



The Plum Blossom Cup of the Southern Song: for Wine or for Tea?

Li Yang

Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics, Dongfang College.

Huang Guanghui

Macau University of Science and Technology.

Abstract

According to traditional Chinese aesthetic standards, the porcelain of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) is considered particularly exquisite. The focus of this paper is a cup, shaped like a plum blossom, from the latter part of the Song dynasty, the Southern Song (1127–1279). It is held in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

Introduction

A common hobby amongst members of the Song court and scholar-officials of the time had to do with the acquisition, classification and study of objects. During this period, what had formerly been an indulgent pastime developed into the systematic study of material culture. One major interest within this movement was ceramics and porcelain, which has left us with a rich body of textual resources on the subject.

In a field where surviving examples of ceramic artefacts are sparse and yet there are many extant relevant historical records, it makes sense to take a “combined” approach: to employ textual records alongside our study of surviving artefacts. This can help us to solve mysteries about their design, production, and uses. As well as this, attempts were made to reproduce the cup according to contemporaneous production techniques of and those of the Longquan kilns. This “triangular” approach, which combines the study of the physical artifact, related texts, and aspects of production will help us to accurately understand this particular porcelain item, particularly regarding whether its intended use was for wine or for tea, which remains unclear.

The Plum Blossom Cup

At the center of this study is a Southern Song cup from a Longquan kiln, shaped like a plum blossom, which is now kept in the Palace of Heavenly Purity at the Palace Museum, Beijing. The shape of the cup is that of a five petalled plum blossom, including a petal on the inside, at the center of the base. It has a copper rim and its body is coated with a celadon glaze that gives it a pale green color. The cup has round feet and an exquisite rounded shape. This is rare in porcelain from the Southern Song, but may be observed in silverware and goldware of the time. For example, gold and silver receptacles of a similar design can be found in the British Museum and Tokyo National Museum. While it is clear

the plum blossom cup represents a different kind of traditional porcelain craftsmanship, aspects of its production and usage remain largely unknown to us. This study hopes to fill this gap in the literature.



Fig. 1 An example of a celadon-glazed plum blossom cup: courtesy of National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 2 A gold plum blossom cup excavated from a tomb in Shaowu county, Fujian province. Courtesy of *Zhongxing jisheng nansong fengwu guanzhi* ('The Glorious Prosperity: Exquisite Objects of the Southern Song Epoch'). Beijing: China Bookstore, 2015, p.302.

The material characteristics of celadon-glazed Longquan porcelain

Located in southwestern Zhejiang province, Longquan city is in one of the most mountainous areas in the province. The exposed strata are mostly comprised of Pre-Devonian Chencai group, Lower Jurassic Fengping formations, Middle Jurassic Maonong formations, and Upper Jurassic volcanic rock. Thick layers of volcanic rock were exposed by the Yanshanian movement. As a result, the local ground surface is rich in minerals like iron. The mountainous topography and rich mineral deposits give Longquan unique characteristics for producing pottery and porcelain. The local celadon-glazed porcelain showcases a pale green color, in part due to the inaccessibility of the city.

1. Longquan's rare glaze: Purple-gold Clay

The local mountain clay has a high iron content, which makes it produce a rare glaze material named purple-gold clay. This type of clay may shrink to 0.5 m or spread to 1 or 2 m across the mountains. It is a time-consuming and continuously experimental process from extraction to massive use of it.



Purple-gold clay is indispensable for replicating the traditional celadon-glazed porcelain. It needs a lot of practice and great chance to look for it. Local artisans can determine the quality of the clay through their years' experience in geomancy. Generally speaking, an advantageous location and exposure to the morning sun guarantee the quality of purple-gold clay.

2. Glaze-making

Celadon-glaze for porcelain must involve purple-gold clay, quartz with a purity above 60%, feldspar and limestone, as well as some ordinary clay. Artisans collect and break up the purple-gold clay before heating it to 800°C in the kiln. Next, they mix the fired raw materials with certain proportion of the above ores, and process the mixture using a glaze grinder for 48 hours. To make the glaze appear closer to the traditional celadon-glazed porcelain, they add smashed porcelain debris left at the mouth of the kiln to the glaze grinder. Finding the most suitable materials can be a huge effort because the material from each mountain possesses a different mineral content. Artisans must employ an approach of trial and error, making porcelain utensils and adjusting the mixing ratio repeatedly. The objective of this trial porcelain-making is to optimize how the glaze binds with the body.



