
Between Ritual and Elegance: The Perception of Chinese Ritual Bronzes in Korea

Dr. Ja Won Lee

*Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Fine Arts, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
PhD in Art History, University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

ABSTRACT

The close diplomatic relations and cultural exchange between Korea and China played a critical role in the discovery of ancient Chinese bronzes in Korea, both as objects used in ritual and as collectibles. This study investigates the historical circumstances in which Chinese ritual bronzes were imported and revered during the Koryŏ dynasty. Focusing on Koryŏ celadon in the shape of Chinese bronzes, it discusses how the Koryŏ artisans integrated elements of both ancient and archaic models to create new designs. An examination of the formal characteristics of Koryŏ celadon provides critical insights into the understanding of the political, social, and cultural appeal for Chinese bronzes, both for ritual ceremonies and for scholarly appreciation, as well as of the adaptation of models of Chinese visual and material culture. It further reveals that the shift in the aesthetic value of Chinese bronzes from the ritual vessels to scholarly objects on the Korean peninsula.

KEYWORDS: *Koryŏ celadon, Chinese bronzes, Bogu tu, Ritual objects, Scholarly appreciation*

INTRODUCTION

Koryŏ高麗 (918–1392) is known for its highly sophisticated production of celadon. Among them, Koryŏ celadon in the shape of Chinese bronzes presents a significant trend in appreciating Chinese material culture on the Korean peninsula. What inspired the Koryŏ artisans to produce celadon in the shape of Chinese ritual bronzes? Why did the Koryŏ court commission its artisans to produce celadon in the shape of Chinese ritual bronzes? What impact did the circulation and appropriation of images of ancient objects have on artistic developments? By answering these questions, this study aims to show the complex dynamics of political, social, and cultural aspiration during the Koryŏ dynasty and to reconstruct the cultural significance of the collecting of Chinese bronzes in Korea. Focusing on the historical circumstances in which Chinese ritual bronzes were imported, consumed, and venerated, it examines how royalty and the scholar-official class initiated the production and use of Koryŏ celadon. By then investigating the variations in shapes and decorative patterns of ritual vessels produced during the Koryŏ dynasty, this study demonstrates that the ruling elite involved in the production process appropriated Chinese ancient bronze forms in response to the social and cultural demands.

THE ACCEPTANCE OF CHINESE CULTURE

The close diplomatic relationship of the Koryŏ dynasty to its counterpart in China, Song 宋(960–1279) and Yuan 元(1279–1368), played an essential role in understanding the meaning of

ancient Chinese bronzes both for ritual use and for aesthetic appreciation. A complicating factor in tracing the acceptance of Chinese ideas and visual models is the Chinese practice of recreating the past, namely of reproducing ancient bronzes in various media (Wu9–46). Consequently, both actual bronzes of the Shang 商 (ca. 1550–1050 BCE) and Zhou 周 (ca. 1046–256 BCE) dynasties – including later visual records of such bronzes – and their antiquarian imitations of the Song and Yuan dynasties were received and regarded as models on the Korean peninsula (Yi 153–190). During the Koryŏ dynasty, it is notable that an intertwining reception of both the originals and the later Chinese imitations, a multilayered group of objects and textual materials, which then served as basis for Korea’s own recreation.

