



Special Feature

Studies of Joseon Porcelain

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Editor's Note

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In June 2021, the *Review of Korean Studies* (hereafter, *RKS*) hosted five studies in the area of Korean porcelain, and Goryeo celadon in particular. Five scholars agreed to contribute their fascinating studies, grouped under the title of “Ceramic Culture of Goryeo.” Ever since, we have been trying to return to this subject for quite some time. And after three years, in the form of a sister project, we were finally able to summon the aid of five other experts in the Korean porcelain field, but this time around, from the area of Joseon white porcelain, blue-and-white porcelain, and *buncheong* pottery.

In these five wonderful takes on Joseon porcelain and ceramics, two scholars concentrated their attention on the 15th century, while the remaining three scholars have respectively examined the 16th, 17th, and 18th–19th centuries. The two articles that focused on the 15th century both discuss the influx of foreign (in this case Ming) porcelain (and in particular, the blue-and-white porcelain) into the Korean peninsula, with one which observes the domestic realm of Joseon and both Joseon and Ming-produced items circulating in the Joseon market, while the other tackles on more international connotations that can be deduced from those porcelain found from various regions throughout East Asia including Joseon. And whereas the one on the 16th century and the other on the 18th–19th centuries rather deal with the traditional Joseon white porcelain as well as certain changes they went through in each of those periods, respectively focusing on either the buyer/producer dynamic or the meaning of certain distinctive patterns, the one on the 17th century interestingly takes a look at the very people who were behind the production of porcelain and pottery, as well as the plight they had to experience when they were forced off the Korean peninsula during wartime.

First, Park Jungmin contributed an article entitled “The Characteristics of Blue-and-white Porcelain Consumption and Trends during the First Half of Joseon Seen through Excavated Artifacts.” In his article, the author examines

extant blue-and-white porcelain, either found or excavated from sites or vestiges of the early Joseon period (15th century to be exact), and also discusses the ratio between Joseon-produced cases and the cases produced in Ming China that have ever been found. He first comments on the usage of them, their initially limited consumption (in terms of social classes, mainly among royal family members and powerful scholar-officials), and their eventual spread to and being acquired by wealthy commoners including merchants operating in the Hanyang capital area. He also assesses reasons for the Joseon kilns not being able to produce the amount of blue-and-white porcelain required by the consumers and how the imported ones met their demand instead.

Next, Gowoon Seong presented an article under the title “An East Asian Perspective on Ceramic Exchange between Ming China and Joseon.” The author examines the porcelain exchanges between Ming China and Joseon, but what makes this study interesting is the author’s choice to examine it in the context of Ming-generated pan-East Asian porcelain exchange, which engulfed almost every corner of the region. This comparative analysis of the Ming-Joseon exchanges with those between Ming and other East Asian countries shows us commonalities and differences between the two trends, of which the former trend, concentrated in the 15th century’s early half, showed mostly white-glazed and blue-and-white porcelain, while other regions in East Asia show items with different attributes. The author hopes that such approach will help us understand the nature of Joseon-Ming cultural exchanges and Joseon’s unique status in the overall situation.

Kim Kwi Han contributed an article entitled “A New Perspective on Royal Kiln White Porcelain in the 16th-century Joseon Dynasty: Supply and Demand.” The author examines the 16th-century Joseon white porcelain produced at the Royal Kiln, the Gwangju branch of the Saongwon 司饗院 office of the Joseon government, and especially its suppliers and buyers, of which the former was the kiln while the latter was the Joseon royal family. What the author took notice is certain changes, including the deterioration in quality which usually had been high-class, spotted from the white porcelain produced there in this period. The author concludes such changes had very much to do with the ever-increasing demand of the buyers while the creators had to resist worsening work conditions by cutting production costs and even to the point of abandoning the kiln, hence creating a compromise where products with lesser qualities had to be created, delivered, and accepted.

Bang Byungsun contributed an article named “Korean Potters in the 17th Century: Their Lives and Pottery in Korea and Japan.” The author focuses on no other than the creators themselves, the potters, by examining the reality and difficulties they faced in their lives, which was interrupted when political shifts in China rendered the trail of materials necessary for ceramic production in Joseon all the more difficult—even worse by two major warfare that broke out in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The author also looks into technological enhancements and new production methods that were achieved in the direst of conditions. Another interesting angle the author adopts in the article is the fate of the Joseon craftsmen who were kidnapped during the war with the Japanese. How they were relocated to Japan and were forced to engage in the creation of Joseon-style ceramics and tea bowl ware, with diligence and ingenuity, is also mentioned here.

Koo Hyein presented us an article under the title “Royal Dragon Jars in the Joseon Dynasty: Perspectives of Rituals, Hierarchy, and Desire.” The author deals with issues such as production, consumption, and perception of late-Joseon white porcelain jars with cloud and dragon designs in underglaze cobalt blue of the 19th-century Joseon society. Nicknaming it as “Dragon Jars,” the author extensively examines how this particular item, which had usually been used only by people in the upper echelons of the Joseon society including members of the royal court, was able to spread itself to other social classes of the Joseon population. According to the author, these “Dragon Jars” were used in royal ceremonies and were one of the most representative ones in the blue-and-white porcelain culture of the late Joseon period. The author also discusses the distinctive nature of this item’s dragon patterns and their meaning.

Again, we at *RKS* are more than happy to feature all these fabulous works through this Special Studies and, of course, express our deepest gratitude to the five authors who kindly agreed to share their wonderful contributions to the field with us. I am sure their studies will help raise the awareness of Joseon porcelain and ceramics for people all around the world. In the meantime, we at *RKS* will continue to try hosting other important studies on other subjects as well in the future.