

THE USE OF GEMSTONES IN THE CHINESE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to provide documentation of information relating to local intelligence from the older generations, specifically the local intelligence of the Chinese community on gemstones. To better understand this issue, an informal interview had been conducted on an informant from the Chinese community who has vast experiences dealing with gemstone crafting. Literature reviews were also carried out to further understand the issue under discussion. It can be assumed that religion is the main factor influencing the use of gemstones among ancient Chinese. Although other aspects such as luck, prestige, and healing may also exist, the reasons would be solely based on the teachings of Buddhism. In summary, every God's creations possess benefits and it is up to human to utilise them in either beneficial or adverse ways

Keywords: gemstones, Chinese community, Buddhism, local intelligence, medication

INTRODUCTION

Article revolves around the use of gemstones among the Chinese community. Every community has their own reasons on why they hold to certain practices. Many works have been conducted to identify the reason on why gemstones are perceived to be significant in the Chinese community. To better analyze this issue, an interview session has been conducted on a Chinese jeweler. This issue may be better comprehended if analyzed both theoretically and empirically. It remains a question on the factors that influence the Chinese community to use gemstones as ornaments and others. Article intended to investigate the main influencing factor on the use of gemstones among them and hoped to serve as a reference for the future generation in recognizing a society. Undocumented local intelligence will be a waste in the sense that the benefits may not be used wisely.

It cannot be denied that the use of gemstones among the Chinese is influenced by their religion. This notion is supported by Chen & Chen (2004) who found that old Buddhist texts mentioned that Buddha himself used gemstones for magical powers and healing purposes. Dalke & Dalke (2012) on the other hand, add that numerous old references indicate the use of crystals or gemstones in Buddhist practices. The use of gemstones in this religion is mostly in the aspects of rituals, beliefs, and others.

Numerous research analyses have found that most Buddhists use gemstones for medical or healing purposes. For example, a study by Tay & Birnbaum (1981) have presented the idea that Buddha is the master of all healing, and one of the techniques or tools used by Buddha integrates gemstones. The research further mentions the use of blue gemstones which is assumed to possess great benefits. It is further said that gemstones are used as explosive materials in cannons during wars. The

Tibetans are among the Chinese communities who still practices Buddha's teachings relating to the use of gemstones in daily lives (Bolsokhoyeva, 1993). There are numerous references on gemstones taken from Buddha's teaching in Tibetan medical texts. Li, Zhuang, Guo, Xiong, Chen, Li & Li (2012) have mentioned that the potential use of gemstones in healing processes needs to be investigated further. On the other hand, Peschek-Bohmer & Schreiber (2002) suggest that an ancient Chinese medical book written 5000 years ago by Sheng Hung depicted clearly on the roles of gemstones in Chinese healing processes. According to Chase & Pawlik (2001), gemstones are used by the Chinese as they believe that gemstones possess energy and aura which may benefit its user.

The use of gemstones among the Chinese is influenced by the belief that it brings luck (Kynes, 2002). The sciences of Feng-Shui recommend the use of gemstones in the surroundings to enhance positive influence to its user. Cammann (1953) has mentioned in his work on the use of gemstones among noble Chinese women in preventing bad luck and has been practiced until early 19th century. According to Lucas, Chapin, Lin, & Jia (2015), the design of gemstones used as ornaments nowadays is influenced by Chinese culture to project luck to the user. The crafting of gemstones is also said to be different from the mainland of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The prestige difference between gemstones originating from China and other countries has been explained by Bhattacharya (2015). He has explained the cultural effects on ornaments using gemstones are influenced by Chinese immigrants. Their culture and beliefs would be assumed to be more prestigious if the gemstones worn are adorned with their own cultural characteristics. Tapatab (2001) has posited that ancient traders would place an exorbitant price for their gemstones such as exchanging the necklaces known as mutisalak with sandalwood belonging to the Easterners.

METHODS

In order to extricate information regarding the issue mentioned, an interview session was conducted with an informant who possessed vast experiences in the field. Literature reviews were also carried out to further understand the issue under discussion. The interview questions were framed before the session. Besides, article also discussed the highlights of works done through analyzing past research. A content analysis was also conducted to further investigate the issue. After the completion of literature analysis and the interview, information from both sources will be compared and contrasted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The information for this article has been gathered from the interview that conducted with the gem cutter. The informant is 75 years of age and has been working with the gemstone crafting for the past 50 years (Figure 1). Most of the jewelry shops in Penang hire him when it comes to work dealing with gold especially relating to gemstones. He admits that the use of gemstones among the Chinese is somehow influenced by the Buddhist teachings. Before relating gemstones with Buddhist teachings, the informant mentioned that majority of Chinese relates the good fortune of gemstones with their birth months (Figure 2). Mr. Liang Keng Boon still maintains the use of traditional tools in his craftsmanship. His eldest son is said to be helping him at work, and this may at least ensure that the local knowledge possessed could be inherited to the newer generation.



