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Emily Lam Ho

"SUSTAINABILITY IS
LIKE A RABBIT HOLE.
YOU FALL DEEPER
AND DEEPER INTO IT"



TIME TO SHINE

ILIA FOUNDER STANLEY CHU IS DETERMINED TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S MIND ABOUT JADEITE THROUGH CONTEMPORARY DESIGNS AND EDUCATION. HE TALKS TO CHARLENE CO



"I LOVE JADEITE;
IT IS IN MY BLOOD AND
IT IS MY ROOT"

While my classmates played with toy cars and Lego, I played with jadeite," says Stanley Chu, co-founder of jadeite jewellery brand ILIA. He shares his fond memories as we sit at his boutique in Central, which opened earlier in the year. Starting ILIA was, in a way, a long time coming; Chu's family has been in the jade business for more than 60 years, but largely in the oft-unseen and low-key business of wholesale.

Chu's childhood home had a jade workshop attached to it, where his parents worked and their craftsmen cut and polished jadeite before turning it into jewellery. "I was exposed to jadeite at a very young age," he says. "My sister and I knew how to appreciate jadeite even as children and we'd play games, like guessing how much the jadeite was worth."

At that time, and indeed until now, his family business supplied the industry with some of the rarest and most precious jadeites. Eventually, through ILIA, it's been able to use these precious stones in its own creations under its own brand name.

Chu partnered with a family friend who also happened to be one of the biggest jadeite collectors in the world. With their strong ties and network among Myanmar's jadeite miners, coupled with their lifelong experience dealing with the gemstones and making top-quality jewellery, they've earned an unrivalled reputation in the industry. But it was their shared deep passion for the gem that sealed the deal.

"Appreciating the beauty of jadeite isn't something people can learn easily; it's something, I believe, that's instilled or passed on from a parent to a child, or from an experienced craftsman to his apprentice," Chu says. "I love jadeite; it's in my blood. And my partner, my good friend, shares this sentiment – and through this brand we can share this passion to the world and educate people about this stone."

Their design mantra? That no two jewellery pieces they

make are alike because, indeed, no two jadeite pieces are alike. They also strive to change the misguided perceptions that people might have about jadeite, for instance that it's for more mature wearers, and isn't nearly as valuable as rubies, emeralds or sapphires. That attitude is completely unjustified, says Chu, as top-quality jadeite is in fact just as rare as exceptional pink and blue diamonds.

"Unfortunately, despite its rarity, top-quality jadeite is still grossly undervalued," Chu explains. "Case in point, while the auction price of a top-quality white diamond is around US\$150,000 per carat, or US\$2.5 million per carat for a pink diamond, or US\$300,000 per carat for emeralds, the highest recorded price per carat for an Imperial Green jadeite is only US\$120,000. But the reality is that Imperial Green jadeite, which is like the Pigeon's Blood of rubies, is just as rare as top-grade fancy-colour diamonds."

Thus, a major goal of ILIA is to change people's perceptions of jadeite – and, according to Chu, the way to do that is to modernise its image while educating people of its intrinsic value. "The younger generation is hungry for information," he says. "They ask questions, such as what's the investment value of jadeite, so they must have access to this information. However, traditional jadeite designs are keeping them away from purchasing this beautiful gemstone and so the most direct way to change their impression is to include innovative and contemporary designs in our collection, working with young jewellery and fashion designers, locally and overseas. We understand that looking cool is just as important as looking elegant for the millennials."

In fact, it seems as if the gemstone that's been an underdog for far too long is well on its way to becoming appreciated by a much wider and younger clientele, and acknowledged for the precious gem it truly is. ■