



Polished gem

Rough stones from Africa now constitute about 40% of the gems cut and polished in China Fort, then re-exported to buyers around the world. The development of the gem trade in Africa has helped many poor communities to improve their standard of living, and many are the charitable endeavours in Sri Lanka initiated by the China Fort community.

The visitor to China Fort, which attracts more than 2,000 people on the main trading days of Wednesday and Saturday, wouldn't believe that the casual business being done in the main street is the source of such a profitable, international enterprise. Sellers of recently mined rough stones brought from Ratnapura offer them to dealers like Mr M Z M Ahzar, an ebullient young man of 36 who is one of the pioneers of making China Fort an international market place.

He, his partner brother, M Z M Rikas, and colleagues source rough stones direct from countries like Madagascar, Tanzania and Mozambique as well as buying rough stones originating in India and Burma. They are following in the traditional family business, typical of China Fort, begun by their grandfather. Their father, A Z M Zawahir, set up his own business in 1976 successfully buying rough stones and selling precious gems in Colombo and around the world. He taught himself about buying, cutting and polishing rough stones, knowledge his sons have inherited and put to good use since setting up their own company Ceylon Beauty Gems in 2003.

"In the old days," says Ahzar, "gem merchants moved to Colombo to make a success of their businesses. They sent their children to universities to become doctors and lawyers. Those who remained in China Fort learned about gems through experience, not through gemmology courses."

Ahzar began Ceylon Beauty Gems (named after his grandfather's original office which clients said was "a beautiful



Gem trading in the street

gem shop") when he recognised the possibilities of expanding China Fort into an international gem emporium. "In the recent past we have had loyal German, Japanese and British buyers, but now we sell natural gems we have produced from rough stones, to buyers around the world."

While he is knowledgeable in sourcing rough stones, Ahzar is an experienced salesman. He likes selling in the USA where there are several holidays that Americans celebrate with gifts. On a visit to Tucson in February, he sold eight precious stones cut into heart shapes, as Valentine's Day gifts.

He tells the tale of a customer in China who was dithering about buying a gem. A colleague suggested he explain that the natural gem stone was at least 2,500 years old. "It's an antique," he said, "not a Chinese fake." The client bought it happily, having realised the stone's intrinsic value.

In China Fort, the international connection seems far from the crowded street where men in white sarongs approach buyers standing on street corners and unwrap a gem from its paper envelope. While some potential purchasers hold the gem up to the sun, others glance at it and shake their head. Scarcely a word is exchanged and the ambience is one of dedication and trust. Indeed, when a buyer is offered a rough stone or gem he wants and the price is softly agreed, no money is exchanged. That happens later at the buyer's home.