Another complicating factor is the relationship and correspondence between objects created for ritual use and those, which served as collectibles. Both were precious items in their own rights and the groups often overlap: ancient ritual bronzes became collectibles in China at least since the Bronze Age and functioned as testimonies of understanding history from the Song dynasty onward, as well as contemporaneously made bronze vessels served as objects used in rituals (von Falkenhausen 45–50). Chinese ritual bronzes were transported to the Korean peninsula for the ritual settings in the royal ancestral shrines. The Song court offered a blueprint for the ritual reform of the Koryŏ court. The new ritual system refers to the Confucian rites that urged ancestor worship during the last decades of Koryŏ (Deuchler 134). In the course of this reform, the Koryŏ court acquired textual and visual material, such as *Illustrations of Great Ancestral Temples* (*Taimiaotang tu* 太廟堂圖), *Illustrations of Ritual Vessels* (*Jiqi tu* 祭器圖), and *Illustrations to the Three Rites* (*Sanli tu* 三禮圖) as well as some ritual vessels, such as *dou* 豆 (raised dish), *gui* 簋 (a two-handled food vessel), *ding* 鼎 (tripod or square cauldron), and *zun* 尊 (a wine vessel) from Song China (*The History of Koryŏ*). In fact, the influx of Chinese illustrated catalogs and ritual handbooks along with the actual bronzes played a significant role in the publication of ritual protocols and the manufacture of ritual vessels in Korea. It seems that extremely few imitations of ritual vessels following ancient Chinese models are extant. The scarcity of the material is probably due to the fact that bronze was often re-melted and recast under different conditions, for instance, into weapons for warfare or objects serving different religious or state ceremonial. Because of the lack of extant Koryŏ imitations in bronze we have to turn to ceramics, a medium that was also used in China early on for imitating bronze ware.

KORYŎ CELADON AS RITUAL VESSEL

Square Cauldron Incense Burner (hereafter NMK *Square Cauldron 1*, figure 1), currently housed in the National Museum of Korea, presents early stage of copying ancient forms of Chinese ritual bronzes in celadon ware, a medium that was also used in China early on for imitating bronze ware (Sin 167). This well-balanced square cauldrons (*fangding* 方鼎) with its soft greenish glaze and low-relief patterns across the entire body is a prime example of the fine techniques of celadon production achieved in twelfth-century Korea, particularly developed during the reigns of King Munjong 文宗 (r.1046–1082) and King Injong 仁宗 (r.1122–1146) (Chang 193–242). It features two upright handles on the rectangular mouth rim, a square body with flanges in the center, and four lobe-legs decorated with blade motifs. As commonly found on ancient bronzes, the main body is embellished with the frontal animal masks with swirling horns, known as

*taotie*饕餮since the Song dynasty, one of the most common motifs Shang and Zhou dynasties ritual vessels. Although this motif was originally found on Chinese bronzes during the Anyang period (ca. thirteenth century–ca.1027 BC) of the Shang dynasty, the term, *taotie* from the ancient text, was first recorded in a painter and antiquarian Li Gonglin’s李公麟 (ca. 1041–1106) essay appearing in the *Kaogu tu* 考古圖[Investigations of antiquities illustrated] compiled by Lu Dalin呂大臨 (1044–1093) in 1092 (Kesner 29–53). Due to the flange at the center, it can also be recognized as two confronting creatures in profile. The narrow band above shows beaked birds with slender bodies in side-view, which presents a familiar feature of the ancient bronze vessels. A most intriguing aspect of this celadon is the two-character inscription, “Zhao Fu 召夫 (Father Zhao),” which indicates that it is supposed to be a copy of a vessel dedicated to Father Zhao of the Shang dynasty (Yi 159–160).



Figure 1. *Square Cauldron Incense Burner*, 12th century, celadon, H: 18.4 cm, W: 15.5 cm, National Museum of Korea, Seoul.



Figure 2. *Shang Zhao Fu ding* reproduced from the *Bogu tu*.

The visual appearance and inscription of the NMK *Square Cauldron 1* offer a clue to possible pictorial references. With regard to its inscription, shape, and decorative patterns, it is almost identical to the *Shang Zhao Fu ding*商召夫鼎(*Square Cauldron for Father Zhao of Shang*, figure

2), a rectangular cauldron of the Shang dynasty reproduced in the illustrated catalog, *Xuanhe bogu tulu* 宣和博古圖錄 [Illustrations of antiques in the *Xuanhe* period] also known by its abbreviated title *Bogu tu* 博古圖 [Illustrations of antiques], commissioned by Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1101–1125) and compiled between 1119 and 1125 (Ebrey 150). This illustrated catalog functions as an important source for understanding Chinese bronze vessels in the Song dynasty because it consists of the title, line drawings, and ink rubbings of inscriptions of diverse types of ancient objects from the imperial collection. Yi Yongjin acknowledges that the inscription engraved on the NMK *Square Cauldron 1* is identical to that of the *Shang Zhao Fu ding* recorded in the *Bogu tu*, yet asserts that there is no record to prove that the *Bogu tu* was available in the Koryŏ dynasty (159). However, this comparison offers enough evidence to consider the book as a key source for Koryŏ artisans.

