

Korean celadon maebyeong

Evolution of Goryeo celadons

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Abstract

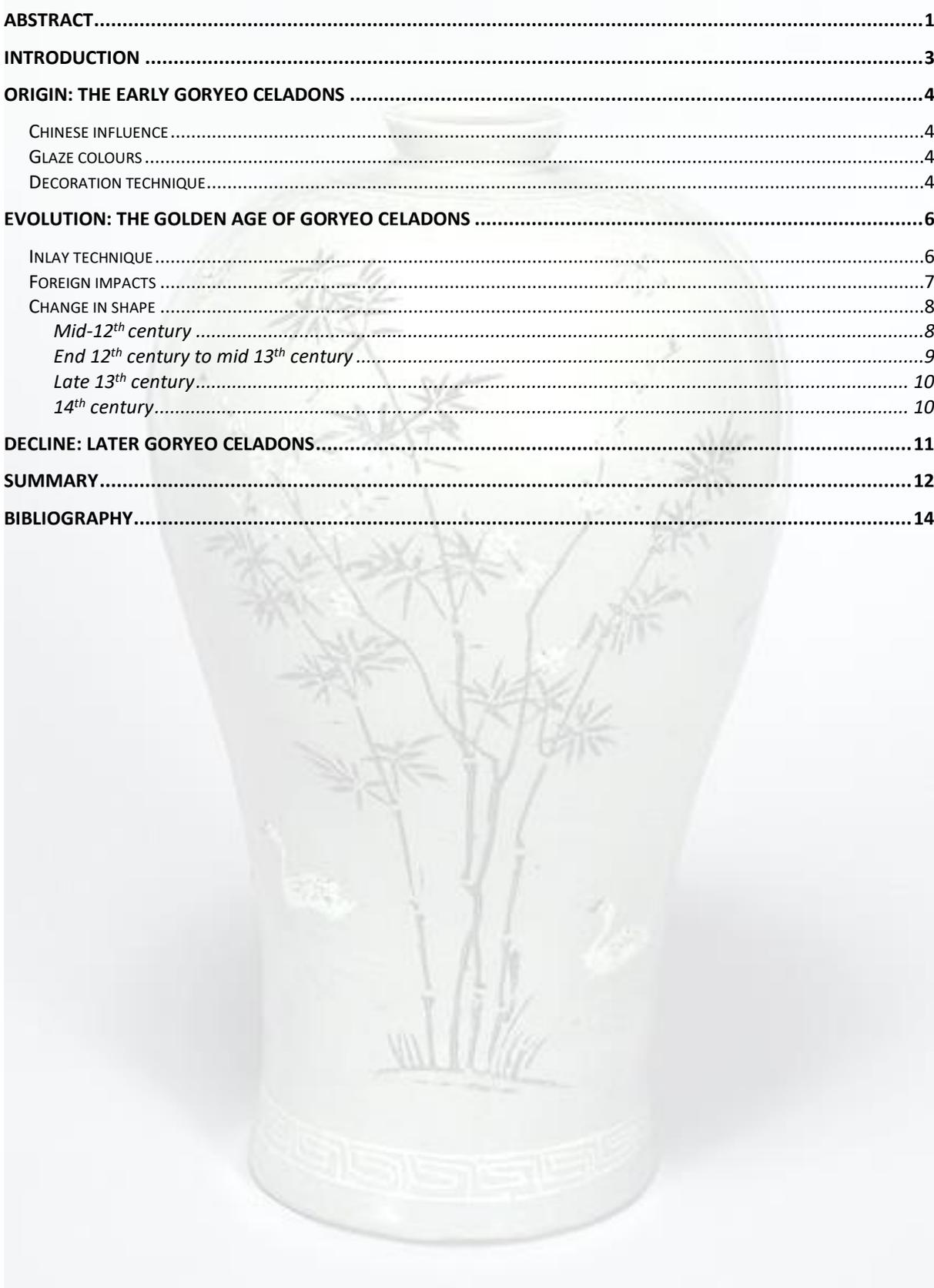
Korean celadons from Goryeo dynasty (918-1392 AD) has gained an international reputation because of their unique beauty, shown by the jade-like thin glaze, refined shape and delicate decoration. The objects with inlaid white, dark brown and even copper red patterns are Korean inventions. Maebyeong as a wine vessel is a typical decorative celadon object through which the whole evolution and development of Goryeo celadons can be interpreted.

The short essay focus on the change in maebyeong decoration and shape to discover the historical impacts behind the beauty of Goryeo celadons.



