

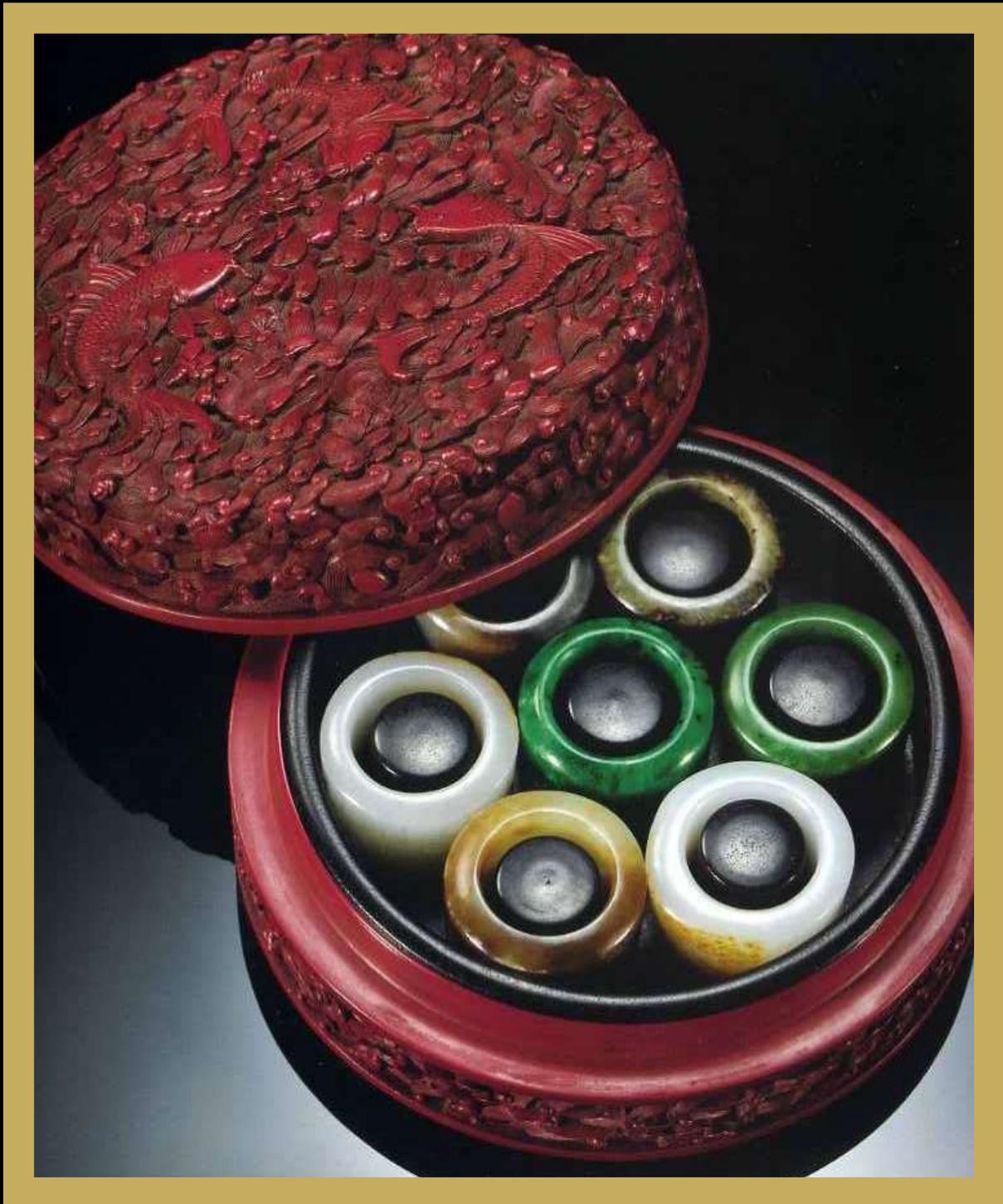
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Carved jade archer's rings, one with jade case, 19th-20th c. The two green rings are jadeite, the others nephrite. (Courtesy Eldred's Auction Gallery)



Qing dynasty ivory rings, one with silver liner. (top row University of Missouri Anthropology Museum; bottom row Special Collections/Musselman Library, Gettysburg College)



Jade rings, top row Burmese jadeite, bottom row nephrite. (author's collection).

Chinese Thumb Rings: From Battlefield to Jewelry Box

By Eric J. Hoffman

It is not often that an implement of warfare evolves into an item of jewelry. But that is precisely what happened with Chinese archer's rings.