Fig. 3 Quartz from the mountains surrounding Longquan city

Trial reproduction

The trial reproduction process for the plum blossom cup took two years in total, between 2017 and 2019. In this process, nearly 70 sets of cups were made after two firings at 6 kilns in Longquan. As each sequence bears loss, only 20 sets had been successfully produced in the end.

After two firings at Longquan, it was observed that the porcelain wall would tilt up slightly due to the tensile force applied to the porcelain body during the ceramic throwing. Going forwards, the walls were shaped to be slightly larger than that of the original cup. The exact difference was determined by trial and error. The porcelain body seemed close to the original, but the wall contracted upward during the later stages of drying and firing. As a result, the object took on a conical shape to begin with. The second time, attention was paid to widening the rims of the wall during porcelain-making, but the curve ended up too

large, leaving a conspicuous difference between the reproduction and the original. The kaolin that I used contained a relatively low purple-gold clay content, which led to inefficient binding between the glaze and the porcelain body. As a result, the final model cup's glazing was not sufficiently cracked.

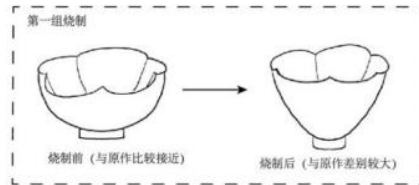


Fig. 4 First Firing: the reproduction before and after firing

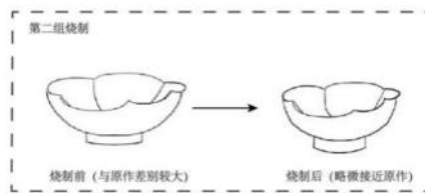


Fig. 5 Second Firing: the reproduction before and after firing





Relevant Records of the Song Dynasty

The following table collates and categorizes relevant quotes from Song dynasty texts.

Cup Uses in the Song Dynasty		
Use	Cup Type	Example
Taking medicine	Jade cup	"Take medicine from a sleek jade cup." [<i>Poems of Su Dongpo, Collected and Annotated</i> (東坡詩集注)]
	Plain porcelain cup	"Take medicine from a plain porcelain cup." [<i>A Collection of Famous Words and Deeds of the Song Dynasty</i> (事實類苑)]
Drinking wine	Gold cup	"In life, we'd drink to our heart's content with a gold cup as large as a boat." [<i>Refined Lyrics of the Music Bureau</i> (樂府雅詞)]
	Glass cup	"Beam dust dirties the glass cup." [<i>Selected Works of Ouyang Duke Wenzhong</i> (歐陽文忠公集)]



	Faint green colored celadon-glazed cup	"As the flagon is opened, a fragrance wafts around the entire seated area." [<i>Poems of Su Dongpo, Collected and Annotated</i> (東坡詩集注)]
	Parrot-shaped cup	"The parrot-shaped cup that I've treasured," [<i>Collected Works of Chen Jianzhai</i> (簡齋集)]
	Jade cup	"At the banquet, jade cups and gold bowls are laid out." [<i>Mid-Spring and White Snow</i> (陽春白雪)]
	Pear-blossom-shaped cup	"Mr. Yang likes my pear-blossom-shaped cup best." [<i>Collected Works of Huang Shangu</i> (山谷集)]
	Pottery cup	"Every drinker holds a pottery cup,..." [<i>Gazetteer of Zhenjiang County of Jiading</i> (嘉定鎮江志)]
	White porcelain cup	"Oh, so beautiful is the white porcelain cup!" [<i>Posthumous Works of Fang Fushan</i> (富山遺稿)]
Drinking tea	Rabbit-hair-shaped cup	"In the rabbit-hair-shaped cup, the fragrant cloud of tea looks so white" [<i>Tan's Family Instruction</i> (譚訓)]
	Small cup	"A small cup gathers the fragrance of the tea." [<i>Poems of Lu Jiannan</i> (劍南詩稿)]
	Brass-leaf-shaped cup	"Your home's brass-leaf-shaped cup is worthy of special praise." [<i>Continued Works of Master Qingshan</i> (青山續集)]
	Glass cup	"The bodhisattva Manjusri took up a glass cup,..." [<i>Blue Cliff Record</i> (碧岩錄)]
	Flower-and-bird-shaped gold cup	"The flower-and-bird-shaped gold cup is a tea utensil." [<i>Illustrated Record of the Chinese Embassy to the Goryeo</i> (宣和奉使高麗圖經)]
	Partridge-shaped gold cup	"The partridge-shaped gold cup contains a remainder of spring." [<i>Works of Master Jibei</i> (濟北先生雞肋集)]
Making an elixir	Iron cup	"The Iron cup comes first and Jian cup second." [<i>The Way of Chinese Alchemy</i> (庚道集)]
	Jian cup	"Spread it up and down, wrap it in salt and put it in a jian cup." [<i>The Way of Chinese Alchemy</i> (庚道集)]
Placing a lamp		"Place a lotus lantern along with its cup." [<i>Records of Dreams in Dongjing from Orchid Recluse</i> (幽蘭居士東京夢華錄)]

