

Title

‘Look at the alcohol if you want to know the country’*: drinking vessels as a cultural marker in the medieval Korea

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Abstract

Like eating in general, drinking is not just a biological activity to sustain us. It also is a fundamentally cultural practice, reflecting our socio-political identity, religious commitment and national stereotype. Subsequently, cultural identity is expressed through drink, and we can construct what kind of society and people it serves through drink.

Just as a drink is a cultural marker, drinking vessels also reflect the political upheaval and social change of the society where they were used through time. They are ubiquitous and common throughout human history, and we tend to see these vessels simply as practical and disregard their cultural implication. But, an analysis of the vessels can tell us a lot about facts hidden behind written histories.

From an art historical perspective, drinking vessels are generally related to tea culture in East Asia. During the medieval period, however, when nomadic powers were in ascendancy throughout various parts of Eurasia, alcoholic drink became more mainstream in the cultural scene of East Asia, especially in the upper echelon. It went through dramatic changes in East Asia due to intense contacts to the other parts of Eurasia along the Silk Roads. This presentation will discuss how changes to the drinking vessels reflect political, social and economic shifts in the medieval Korea.