It was not until the Song dynasty that Chinese artisans produced a considerable number of objects imitating and transforming the shape of ancient ritual vessels in response to political interests and to a growing demand, due to the collecting and appreciation of antiques among scholars and collectors (Chen). While they attempted to maintain the key aspects of ancient forms of the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, artisans of the Song dynasty slightly transformed certain features of shapes and common motifs. The earliest examples of archaic bronzes appeared in the Northern Song dynasty when Emperor Huizong commissioned a considerable number of ritual bronzes modeled after ancient ones in order to solidify his reign by restoring the glories of the past. In order to establish his political legitimacy Emperor Huizong initiated a ritual reform and commanded to produce new ritual vessels to celebrate the new era. The Ritual Bureau was charged with casting new ritual bronzes from 1113 through 1120. The *Zhenghe ding* 政和鼎 (*Tripod of the Zhenghe Reign*), a bell set, entitled *Dasheng* 大晟 (Great Brightness), a *ding* vessel with ox-head are the most important ritual vessels for Emperor Huizong's projects in the light of antiquarianism (Watt 219–228, Bol 173–205).

Zhenghe ding, which was commissioned by Emperor Huizong in 1116, represents the emulation and appropriation of a bronze vessel of the Shang dynasty. It recreates most of the formal characteristics of the *Shang xiang xing taotie ding* 商象形饕餮鼎 (*Ding with Taotie Motif and Elephant Shape of the Shang*) from the *Bogu tu* (Sena 139–140). It has two upright handles and a round body with *taotie* motifs supported by three cylindrical legs. As for the ancient bronzes, it is common that the entire body is divided into six registers by flanges and decorated with low-relief animal face against spiral motifs. By replacing the central flange with a subtle ridge, however, the newly cast *Zhenghe ding* alters and reinterprets the decoration of the ancient vessel combining the two sides of the zoomorphic motif into a more coherent face. This modification is characteristic for the process of copying and recreating ancient vessels. In the Southern Song period, the *Bogu tu* had a significant impact on the manufacture of archaic objects. In other words, the *Bogu tu* functioned as a reference for imitating the ancient forms of ritual vessels, particularly later Song copies of bronzes from Hangzhou and Huzhou (Hsu "Reshaping Chinese Material Culture" 207).

Yet, there are still some slight differences, particularly in the decoration of the legs when it comes to the NMK *Square Cauldron 1* and *Shang Zhao Fu ding* recorded in the *Bogu tu*. While the blade motifs on the legs of *Shang Zhao Fu ding* illustrated in the *Bogu tu* are only indicated by a few short lines, the NMK *Square Cauldron 1* shows a much more elaborate blade pattern.

This pattern is, in fact, reminiscent of another *ding* vessel, entitled *Shang Fu Gui ding* 商父癸鼎 (*Ding for Father Gui of Shang*), which is also recorded in the *Bogu* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Shang Fu Gui ding* recorded in *Xuanhe bogu tu*.

Thus, the comparative examination of the NMK *Square Cauldron I* and the *Shang Zhao Fu ding* in the *Bogu tu* suggests that the *Bogu tu* functioned as a critical visual source for Koryŏ artisans to produce ritual vessels. It is evident that the influx of illustrated catalogs made a significant impact on the production of ceramics in the shape of bronzes in the Koryŏ dynasty.