Figure 1 The informant, Mr. Liang Keng Boon



Figure 2 The Brochure Relating Gemstones with the Birth Month of an Individual

Various beliefs exist in the Chinese community about gemstones. Multiple references to gemstones can be found in old Buddhism books. For instance, in a Tibetan Buddhist scripture, there was a mantra “Om mani padme hum” which literally translates to “gemstones in lotus”. Originally the meaning refers to the enlightenment which is the goal of every Buddhist. This clearly shows the association between the religious teachings of Buddha and also gemstones. Another belief surrounding gemstones is the existence of heaven queens known as Vajravarahi, who is said to have infested the earth with gemstones. In addition, the scripture also reveals the tale of a pure Arasy gemstone which is said to be the center of energy and to retrieve it and one has to dig deep under more than 100 feet. Another gemstone by the name of Dorje is mentioned to be associated with rituals dealing with illusions. Given the fact that gemstones have been numerously referred to in the scriptures, according to the informant, the Buddhists tend to associate the use of gemstones in their lives as a way to be more religious.

Another precious stone referred to in Buddhism is sapphire. In its teaching, the use of sapphires is said to enhance loyalty, happiness, serenity, and spiritually enlightening. The Chinese believe that the use of sapphires brings about profitability and in another word, luck. Another type of precious gem synonymous with the Chinese is the jade. According to the Respondent, an individual who wears jade will be honorable, full beauty, dignified, highly respected, healthier and will be able to fight bad omens. Jade is also believed to prolong one’s life and bring luck to its owner.

Other than gemstones, multiple other fine jewels are also mentioned in Buddhism. Rubies, for instance, is said to originate from Buddha’s tears. As such, some Chinese individuals use rubies as a way to honor Buddha. The Chinese also believe that rubies have the ability to increase sperm production among men. The informant mentioned that there were multiple other precious gems which will pose benefits to their users and brings about positivity. However, he further added that a person must truthfully belief that the stones will bring about positivity or else the stones might not be effectual to the person wearing. Then, the informant further added on the difficulty of convincing the younger generation on the medical benefits of precious stones. Apart from luck, Jade is also believed to have medical benefits. Jade is said to absorb sunlight during daytime and transmit them during night. He further added that Chinese medical research shows that the light is able to heal human collateral system. The use of jade as bangles among the elderly is said to be able to massage the wrists of its wearer and at the same time, improve their eyesight. The habit of sucking jade, as mentioned in ancient Chinese medicine, is able to heal throat, lungs, and stomach related ailments. In addition, Jade is assumed to have the potential to beautify one’s hair and maintain one’s spirit. There are almost 106 different types of jade available on the market. The form of Jade gemstone can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3 Jade Gemstone

The use of gemstones in Buddhism is not only restricted to expensive ones alone. In fact, lesser valued stones are also incorporated in practice. An example would be the use of turquoise stone. A myth revolving it dates back to ancient time where Buddha is said to have destroyed a monster with the help of a blue stone assumed to be turquoise stone. The Chinese in countries like China and Tibet wear turquoise stones as safety amulet and also as a symbol of wealth although, in reality, the value of this stone is considerably lower. The informant personally believes that the higher the value of a stone worn, the more lucky one gets.

The interview session and literature review have revealed the four main factors on the use of gemstones among the Chinese community. The first factor is religion that proves Buddhism gives a fundamental effect towards the Chinese community. The analyses of ancient Buddhist scriptures and texts by scholars have proven that the founder of the religion had used gemstones for multiple purposes. As for the second one is luck factor. The Chinese truly believes in the power and energy confined in a gemstone. The science of Feng Shui states that gemstones are one of the elements on earth which bring luck. The Chinese also believes that gemstones can be used as amulets as how it was mentioned by Mr Liang Keng Boon.

The Chinese community uses gemstones for prestige purpose as well. As mentioned, the prestige of a gemstone is not only determined by its price value alone. The meaning of prestige may be extended to the way the stone is acquired, the beneficial properties it exerts and also the sentimental value associated with a gemstone. However, the informant added that the higher the price value of stone, the more prestige its wearer may carry.

The third factor on the reason why the Chinese community uses gemstones in their daily lives is for their healing and medical properties. They strongly believe in the ideas that energy and aura are confined in a gemstone. Every stone may deliver a different aura and energy towards its wearer and as such, the effect it exerts is multiple. As mentioned by the informant, the use of rubies, for instance, may enhance masculinity. Review of literature also shows that abundance of Chinese medical reference books associates gemstones with healing power. Besides that, gemstones are also used by the Chinese as a symbol of wealth or prestige. According to the informant, the higher the price value of stone, the better would be the luck of its wearer. This statement is contrastive to the findings of literature analysis done by ancient scholars. These scholars posit that the value of stone is not determined solely by its price, but based on several other factors as well.