From ancient times, archery in Asia was well developed for warfare, hunting, and sport. Archery implements have been unearthed in Chinese tombs going back at least 4000 years. The Mongolian warriors who conquered China in 1271 to establish the Yuan dynasty owed much of their success to their skill in shooting arrows from horseback. Their implements, techniques, and tactics allowed them to shoot their targets from galloping horses and then twist around in the saddle for a parting backward shot after passing. The Manchu clan that conquered China 400 years later to establish China's final dynasty, the Qing, was equally skilled with bow and arrow. Their prowess with archery—again, especially from horseback—allowed a relatively small band of Manchus to conquer all of China and rule it for over 250 years.

A number of technological developments contributed to the success of archery in northeastern China. Among these was the use of archer's rings, called *she* in ancient China (modern term *banzhi*). The archer's ring is used on the thumb of the stronger hand, the one that pulls the bowstring. In addition to protecting the thumb, the ring provides a precise release action for the bowstring. The sidebar at the end of this article explains how these thumb rings were actually used.



Earliest known archer's ring, nephrite jade, excavated from tomb of Fu Hao (1250 BC).

An early form of archer's thumb ring was found in the tomb of Fu Hao, the powerful consort of the fourth king of the Shang dynasty (1250 BC). Like other very early archer's rings, it had a slot cut into it to engage the bowstring. Other early rings, from roughly the Zhou dynasty period (about 1000 B.C.), had a small tooth projecting from the side. Archaeologists speculate that this helped pull the bowstring across the trigger mechanism of a crossbow, but that it later degenerated into a traditional embellishment. Some early archer's rings, including Fu Hao's, have one or more small suspension holes to allow the ring to be tied to the archer's wrist or belt.

Archery was also used for hunting game. Upcoming bow-and-arrow hunts were mentioned in Chinese "oracle bone" inscriptions dating back 3,500 years. From its beginnings in warfare and hunting, archery soon became a sport, and later, a skill that any cultured Chinese gentleman was expected to master. Up through the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) archery remained one of the standard examination tests for civil service.

As the Qing dynasty declined in the late 1800s and China faced attack from modern foreign powers, archery became less relevant as a military skill. Chinese scholar-gentlemen soon dispensed with the difficult business of actually mastering archery and simply wore an archer's ring on their thumb to imply a manly skill they did not truly possess. Many Chinese portraits painted in the 18th and 19th centuries depict high officials and well-off merchants—who clearly spent no time on horseback chasing down targets—

proudly wearing their archer's rings. From its practical origins four millennia earlier, the archer's ring had evolved into a fashionable adornment, a status symbol among the wealthy and cultured.

Two early agate archer's rings with projecting tooth. Warring States period (left), Han dynasty (right).
(University of Missouri Anthropology Museum).



Embellishing the Rings

It's surprising that an item as small and plain as a cylindrical thumb ring can provide so much opportunity for artistry. Much of the enjoyment of these rings comes from the materials they are made of. The earliest archer's rings were usually made of horn, jade, or ivory. But as archer's rings became more ornamental and less practical, the materials that could be used expanded greatly. In this way they are very similar to Chinese snuff bottles, and many of the same materials were used.

The archer's ring must be reasonably hard and durable. To a Westerner the obvious choice of material would be metal, but surprisingly few metal rings are known. Perhaps forming a ring from bronze or silver was simply not challenging enough for the Chinese artisan.



Iron ring with silver inlay and remnants of gold, ca. 13th c. (two views) and 18th c. silver and enamel ring.
(University of Missouri Anthropology Museum).

Archer's rings in various hardstones are the most common. Of course the stone that holds the place of honor in China is jade. Nephrite jade is in fact a very practical choice as it is the toughest (hardest to break) of all stones, and lovely as well. As we have seen, the oldest known archer's ring was made of this precious material. By the Qing dynasty, archer's rings had mostly become personal adornments rather than utilitarian accessories for archery, and many of them were now made from the other type of true jade, jadeite. Jadeite, which was not used in China in significant amounts until the late 1700s, comes in a more exciting color palette than its sister jade, nephrite. Nephrite's subtle colors, and jadeite's more brilliant hues, along with the swirls and patches of contrasting color often seen in jade, make even an undecorated thumb ring a thing of beauty.

Although many thumb rings are left undecorated to show off the material, others have a design or inscription incised into the ring's cylindrical surface or carved in low relief. Agate is another popular material for thumb rings, and the artist often takes advantage of that material to carve cameo style scenes through contrasting layers of color.

In India, the archer's rings are usually of the tabbed form, rather than the cylindrical Manchu style. Many of these are nephrite jade, and India's Mughal rulers had them decorated with elaborate inlays of gold and precious stones.



Two Mughal jade archer's rings inlaid with gold and precious gems, India, 17th c. (*Susan Ollemans Oriental Art (left), British Museum (right)*).

