industry, suggested industry leaders form the Hong Kong Jade & Stone Manufacturers Association (香港玉石製品廠商會) to negotiate with the US government, leading to the recovery of jadeite imports in 1967 with certificates of origin (“Hong Kong Jade Industry and some of its pioneers” by York Lo).

Lee San-chiek (李生澤), the patriarch from a prominent

jadeite business family, was one of the founders of the Hong Kong Jade & Stone Manufacturers Association. He generously donated to help the association acquire its premises at the Hang Lung Building in Central in 1968. The association was renamed the Hong Kong Jewellery & Jade Manufacturers Association (香港珠寶玉石廠商會, HKJJA) in 1997 and remains the leading organization in the jade industry today, with over 340 member companies at present.

Born in Tengchong, Yunnan Province (雲南騰冲), Lee San-chiek was immersed in the jade business from an early age, due to his father's influence. His father, Lee Ben-ren (李本仁), was a prominent jade merchant operated in both

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Yunnan and Burma (renamed as Myanmar after 1989). The story of his family is a true reflection of the development of the jade business in Hong Kong and Burma.

LEE BEN-REN, “KING OF JADE”

In 1915, Lee Ben-ren (李本仁), a native of Tengchong, Yunnan Province, acquired with his partner a jadeite jade boulder weighed over 8 tonnes (象玉) that was unearthed in northern Burma. This turned out to be one of the most precious jadeite jade boulders ever discovered and was sold in China for 100,000 Chinese silver dollars.

The boulder was cut into thirteen pieces, five of which were bought by Shanghai jade dealer John Wen-ti Chang (張文棣) who commissioned 150 craftsmen to carve the Green Jade Pagoda, a masterpiece with over 1,000 parts, which was featured in the China Pavilion of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933 and heralded as “The Eighth Wonder of the World”. It was then donated to the Oakland Museum of California but was sadly kept in the basement for many years (“Magnificent Chinese Jade Pagoda” by Mae Chang Koh). The Pagoda was gifted to Lizzadro Museum of Lapidary Art, Oak Brook, Illinois in 2018. The boulder earned Lee Ben-ren the title of “King of Jade” and he became a major supplier of Burmese jades to jewelers in major cities in China including Shanghai, Canton (now called Guangdong) and Hong Kong.

Lee Ben-ren passed away in 1937 and over one thousand people took part in his funeral procession. He donated generously to the hometown in Tengchong of Yunnan Province of China, as well as the overseas Chinese communities in Burma, which included 15,000 Chinese silver dollars to support the schools in Tengchong and help to build new schools (“Tengchong People in Hong Kong and Macau” by Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House).



Left: Lee San-chiek; Right: Yon Kwan-wan (center) wife of Lee San-chiek, with his sons (including Dr. Richard S.K. Lee, 2nd on the left), staff and pieces of the Royal Jade Boulder.



Yon Kwan-wan inspecting jadeite jade boulder in the Gem Emporium in Yangon, Myanmar.



Lee San-chiek in the jade mine in Burma. Lee San-chiek’s business card.

LEE SAN-CHIEK AND YON KWAN-WAN, PIONEERS OF THE JADE INDUSTRY IN HONG KONG

Lee San-chiek (李生澤), whose Burmese name was KO LAW YOE, is Lee Ben-ren’s (李本仁) 2nd son. Not only did he inherit his father’s business, but also elevated it to a new level with his international vision and experience in the jade mines. He and his wife Yon Kwan-wan (容貫雲) managed jade mines in Burma and established a significant presence in Hong Kong’s jade market. Yon Kwan-wan, originally from Canton, played a crucial role in marketing and strategies.

Lee San-chiek and his wife Yon Kwan-wan had controlled around 80% of Burmese jade traded in Hong Kong with Lee Chan-taik (李昌德), another prominent jadeite merchant. After the jade mines in Burma were nationalized in 1962, Lee San-chiek moved their base to Hong Kong and Bangkok. The family continued to deal in Burmese jade under Yue Fung Company (裕豐公司) and other entities. Through their efforts, they maintained a strong influence in the global jade trade, marking significant milestones in the



Yon Kwan-wan (2nd on the right) and his son Dr. Richard S.K. Lee (1st on the right) were invited to dinner at General Ne Win's (sitting at the table, ruler of Myanmar) palace at Inya Lake, Yangon on 27 January 1991.

history of Hong Kong's jade industry.

Lee San-chiek and his family played a pivotal role in shaping Hong Kong's jade industry, ensuring its resilience and growth even in the face of political and economic



Yon Kwan-wan (the lady in green dress) attending the annual Myanmar Gem Emporium with his son Dr. Richard S.K. Lee on her right. Picture from "Myanmar Gems Enterprise", a special issue for the 26th Myanmar Gem Emporium.

challenges. Their story reflects the enduring importance of jade in Hong Kong's cultural and commercial landscape.

In the early 1960s, the Lee family's mine in Sanka in northern Burma discovered a jadeite jade boulder weighing 101 catties (approx. 61 kgs), named the "Royal Jade Boulder (權玉)." During the 1967 riots in Hong Kong, the Lee family shipped the boulder to Sydney for safety reasons and finally polished and bisected it in 1992, which produced many top-quality jadeite art jewellery.