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Introduction

Goryeo celadons, though inspired originally by Chinese Yue wares, bear high aesthetic level through its own development over 10th-11th century. They have reached the golden age during 12th and 13th century, with delicate form and decoration, as well as distinguished greyish blue-green colour that was considered “first under Heaven.” [1] Decoration techniques such as inlay (sanggam) and underglaze copper red were invented alongside. [1] [2]

Among all Goryeo celadons, maebyeong, derived from Chinese meiping “prunus vase” as a wine vessel has its unique beauty with an elegant S curve form and fine decorations that display lively natural scenes. As shown in Figure 1, this maebyeong has broad and round shoulder that merges with a narrow waist that finishes with a slightly flared base, which distinguishes it from a Chinese meiping. The body is ornamented with inlaid bamboo, prunus, butterflies, and duck with the bottom that has white Chinese “thunder pattern,” which is popular for art objects. [1]



Figure 1 Maebyeong celadon with an inlaid bamboo, prunus, and duck design, 13th century, Tokyo National Museum [3]

The maebyeong can be a representative to demonstrate the entire evolution of Goryeo celadons over four centuries. The whole course was resulted by the interaction between Korean and China throughout late Tang to early Ming dynasties, showing foreign impacts on the design of Goryeo celadons particularly.

Origin: the early Goryeo celadons

Although the production of celadons started during the second half of the 10th century, only since the later 11th century its development moved forward when the political situation stabilized from Northern Chinese invasion. [4] Two areas in Korea became major celadon manufacture centres: Gangjin county and Buan county. [5]

Chinese influence

Goryeo dynasty was established in 918AD, when Buddhism and Confucianism continued to spread. Korea was under the patronage of ruling class who practiced Chinese customs in all aspects of the society, such as the civil service examination system. [1] Korea also kept close relationship with the Tang dynasty and the Five Dynasties in China. [4] This has stretched to the art design and aesthetic appreciation, influenced by Chinese culture and beliefs. This is demonstrated by a maeopyeon, (“meiping” in Chinese), inspired by the traditional Chinese wine vessel shape and motifs. [6] Yue kilns since Tang dynasty had flourished and Yue wares in particular “secret colour (mi se)” wares were appreciated in Korea [4]. The production techniques were thought to be adopted by artisans in Korea or potters might have moved to Korea after Tang dynasty to produce celadons during the 9th-10th century. [7] This benefited from the sea trade between Western ports of Korea and South-eastern coast of China, such as Zhejiang Province.

Glaze colours

Compared with Chinese celadons, Goryeo celadons display a translucent sheen from a thinner glaze that makes the underglaze designs more visible (Figure 2 Left). [1] The colour tone of glaze varies from many shades of grey, brown, olive, green, and blue [2], which is derived from the small amounts of iron oxide under a reducing atmosphere.

Decoration technique

Plain celadons appeared before the first half of 12th century, [4] and designs on early celadons were incised, carved, or mould-impressed (Figure 2) [1], where subtle lotus motifs were carved under the celadon glaze. [6]



Figure 2 Left: Maebyeong celadon with an incised lotus decoration, late 11th–early 12th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art [6]; Right: Maebyeong celadon, 11th-12th century, National Museum of Korea [3] [8]

In 2007 several hundreds of celadon wears were discovered from a shipwreck near Taean's Daeseom Island. The excavation uncovered the sea route carrying Goryeo celadons made over 900 years ago to the east coast of China from Gangjin kilns. [9] They are mainly monochrome tone without any inlay, consistent with the style of early Goryeo celadons.

In addition, celadons with painted underglaze iron (so-called “cheolhwa”) that appeared around 10th century in Korea were also produced in large quantities mainly during 11th and 12th century, where the patterns are usually dark brown and the glaze tend to become yellowish (Figure 3). [5] [7]



Figure 3 Left: Maebyeong celadon with underglaze iron painted peony and scroll design and inscription of "Hwasan (華山)", 11th century, National Museum of Korea [10] [11]; Middle: Maebyeong celadon with underglaze iron painted chrysanthemum scroll design, 11-12 century, National Museum of Korea [10]; Right: Maebyeong celadon with underglaze iron painted bird, butterflies and vines design, 11th century, Samsung Museum of Art [3] [12]

Evolution: the golden age of Goryeo celadons

The golden age of Goryeo celadons spanned the first half of 12th century to the end 13th century when they developed unique features technically and artistically. To some extent, they exceeded Chinese wares in shape, design, colour, and decoration, particularly thanks to the jade colour glaze and the technique of inlay (sanggam). [1] [5] Some scholars believed that the glaze reaching of high point in the 12th century was a result of influence from Ru wares in Northern Song dynasty. [2] Mongol invasion turned the society from civil officer to the military aristocracy dominated, and the later were in favour of more comprehensive design using inlays. [5]

