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Code green: B.C. jade producers work toward a code of conduct

June 14, 2016

By Sam Michael Dilts

Jade is one of the most sought-after gems in the world, yet as a producer, Canada is the least-recognized exporter. Each year, hundreds of tonnes of nephrite jade leave Canada, bound for Asia where the stone is engrained in the culture and used in making jewellery and for carvings. And while jade is a source of pride for Canadian producers, as an industry, it is lacking in regulation to its own detriment.

For decades, countless tonnes of gem-grade jade have been purchased at rock-bottom prices in Canada and exported to Asia where the stone is sold at market value. These low and unfair wholesale prices are fuelling efforts to develop a Canadian Jade Code of Conduct (CJCC) and a certificate of origin. Modelled after the Canadian Diamond Code of Conduct (CDCC), the voluntary code looks to protect Canadian producers of jade.

Around 1850, Imperial green jade exports from Burma helped meet China's demand for this variety, as its own long-worked quarries had become depleted. As a result, jade traders were forced to source alternative supplies farther from home. With Sturgeon eggs from British Columbia's Fraser River popular on the Asian caviar scene, many shallow-water fishmongers wading for the spawning 'white ghosts' on the banks of B.C. rivers spied the water-tumbled shining green gems and quickly recognized their significance and value.

Changing times introduced cultural influences on a rapidly developing mining industry in the Pacific Northwest. Migrant Asian workers with thousands of years of rich mineral history in places like China and India began to develop B.C.'s jade export trade with China, Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Jakarta.


For almost 150 years, B.C.'s nephrite jade producers shipped the stone to China, without mention of origin or branding of any kind. Even today, Canadian nephrite jade—considered top-quality material around the world—is advertised in Hong Kong shops as originating from regions of China, which has a notable history of high-quality jade mining. To clarify, Imperial jade from Burma is actually jadeite jade, while nephrite jade is the original Imperial jade of China—and British Columbia is full of it.



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Jade fever

British Columbia supplies 75 per cent of the world's raw nephrite jade. Every year, approximately 500 tonnes is shipped in containers to various ports around China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Vietnam, loosely graded according to various systems. By that, I mean wholesale buyers use one grading system, while retailers use another. The agenda of the wholesale buyer is to push the price per kilo down at its point of origin, while driving it up once it reaches China or another foreign market.

In British Columbia, nephrite jade is traded primarily as uncut boulders with windows polished on the side or as large slabs. In the past, its price was very loosely dictated by the cost of mining plus profit. However, in the last five years, with increasing migration of mainland Chinese immigrants to British Columbia, growing interest—not to mention competition—from international traders has changed the wholesale and mining industries in the province's 'jade country.' Canada's nephrite is exported to China or sold in private silent auctions in the Vancouver lower mainland where entry fees can exceed \$5000 Cdn. per person. It is still very much the 'Wild West,' an idea conveyed through *Discovery Channel's* "Jade Fever," which chronicles the trials of jade mining in British Columbia.

As with other high-value goods, consumers of luxury jade jewellery prefer it carry a certificate of origin to authenticate a gem's mineralogy. Given that most of Canada's jade is sold in Asia, certificates of origin are currently not issued, as consumers in that part of the world demand a product with Chinese provenance. The result is B.C. jade is being presented and sold in Asian markets as Chinese jade. In fact, our best greens are identical to the Xinjiang jade, which is quite rare, since its source is nearly depleted. Like other parts of the world where jade is mined by Asian companies

(e.g. Guatemala, Siberia, and Afghanistan), the best material loses its identity once it reach the ports of Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shanghai.



Rough natural translucent high-grade B.C. nephrite.

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Industrial effort

In 1974, renowned B.C. geologist and rock hound Stan Leaming pleaded with the provincial and federal governments to open their eyes to the rapid unregulated annual exportation of jade, which happened to be the most precious of stones to the largest, fastest-growing population on the planet. Forty years later, searching for nephrite jade on Industry Canada's mining statistics database results in 'No data available.' This is in stark contrast to Canadian diamonds and the effort that has gone into establishing an industry around them.

Fifteen years ago, the Canadian diamond industry didn't exist. Today, Canada is a major player. When diamonds were discovered in the Northwest Territories, their value was immediately understood. When gold is found, nobody questions whether to stake a claim. In contrast, most British Columbians—or Canadians across the country, for that matter—have no idea the province is a source of jade. They may even say they thought jade came from China, which is true, in a way. Most of the jade we see in North American shops is sourced as raw material in British Columbia, manufactured in China, and shipped back as finished product.



Although sold in Vancouver showrooms for \$15,000 Cdn., these same bangles can fetch up to \$30,000 apiece in northeastern China.