Glass can be used for thumb rings, either overlay carved, as in a snuff bottle, or simply imitating another material such as jade. The famous snuff bottle collector Emily Byrne Curtis had a clear glass ring painted on the inside with butterflies and flowers to match one of her inside-painted snuff bottles. The pair is illustrated in Bob C. Stevens' *The Collector's Book of Snuff Bottles*. The inside of her ring is lined with silver to protect the painting.

Two Peking glass rings, one inscribed "When the sun sets and the moon rises, clusters cast shadows; when rain stops and wind ceases, bamboo regains silence. Be content with one's lot." (20th c.) Another 18th c. overlay glass. (*University of Missouri Anthropology Museum*).



It is interesting that early rings that show signs of usage and burial are often thinner walled and carefully shaped on the inside instead of being precisely cylindrical, as if custom fitted to the archer's thumb. Some early rings are also carved with designs on the *inside*, possibly to increase the archer's grip on the ring.

One issue that arises with cylindrical rings is "which end is up?" These rings usually have one end chamfered and the other concave (dished in). Logically one might think that the concave end should go against the bowstring to provide the sharpest release action. But Stephen Markbreiter in his 1975 *Arts of Asia* article argues for just the opposite, since placing the concave end toward the thumbnail provides more freedom of movement for the thumb. Even paintings showing archer's rings being worn are of little help in resolving this question, since few of the subjects ever actually used the rings in archery. Most rings with scenes or inscriptions on them support Markbreiter's view, if we assume the scene is to be viewed by the wearer, not by others.

A Famous Set of Rings

Even more impressive than a well-carved single ring are sets of rings. Several rings of similar or complementary types, in a fancy case, made the perfect gift for a friend (or bribe for an official). The cases holding sets of archer's rings are often as impressive as the rings themselves.

A famous set of archer's rings was auctioned in April 2007 at Sotheby's Hong Kong. Lot 602, "Extraordinary Group of Seven Jade Imperial Archer's Rings," along with its original fitted cinnabar box and cover, former property of the Qianlong emperor (and probably stolen from the Summer Palace), went to an Asian collector for the princely sum of US\$6.1 million. Qianlong, perhaps the most well-known emperor, was a major patron of Chinese arts. He also strongly promoted the preservation of traditional Manchu culture and heritage, of which archery and archer's rings were key elements. It is not surprising that the famous engraving of Qianlong which is the frontispiece to Sir George Staunton's account of Lord

Macartney's embassy to China shows archer's rings conspicuously displayed on both of Qianlong's thumbs.



Magnificent Imperial set of seven archer's rings and case, Qianlong.
(Courtesy Sotheby's Hong Kong, see also cover).

The seven Qianlong rings, identical in size and shape, are of white jade, light and dark green jade, "red skin" green jade, and archaic Han jade. The rings are incised with scenes of mountains, pines, and clouds and the Emperor's poems in his own calligraphy. One white ring, for example, is carved with the poem "Fishing Alone at Hanjiang River," a poem Qianlong likely composed specifically for this ring as the figures and calligraphy are in complete harmony. These poems provide revealing insights into the ruler across several decades of his reign.

The round lacquer box that holds the rings is carved with a design of three fish and flower scrolls. The inside of the box is incised with two additional Qianlong poems, including "Song of the Jade Archer's Rings." The base has a four-character Qianlong reign mark. Each ring is kept in a yellow silk liner within separate compartments to prevent damage. The Imperial workshops devoted extraordinary care to the design and workmanship of these masterpiece rings and their container.



Carved hardstone rings: Jade (left), 3 agate rings, amber (right) (University of Missouri Anthropology Museum.)



Left: Nephrite ring in form of a *Lian*. The two halves of the ring are loose but interlocked and inseparable, all carved from one piece. (author's collection).
Right: Thumb ring of compressed, powdered sandalwood with silver lining. Silk lined pewter case. 19th-20th c. (University of Missouri Anthropology Museum).



Archer's Rings as Jewelry

Chinese thumb rings need not reside passively on a collector's shelf—they can be worn as attractive (and durable) items of jewelry. The simplest and most obvious way is simply to wear it as a ring on the thumb or other finger. Some Manchu-style rings are too thick to wear comfortably this way, however, especially for women. A thumb ring can also make a “conversation piece” pendant, worn on a precious metal chain with the most attractive side facing outward. A Mughal-style ring inlaid with gold and gems offers additional opportunities for incorporation into jewelry designs.



Chinese objects incorporating thumb rings: calligraphy brush (*Courtesy Great Stuff by Paul Antiques, Frederick, MD*), toothpick holder, Chinese charcoal-fired iron with jade handle.