It is clear from the above table that in the Song dynasty, cups had a variety of material qualities and purposes. When it comes to the design and shape, parrot and pear were often used. The *jian* cup (Cups produced in Fujian Province) was used for drinking tea as well as making elixirs. As a rule, medicine cups were plain-looking, less decorative and often made of jade or porcelain. As for wine cups, there were more material and design options. The *jian* cup and its derivatives account for the most of the cups used for tea. Lu You, a poet of the Southern Song, liked drinking tea from a small cup, as reflected by his lines "The sound of chessmen reverberates around the empty hall while a small cup gathers the fragrance of tea" in his poem "Coming to Suoxiao Pavilion at Eventide (晚晴至索笑亭)." Glass cups were usually used by common folk to drink wine or by monks to sip tea, according to Blue Cliff Record (碧岩录). Su Shi wrote in "Envy the Beautiful Moon (妒佳月)," "The vault of the night sky is a huge glass cup, which shines and shimmers upon my breasts." Iron cups came first and *jian* cups second in the eyes of Taoists. The cups used as lamps have no name, but they looked like lotuses according to *A Record of Dreams in Dongjing*.



It is of special note to this study that the *jian* cup and its derivatives were the most commonly used cups in tea-drinking. For instance, the rabbit-hair-shaped cup and partridge-shaped spotted cup are both derivatives of the *jian* cup, while the flower-and-bird-shaped gold cup is Goryeo's (in modern-day Korea) imitation of the iconic cup. The *Illustrated Record of the Chinese Embassy to Goryeo* (宣和奉使高麗圖經) says, "The flower-and-bird-shaped gold cups, emerald small bowls, silver stove and soup tripod all follow the shape design of Chinese cups."¹ The *Continued Miscellaneous Writings of Guixin Period* (癸辛雜識續集) claim that "The flower-shaped gold bowl of Ding kiln will not discolor once it has been outlined with mixture of garlic juice and gold and fired." While there are few surviving Song dynasty flower-shaped gold-outlined bowls, many broken pieces of this kind of porcelain from the same period have been unearthed at Yulinting kiln, Fujian province. This quote suggests this to be the origin of this kind of gold-outlined bowls. So, we can presume that that the Goryeo version came to be after the *jian* cup arrived in the north, when Korean artisans made flower-and-bird-shaped gold cups on the basis of its design. As the cup of Yulinting kiln is a derivative of the *jian* cup, the flower-and-bird-shaped gold cup can be regarded as a distantly related to it. Cheng Dachang mentions a brass-leaf-shaped cup in *Extended Luxuriant Gems of Spring and Autumn Annals* (演繁露), "Now the emperor doesn't gift the *jian* cups, but large soup jars. It is pure white in color and its shape is akin to the tawny brass-leaf-shaped cup." Clearly, the brass-leaf-shaped cup is similar to a tawny cup and larger than the *jian* cup.

Conclusion

As the *General Gazetteer* (通志) reveals, "Ancient *jue* goblets are collected by many scholar-officials. I often see such goblets and know that the mouth of each goblet resembles a bird. Likewise, lotus-leaf-shaped cups and sunflower-shaped cups are also named after the shapes of their mouths rather than their overall shapes."² The plum blossom cup is most similar to the sunflower-shaped cup mentioned above. The textual sources indicate that the plum blossom cup was likely used for drinking wine rather than tea, because wine cups typically had a more diverse range of designs than tea cups. It is still unclear when flower-shaped cups started to be used for drinking tea, an issue which warrants further research.

This study has shown how ancient texts can be treated almost like product instructions for extant artefacts. They can help us to further our knowledge of known porcelain-making techniques, and better understand the shape, design, and intended usage of the extant receptacles. In turn, our understanding of the ancient porcelain can be of benefit to contemporary porcelain techniques.

Thanks

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¹Jilin shifan xueyuan guji yanjiu suo 吉林师范学院古籍研究所, *Xuanhe fengshi gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高丽图经 v, Jilin: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1991, p. 65.

²Zheng Qiao 郑桥, *Tongzhi ershi lue* 通志二十略, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2019, p. 800.



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