Inlay technique

The inlay technique (sanggam) of Goryeo celadons, developed during the second half of 12th century, is considered the unique Korean invention, perhaps the most distinguished milestone in Korean ceramics history. [7] Inlaid decorative patterns contributed to the special beauty of Goryeo celadons, which was missing from Chinese Yue wares as well as Song to Ming dynasty celadons. [13] Instead of painting on the surface of the fired clay, the technique involves carving the design into the unbaked clay body and filling it with white and red slips to form inlaying patterns to depict certain designs. [1] [14] Then the celadon glaze is applied onto the clay body that is fired again at a higher temperature. [1] Inlaid celadons were promoted by the royalty and the aristocracy and their development was boosted by Mongolian taste after Mogol invasion at some point. [4]

There are some classic motifs, such as cranes and clouds, waterfowl among reeds, willow trees, lotus, etc., which possibly were influenced by Chinese Song dynasty paintings [1]. Figure 4 shows three typical examples of maebyeon decorated with cranes flying and clouds floating in the sky of the celadon glaze. [15] Occasionally the black and white inlay decorations are also accompanied by touches of underglaze copper-red (Figure 5), which is recognised also as originally Korean invention. [4] [7]



Figure 4 Left: Maebyeong celadon with inlaid crane and clouds design and copper red colour, second half of 12th century, Fitzwilliam Museum [16]; Middle: Maebyeong celadon with inlaid crane and cloud design, 12th–13th century, Princeton University Art Museum [15]; Right: Maebyeong celadon with inlaid cranes and clouds design, late 13th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art [17]



Figure 5 Maebyeong celadon with inlaid peony design and copper red, Goryeo Dynasty, 12th-13th century, National Museum of Korea [18]

Foreign impacts

The north border of Korea was constantly facing invasions from North China, starting from Liao and Jin throughout the 12th century. [19] They have brought the culture influence that was expressed in the celadon design, such as scenes of “spring landscapes” with willow trees, ducks and flowers, etc (Figure 8). [2] The Mongolian Empire invaded Korea several times and indirectly controlled Korean from early 13th century to mid 14th century. [20] [19] Although most of the scholars believe this has brought the decline of Goryeo celadons [5] [7], the

breaking relationship with Southern Song dynasty as a result did lead to the further development of Korean own celadon designs and techniques. [4] Mongolian customs were introduced to Goryeo court, so the style has moved towards heavily decorated surface with more copper-red (Figure 5) or even gilded gold [21] [22] (Figure 6), flower motifs, as well as new shapes, such as a gourd. [4] Gilded gold was used to emphasize the inlaid designs and some gilded celadon wares were among gifts by the Goryeo court for Yuan emperors. [22]



Figure 6 Maebyeong celadon jar with inlaid and gilded decoration of arabesques, monkey, tree, rabbit and banana plant, late 13th century, National Museum of Korea [22]

Change in shape

It seems that the elegant S shape maebyeong only started to appear (Figure 4) in a fuller bulky shape (Figure 2) until early 12th century and its shape keeps evolving throughout 12th and 13th century. [6]

Mid-12th century

The maebyeong tend to have a short neck on top of a wide and round shoulder that narrows down to the base from the middle of the body. The body looks in general thin and wavy, and the base is steady with tiny flare (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Maebyeong celadon with inlaid clouds design, 12th century, Brooklyn Museum [23]; Maebyeong celadon with incised lotus design, 湖林博物馆, 12th century [24]

End 12th century to mid 13th century

By the end of 12th century and throughout the 13th century, the shape of maebyeong gradually changed by flattening the shoulder and broadening the bottom half of the body. The neck shrinks further and the body shape is more curvilinear, showing a more pronounced S curve. [4] This is generally considered the most elegant and classic shape of Korean maebyeong (Figure 8).



Figure 8 Left: Maebyeong celadon with a inlaid plum tree, bamboo, willow and waterfowl design, 12th-13th century, Tokyo National Museum [25]; Middle: Maebyeong celadon with a inlaid willows, reeds and chrysanthemums design, early 13th century, 湖林博物馆 [24]; Right: Maebyeong celadon with a inlaid design of an old Man playing the musical instrument, 12th-13th century, National Museum of Korea [3] [26]

Late 13th century

Towards the end 13th century, the shape of maebyeong did not change that much but only the foot flared more and becomes broader (Figure 9).



Figure 9 Left: Maebyeong celadon with a repetitive cranes and clouds design, 13th century, Kansong Art Museum [3] [27]; Maebyeong celadon with a repetitive cranes and clouds design, 13th century, 湖林博物馆 [24]; Maebyeong celadon with a inlaid design of chrysanthemums, willows and reeds, late 13th century [24]

14th century

The shape of maebyeong in the 14th century looks coarse and unbalanced, quite different from the previous periods, with a less flat shoulder but wider and fuller upper body. [4] Some have spreading feet with narrow waist while some show a less curvy body (Figure 10).