Decorative Uses

With the modernization of China in the 1920s, thumb rings became useless even for status purposes, and great quantities became available for other decorative uses. Most of these rings are made of low-quality jade or pseudojade, and they are still being made today. They appear on all sorts of made-in-China objects where a small cylindrical decoration is needed. These include miniature flowerpots, handles for Chinese charcoal-heated irons, opium lamp barrels and opium pipe dampers, parts of walking sticks, scroll ends, napkin rings, snuff bottles, saltshakers, toothpick holders, and even as mouthpieces for Chinese musical instruments. A few examples are shown above.

A Word for the Collector

Collecting Chinese thumb rings shares many similarities and advantages with collecting snuff bottles. Several dozen rings can be housed in a single small padded box. The rings are less fragile than snuff bottles, less expensive, and are available in the same broad variety of materials and artistic motifs. Like so many Chinese decorative arts, top-quality archer's rings were once easy to find at very low cost. But the better examples sought by collectors today—interesting rings of top-quality material, with good carving, signs of use, and no damage—have become scarce and costly. The beginning collector should become acquainted with the limited literature on the subject and see as many collections as possible before making any serious purchases. An exceptionally fine collection of more than 500 thumb rings is housed in the Grayson Archery Collection at the University of Missouri Museum of Anthropology.

Whether you wear your archer's rings, collect them, or merely admire them in a museum, you are honoring a humble object that contributed to the conquest of China itself.

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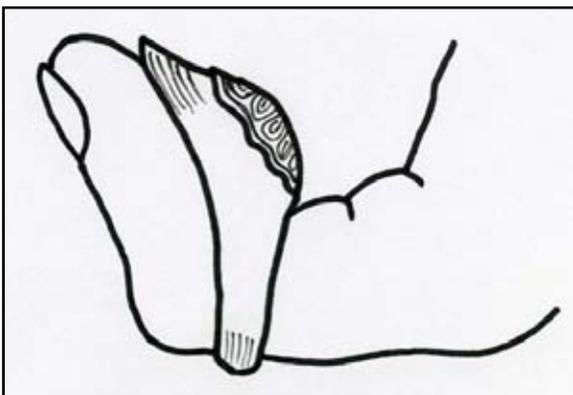
Far East Gallery <http://hoffmanjade.com>

How the Archer's Ring Was Used

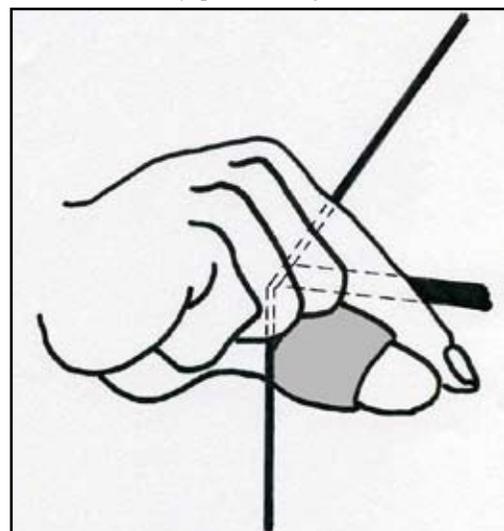
In Western archery, the back end of the arrow is attached to the bowstring using a v-grooved "nock," the string and arrow are pulled back by three fingers, and the arrow is released. In contrast, many Asian cultures use a thumb release aided by a hard thumb ring to improve the control of their longer, more powerful bows. The thumb ring's single hard point of contact with the string reduces drag and provides a faster, more accurate release. The ring also spreads the force of the pull over more of the thumb and protects it from the friction of drawing and releasing the bowstring.

Supreme among Asian archers were the Mongols, who trained from childhood and shot both forward and backward from horseback. In the "Mongolian draw" (or Mongolian release) the thumb with ring, just below the first joint, is hooked around the string and under the arrow. The last three fingers curl into a fist and the tip of the thumb is placed on the second joint of the middle finger. The index finger is then locked over the thumbnail to help draw the string and steady the arrow. This technique was common throughout Asia, as well as in Persia, Turkey, India, and parts of North Africa.

The Asian archer's thumb ring can be made of any hard, strong material, in either of two common styles. One type is a simple cylinder, the back edge providing the contact point with the bowstring. The other style is a lighter weight ring with a rigid tab or tongue that fits over and protects the pad of the thumb. The figure shows the correct technique for the Mongolian draw using a cylindrical ring, copied from a woodcut published by the Chinese author Gao Ying in 1637. Also shown is an example of the tabbed ring, which sometimes has an oval hole so the ring can be turned 90 degrees after putting it on to lock it to the correct orientation. Either style must be fitted precisely to the archer's thumb to prevent the ring from flying off with the arrow. Thumb rings thus become very personal objects that cannot be exchanged with others.



Tabbed Ring



Mongolian Draw