Another Koryŏ celadon, entitled *Ding Cauldron* in the Museum of Oriental Ceramics in Osaka, offers evidence of the combined use of illustrations and contemporaneous Chinese objects. This green-glazed *ding* vessel has two upright handles on a round mouth rim and the bowl-shaped body supported by three cylindrical undecorated legs. The upper body is decorated with beaked-shaped dragons while the lower body is embellished with *taotie* masks. It resembles, in its overall shape and the distinction between upper and lower register on the body, one of the archaic bronze vessels produced in Yuan China (Figure 4). It was discovered in the Chinese merchant ship of 1323 that was found at the coast of Sinan in Korea (Kim 103–134). From the comparison, it is evident that the Koryŏ artisans attempted to maintain the particular characteristics of ritual vessels from the Yuan dynasty.



Figure 4. *Tripod*, Yuan dynasty, bronze, H: 15.9 cm, D: 12.1 cm, National Museum of Korea, Seoul.

KORYŎ CELADON AS COLLECTIBLE

There are a few indications, both in textual and in visual material, that already during the Koryŏ dynasty the court and scholar officials regarded bronzes as objects of aesthetic appreciation. In particular, the Song envoy Xu Jing 徐兢 (1091–1153) mentions in his *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高麗圖經 [Illustrated records of Koryŏ in the Xuanhe period], the record of his visit to Koryŏ of 1123, that he brought some antiques to Koryŏ along with paintings, calligraphy, incense, and tea (174–176). He appreciated these gifts with Koryŏ officials, including Kim Pusik 金富軾 (1075–1151), who compiled *Samguk sagi* [History of the Three Kingdoms 三國史記], the earliest extant history of the Korean peninsula published in 1145.

In addition, the *Incense Burner with Applied Peony Scroll Design* in the Nezu Museum (hereafter *Nezu Incense Burner*, Figure 5) combines the shape of a ritual vessel with a peony design. The design quite obviously would have been inappropriate for ritual use, and the vessel therefore has to be regarded as an object of appreciation and collecting by a member of the Koryŏ elite. Its peony design on the body completely separates it from any of the ceramics discussed earlier, strongly indicating its decorative use, and signifies its connection with other items for the scholar's studio produced in celadon at the time, such as water droppers, brush holders, or inkstones (Figure 6).



Figure 5. *Incense Burner with Applied Peony Scroll Design*, 13th-14th century, H: 15.8 cm, Nezu Museum, Tokyo.



Figure 6. *Inkstone with Peony*, 12th century, National Museum of Korea, Seoul.



Figure 7. *Square Cauldron Incense Burner*, 12th century, celadon, H: 11.1 cm, W: 14.1 x 12.7 cm, National Museum of Korea, Seoul.

Koryŏ artisans introduced innovative designs by modifying shapes and decorative patterns. A representative example in this regard is another *Square Cauldron Incense Burner* housed in the National Museum of Korea (hereafter *NMK Square Cauldron 2*, Figure. 7). The *NMK Square Cauldron 2* can easily be recognized as a ceramic following ancient Chinese models with its two upright handles and rectangular body decorated with *taotie* masks against a ground of angular thunder patterns. The mythical animal mask has been transformed into swirling ornaments, while its origin is hardly recognizable. The registers, divided by flanges in more orthodox examples, have been altered into even decorative sections. Moreover, the very short feet bear small holes, and a squared spiral pattern encircling the narrow band of mouth can hardly be compared with the beaked-dragon design from which it most likely derived. While *NMK Square Cauldron 1* may well have served as a ritual vessel, it is quite unlikely that *NMK Square Cauldron 2* had the same function. The transformation rather seems signify its function as collectible, made for display and appreciation in the studio of the Koryŏ elite.

CONCLUSION

The Koryŏ elite drew inspiration from both the ritual use and the collecting of Chinese bronzes due to the intercultural exchange between Koryŏ Korea and Song and Yuan China. As a consequence of this exchange, the fashion for creating ritual vessels developed from the Koryŏ dynasty onward. Pointing out the crucial role of ritual handbooks and illustrated catalogs, this essay traced the way in which the Koryŏ courts modified and transformed shapes and decorations of ritual vessels. While the high degree of likeness suggests that the *NMK Square Cauldron 1* was faithful to the Chinese prototypes, such gain of independence from orthodoxy can also be observed in celadon production.