As a major producer of jade, it's really important for us to look at how the West's lack of interest in this gemstone has influenced Industry Canada. In 2002, the Canadian Diamond Code of Conduct was conceived concurrent with the development of diamond exploration and mining in Canada's far north. Industry Canada and key stakeholders in the diamond and jewellery industry were keen to establish a certificate of origin for Canadian diamonds, along with homegrown authentication of Canadian diamond minerology. By 2009, Canada had become the world's second-largest producer of diamonds by value, producing about 17 per cent of the global supply, according to Natural Resources Canada figures. In contrast, some estimates put the Canadian jade industry's profit in 2009 at \$75 to \$100 million Cdn. This small amount—in comparison to the billions of the Canadian diamond industry—leaves little money across a handful of companies for exploration and development. Compare this to Myanmar's jade trade, which non-governmental organization (NGO) Global Witness reported to be worth \$30 billion U.S. in 2014.

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From junk to gem

In 2013, I began to consolidate market research my fellow jade producers, designers, and I had gathered over the previous five years during meetings with Asian manufacturers, traders, retailers, artists, underground jade dealers, museums, auction houses, trade departments, jewellery design studio owners, and others.

We wanted to better understand the needs of groups and individuals who source B.C. nephrite and to link them with Canadian expertise in processing, appraising, authenticating, and design. Our goal was to develop Canadian guidelines and standards that would ensure the sustainable development of the gem's mining, production, appraising, and exporting. My colleagues and I thought it important to help establish a standard that removed barriers to the development of the Canadian nephrite brand as a precious gemstone.

In 2014, our jade research team introduced the B.C. Jade Standard. A registered Canadian Industrial Design, the standard is a tangible asset with defined parameters that fits with the existing—albeit loosely defined—nephrite grading system. In addition, it creates a system of validation of origin and authentication. In the shape of a rhombohedron, the B.C. Jade Standard's 10-kg mass is calculated using the known geological density range for nephrite and its proprietary dimensions meet the requirements of the world's jade jewellery manufacturers.



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In November 2014 and February 2015, we held product launches in Hong Kong and Shenyang, China, introducing the B.C. Jade Standard to the trade, consumers, and media. We are now working with the Canadian consulate in Hong Kong to build brand awareness for B.C. jade.

Around that time, we also began discussing the need for a certificate of origin for jade with several key players involved with the CDCC's development. In particular, we approached Jewellers Vigilance Canada (JVC), the Canadian government's minerals and mining sector, and federal and provincial ministries of international trade and foreign affairs. All have been instrumental in encouraging our efforts to use the diamond code as a template for a proposed Canadian Jade Code of Conduct.

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In consultation with JVC executive director Phyllis Richard and Louis Perron, Natural Resources Canada's senior policy advisor for diamonds, we learned Industry Canada's Competition Bureau, which supported the development of the Canadian diamond code in 2002, had since changed its policy—it would no longer support or endorse any voluntary codes spearheaded by private industry. This came as a bit of a blow to our efforts, although we haven't given up. That said, we recognize financing and establishing a secretariat to govern our proposed jade code is one of our biggest obstacles.

In 2015, we streamlined our business and branding initiative for the B.C. Jade Standard and held meetings with key stakeholders who we felt would benefit from a voluntary code for nephrite jade. This year, we are continuing our work to establish a brand identity for Canadian nephrite through the registered 'jade bullion' design. In addition to focusing on financing the project, we also want to attract the best minds in the industry to join our efforts. These could include mining companies, environmental organizations, jewellery manufacturers, jade producers, government, retailers, gemmologists, lapidists, jade carvers, or gemstone appraising associations. We are confident we will meet our goals with this support.

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Origin matters

Given the growth of the jade industry in the last few years, we believe it is important to work toward developing a certificate of origin. That said, we are keenly aware of foreign mining investments, particularly from China, who have moved into British Columbia. Chinese firms would have little interest in participating in an initiative that would not only raise the price per kilo of Canadian jade at its origin by setting a fair world market value, but establish origin for high-grade Canadian jade being passed off as Chinese material.

As the key players in B.C.'s industry shift from being small, local mining companies to long-established foreign jade syndicates, we face an uphill challenge. With British Columbia supplying 75 per cent of the world's nephrite, there is no doubt 'we got the good stuff.' The question will be how we as Canadian jade and jewellery industry professionals can work together to secure a future for Canada's nephrite sector. There is a very old saying in China: "Gold is valuable, jade is priceless."

Sam Michael Dilts is the founder of Vancouver-based New Sun Jade Inc., and director of Hong Kong-based, BC Jade Ltd. He is the creator of the B.C. Jade Standard and is working toward helping establish a certification of origin (COO) for Canadian jade, along with an appraisal system for jade exports. Dilts can be reached via e-mail at info@bcjade.com.



Presentation of the B.C. Jade Standard to the Consulate General of Canada in Hong Kong. [Left to right] Kitty Ko, consular general; Sam Michael Dilts of New Sun Jade; and Jon T. Benn of BC Jade Ltd.

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