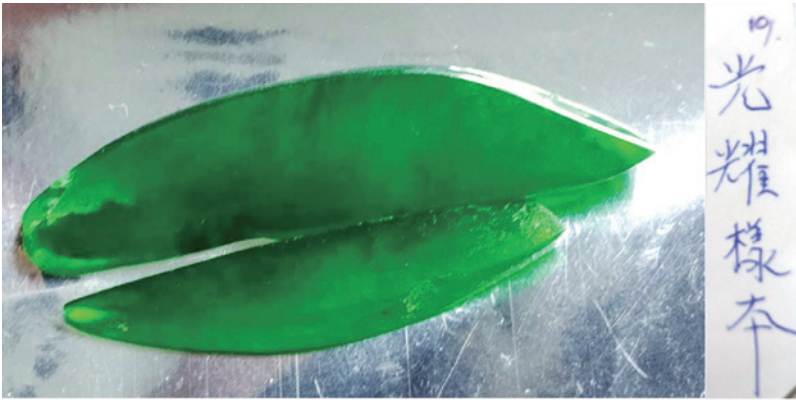
In 1954, they acquired a 600 kg boulder for HK\$360,000 and resold it for over HK\$2 million. Another major deal in 1960 involved acquiring the remaining 10% interest of the Royal Jade Boulder from Lee Xu-shan (李旭山, the eldest son of Lee Chan-taik 李昌德), in order to secure 100% interest of the boulder. From 1993 to 1995, the boulder was sold in Hong Kong to 2 listed companies, Fu Hui (福輝公司) and Chow Tai Fook (周大福珠寶公司) at a total price of HK\$110 million.

Aside from jadeite jade, Lee San-chiek also dealt in a material called maw-sit-sit mined in Burma. He invited the renowned gemologist Dr. Eduard Gübelin (1913-2005) to visit Mogok in 1963 to study the gemstone material (Journal of Gemmology, 1965).

After Lee San-chiek pass away in 1974, his wife Yon Kwan-wan became the matriarch and continued to deal in Burmese jade and was presented with gifts by two deputy prime ministers and the Minister of Mines of Myanmar in 1993 for attending the country's annual Gem Emporium



The Royal Jade Boulder, one of the milestone jadeite jade boulders of the Lee family, weighing approx. 61kgs.



Samples cut from the green Colour Grain of the Royal Jade Boulder, revealing top colour and translucency.

(national-level tender for jadeite jade and other coloured gemstones) for 30 times. She passed away 39 years after her husband in 2013.

During the 1982 Emporium, General Ne Win, the ruler of Myanmar gifted to Yon Kwan-wan and Wendy Wai Han Lee (Dr. Richard S.K. Lee's wife) with two pairs of uncut diamonds for their future earrings, during a private audience.

DR. RICHARD S.K. LEE, THE 3RD GENERATION

The eldest son of Lee San-chiek and Yon Kwan-wan, Dr. Richard S.K. Lee (李承光) is both a medical professional and a gemologist with



A few pieces of the fine Jadeite (Fei Cui) jewellery - imperial jade with vitreous luster - cut from the Royal Jade Boulder mined from the Sanka Mine in the early 1960s. (Special thanks to Chia Ta Jewellery for providing the photo of the necklace on the right.)



A jadeite jade brooch with unique triangular shape from the Lee family collection, of top "Imperial Jade" quality.



Dr. Richard S.K. Lee in an exclusive interview by the Spirit of Hong Kong media channel in 2024.

Graduate Gemologist diploma of GIA. He is the third generation of the prominent illustrious jadeite family. Dr. Richard S.K. Lee serves as Permanent Honorary President of Hong Kong & Kowloon Jade Merchants & Workers Union Association, Honorary Advisor (jade), Council of Management of Hong Kong Jewellery & Jade Manufacturers Association, Founder & Past President of GIA Alumni Association (Hong Kong Chapter) and Vice President of The Association of Hong Kong, Professionals. Being highly respected by the industry, he is a professional with in-depth knowledge in gemstones, including jadeite jade.

His grandfather and his parents donated generously and contributed to the society, so has Dr. Richard S.K. Lee as a family tradition.

At his age of 70's, Dr. Lee thrives to pass on his family's knowledge of three generations to the jewellery trade.

In the article of "The Art & Science of Reading Rough Jadeite Jade: 2 parts Science, 1 part Art, and a lot of luck" published on the Journal of the Gemmological Association of Hong Kong (2018), he used the Royal Jade Boulder owned by his family to describe and illustrate the process of assessing, bisecting and evaluating jadeite jade rough to maximize its investment potential.

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About the author

Julius Zheng is a jewellery industry analyst and senior consultant to various important firms and institutes. He has developed various projects that connect China's diamond, coloured gemstones and jewellery sectors with international markets, including organising over 50 China Jewellery Delegations. As a gemologist and educator, he has developed international gemological educational programs. Formerly General Manager of Rapaport China, he has over 20 years' international working experience in Asia and North America. He is also a member of Executive Board of Bangkok Diamonds and Precious Stones Exchange (WFDB affiliated).



Julius Zheng