The production of Koryŏ celadon in the shape of Chinese ritual bronzes is linked to their roles in the context of ritual reform, the highly developed ceramic technology, and the influx of Chinese materials, both in the form of books and objects. Although further research on the collecting of antiques needs to be done, a similar constellation could be suggested in the private realm based on the examination of those incense burners that show strongly modified shapes and innovative designs. The collecting of antiquities among the cultured elite of Song and Yuan China may have encouraged a similar fashion in Koryŏ Korea. Koryŏ celadon in the shape of Chinese bronzes

provided insights into the understanding of the political, social, and cultural appeal for Chinese bronzes, both for ritual ceremonies and for scholarly appreciation, on the Korean peninsula. Both as objects used in ritual and as collectible, Koryŏ celadon in the shape of Chinese bronzes functions as a critical record of material culture at that time.

REFERENCE

- i. Chang, Namwŏn. "The Development of Koryŏ Porcelain and the Chinese Ceramic Industry in the Tenth Century." *New Perspectives on Early Korean Art*, edited by Younmi Kim, Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2013, pp. 193–242.
- ii. Chen, Fangmei. *Qingtongqi yu Songdai wenhua shi*. Guoli Taiwan daxue chuban zhongxin, 2016.
- iii. Lee, Ki-baik. *A New History of Korea*, translated by Edward W. Wagner with Edward J. Shultz, Harvard University Press, 1984, pp. 110–162.
- iv. Hsu, Ya-hwei. "Songdai fugu tongqi feng zhi yuwai chuanbo chu tan yi shier zhi shiwu zhiji de Hanguo weili." *Meishushi yanjiu jikan* 32, 2012, pp. 101–170.
- v. Watt, James C. Y. "Antiquarianism and Naturalism." *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996, pp. 219–228.
- vi. Kim, Sŏnga. "Sinan-sŏn ch'ulsu pang kodonggi ūi kihyŏng kwa yongdo." *Misulsahak* 29, 2015, 103–134
- vii. *Sinan haejŏsŏn esŏ ch'ajanaen kŏttŭl*. Kungnip chungang pangmulgwan, 2016.
- viii. *Han'guk ūi pomulsŏn*. Kongmyŏng, 2016.
- ix. *Koryŏ sidae hyangno*. Kungnip chungang pangmulgwan, 2013.
- x. Kesner, Ladislav. "The Taotie Reconsidered: Meanings and Functions of the Shang Theriomorphic Imagery." *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 51, no. 1/2, 1991, pp. 29–53.
- xi. von Falkenhausen, Lothar. "Antiquarianism in East Asia: A Preliminary Overview." *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Alain Schnapp, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Peter N. Miller, and Tim Murray, Getty Research Institute, 2013, pp. 45–50.
- xii. Deuchler, Martina. *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*. Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992.
- xiii. Ebrey, Patricia B. *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong*. University of Washington Press, 2008.
- xiv. Bol, Peter K. "Emperors can Claim Antiquity too: Emperorship and Autocracy Under the New Policies." *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics*, edited by Patricia B. Ebrey and Maggie Bickford, Harvard University Asia Center, 2006, pp. 173–205.

-
- xv. Sin, Suk. “Koryŏ kongyep’um e poinŭn Song tae ‘panggo kimul’ ũi yŏngnyang.” *Misulsa yŏn’gu* 25, 2011, pp. 161–184.
- xvi. Xu Jing, *A Chinese Traveler in Medieval Korea: Xu Jing's Illustrated Account of the Xuanhe Embassy to Koryŏ*, translated by Sem Vermeersch, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016.
- xvii. Hsu, Ya-hwei. “Reshaping Chinese Material Culture: The Revival of Antiquity in the Era of Print, 960–1279.” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2010.
- xviii. Yi, Yongjin. “Koryŏ sidae chŏngnyŏng ch’ŏngja yŏn’gu.” *Misulsahak yŏn’gu*, 2006, pp. 153–190.
- xix. Sena, Yun-Chiahn C. “Pursuing Antiquity: Chinese Antiquarianism from the Tenth to the Thirteenth Century.” Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2007, pp. 139–140.

www.ijahms.com