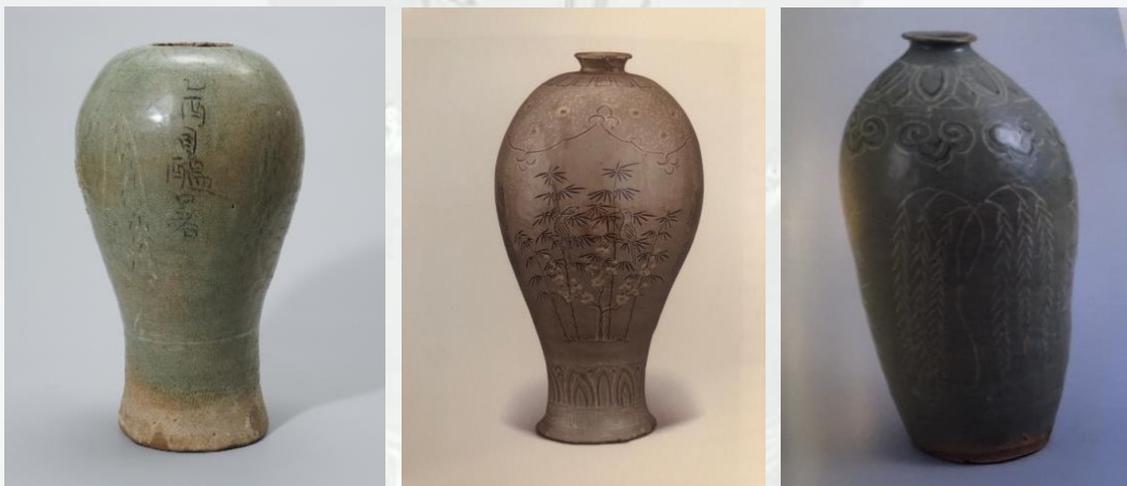


Figure 10 Maebyeong celadon with an inlaid landscape design and inscription of "Uryu Saonseo (乙酉司醴署, 'Used at a Government Office that Took Charge of Liquor Supplies in the 22nd Year of the Sexagenary Cycle')", 1345 AD, National Museum of Korea [28] [24]; Maebyeong celadon with a inlaid plum tree, bamboo, willow and birds design, 14th century, Honolulu Museum of Art, accession 127 [3]; Maebyeong celadon with an inlaid design of lotus and willows, second half of 14th century, 湖林博物馆 [24]

Decline: later Goryeo celadons

With the Mongolian backing ruling Goryeo families towards the late 13th century, the Korean society and art were influence by Mongolian cultures and Buddhism [1]. From the 14th century, Mongol's invasion and control started to show a more negative impact on Korean celadons's quality, resulting in the glaze quality changing from jade colour to greyish green or yellow-brown finishes, more rigid design and less fine inlaid pattern (Figure 9 Right). [4] [29] This has been demonstrated by Figure 10, that the shape of maebyeong became less elegant and more bulky, similar to a flattened bottle used as storage jar that was popular at that time. [5]



Summary

Goryeo celadons, though having had Chinese origins, had become classic Korean beauties, bearing thin, fine green-bleu glaze and delicate decorative pattern using unique Korean inventions – inlaid technique and underglaze copper red. Here the development of Goryeo celadon using maebyeong as example is summarised below in Table 1.

Table 1 Goryeo celadon development

Time	Event	Style	Figure
10 th -11 th century	Introduction of Yue wares celadon technique; culture exchange with Song dynasty	Greyish green-blue glaze, monochrome with incision and carving	
12 th century – 1 st half of 13 th century	Stabilisation of society and peak of demand and development of ceramics; Mongol invasion	Refined jade-like glaze and various shape; development of multi decoration skills, notably inlaid technique	
2 nd half of 13 th century	Mongol control and fleet of Goryeo court; interruption of production	Mongol culture impact on design; start of decline – coarse glaze and inlay	
14 th century	Fall of Goryeo dynasty	Poor decoration, less lively design	

Maebyeong celadon as a typical wine vessel when created by Korean potters has an elegant curvy S shape comparing with traditional Chinese meiping. Korean maebyeong have evolved from a bold shape with mild incised and curved decorations to comprehensive inlay patterns and natural scenes with multi colours including white, dark brown and copper red. The change has suggested strong foreign impacts from Kitan, Jin and Mongol cultures in terms of motifs, in particular the complex design and even gilt gold on the surface. Maebyeong is far more than just a wine vessel but essential decoration in Goryeo dynasty.



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