Table 1 Information Matrix Found between the Informant and Literature Review

	Religion	Luck	Prestige	Medication
Informant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old Tibetan Buddhism books • Ritual objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of sapphire is said to enhance loyalty, happiness, peace and spiritual enlightening. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The more expensive a gemstone is, the more luck it brings to its wearer. • In China, people are said to wear Turquoise stones as safely amulets and as a symbol of wealth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubies can enhance sperm production for males. • Multiple other stones which may project benefits to the users.
Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old Buddhist texts. • Ritual, beliefs and use based on many reasons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Feng-Shui teaching states the use of gemstones to enhance the environment of the users. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An individual is assumed to be more prestigious if uses their cultural characteristics in their ornaments. • Exchange of sandalwoods among the Easterners with a highly prestigious necklace known as “mutisalak”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue gemstones are said to possess many benefits. • Tibetan medical texts are said to contain rich information about gemstones through the teaching of Buddhism.

The findings of the interview and literature reviews are shown in Table 1. Both sources dwell on the same pattern and characteristics, pondering on the reasons on why the Chinese community uses gemstones. The findings on religion factor display similar results from both sources, which is reference to old and ancient scriptures. This finding shows that the influence of religion on the use of gemstones is not merely a myth. In fact, it was mentioned in their religious scriptures as well. Both sources mentioned the use of gemstones in religious rituals.

On the use of gemstones in bringing in luck, the informant deviates slightly by saying that the use of sapphires, for instance, is able to bring peace and happiness to the wearer. He further adds by mentioning that the luckiest man is the one who possesses peace and happiness in his life. The science of Feng Shui states that the use of gemstones in specific area such as workspace may provide positive impacts to individuals in those spaces.

As for the prestige factor, the informant posed a slightly different opinion compared to previous research done. He clearly mentioned that the higher the price of a gemstone, the higher the prestige its wearer carries. However, other sources mentions that the value is not determined based on its price alone. The informant also shared on the use of turquoise stone by the Chinese in China as a symbol of wealth. Studies have also mentioned on the ways ancient people determine the value of their gemstones. During the times when the barter system was still practiced, they exchanged their gemstones with valuable commodities such as sandalwood.

The efficacy of gemstones as an alternative in medicine cannot be denied. Various scientific evidence discusses on the effectiveness of gemstones from both medical and scientific perspectives. The Chinese have been one of the most developed communities in almost all fields through their majestic ancient Chinese civilizations. The informant shared his views on the fact that every stone possess its own benefit based on the needs of each individual. For instance, a man suffering from erectile dysfunction should opt of rubies and the stone is believed to be able to enhance sperm

production. Studies also mentioned on the multiple benefits of blue stones. Tibetan ancient texts mentioned about the use of gemstones as a method of healing as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Gemstones do not play the role of being ornaments alone, in fact it has been used for multiple purposes by different communities around the world. The Chinese, being one of gemstone's users, have their own reasons on the incorporation of the stone in their lives. Through the interview and reviews of literature, it is found that most of the Chinese share common reasons on the use of gemstones.

Followers of a religion, most of the times follow dutifully the teachings and beliefs of the religion followed and thus, it cannot be denied that religion influences the lives of people. The Chinese follows the teachings of Siddartha Gautama to a high extent and references from old Buddhism books revealed the relationship between the use of gemstones with history, rituals, and other purposes in the religion. Since the use of gemstones is mainly influenced from their religion, it can be deduced that the young generations who follows Buddhism will be able to preserve the tradition or culture.

The luck and prestige factors seem to be closely related in the sense that highly valued gemstones similarly would have higher prestige as well. A person is considered lucky to be able to possess expensive gemstones as normal individuals usually will not be able to afford such luxuries. This working paper brings into surface the idea that the value of gemstones is not solely determined through their prices. For some Chinese communities, possession of gemstones adorned with cultural properties is deemed prestigious as well. The use of gemstones for healing and medical purposes is an aspect which should be well and deeply documented. The current generation depend highly on modern medicines. However, it is to be noted that older generations lived longer and healthier lives thus urging the current generation to deeply analyse the benefits of local intelligence.

It can be assumed that religion is the main factor influencing the use of gemstones among ancient Chinese. Although other aspects such as luck, prestige, and healing may also exist, but the reasons would be solely based on the teachings of Buddhism. In summary, every God's creations possess benefits and it is up to human to utilise them in either beneficial or adverse ways.

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