Jizhou Leaf Bowl

A Master Achievement in Glaze Decoration

By Bernard Azevedo

Figure 1

Yuan Dynasty, 13th century, Jizhou ware from Yonghe, Jian, Jiangxi province.
H. 4.80cm, Diam. 11.58cm, Foot Diam. 3.65cm.

I endeavor to examine the background and history of the Jizhou kilns to better understand the making of this Jizhou leaf bowl. Compared to other major Chinese ceramic kilns of its time, there has been limited information generated in English about the Jizhou kilns and the wares they produced. This limitation of readily available research material has added some additional complexity to this study. As a result, efforts for the initial study of this featured Jizhou leaf bowl will focus on the period from the Northern Song to the Yuan Dynasties.

While China has produced ceramics for thousands of years, the Jizhou kilns are only "believed to have operated from as early as the Tang Dynasty," by first making common wares, and then developing into more refined and elaborately decorated wares, such as tea bowls with tortoiseshell glaze, slip painted script over glaze, paper cut, and the leaf decorations that for which Jizhou is famous.[1] As for the making of these more advanced wares, the primary production of Jizhou kilns only took place for roughly 400 years, "from the Northern Song through Yuan Dynasties, (960 AD – 1368 AD)," which is comparatively only ten percent of the time ceramics have been fabricated in China.[2]

China was a populous and rich country during the Song Dynasties, full of busy towns with large populations that effected the country from the coast to the interior with the number of cities with over 100,000 families reaching forty-six with an estimated population of 110 million in 1190 AD.[3] This would make Song China comparable in size and to many countries today. These large cities full of markets and affluent customers were a destination for many of the Jizhou tea bowls.

The Song Dynasties fully supported vigorous economic expansion during the period, and the Court became a merchant too, and drew from its monopolies and from the taxes levied on private transactions for a major part of its revenue.[4] While the Courts had held monopolies in key areas like salt in the past, this was a change for the Court to be linked to private transactions. In the courts' effort to further the economic activity, ambitious programs were put in place to construct navigable waterways connecting the Yangzi (Yangtzi). As a result, China had a mature

[1] Mowry, *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers,* (Harvard University Art Museum 1996), 36.
[2] Mary Tregear, *Song Ceramics*, (Rizzoli International Publications 1982), 10.
[3] Li, *Chinese Ceramics Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,* (Thames & Hudson, 1996), 131; John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China – A New History*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 106.
[4] Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion 1250-1276,* (Stanford University Press, 1970), 61, 62.

commercial environment linking the large cities by way of the new infrastructure developed. This allowed the Jizhou and other kilns to transport their products throughout China.

The prosperity of the Song Dynasties was also demonstrated by the settlement of two border disputes within twenty years of each other. These settlements with the Liao and Xi Xia Dynasties required the tributes hundreds-of-thousands of ounces of silver and rolls of silk per year and Xi Xia settlement also included 30,000 pounds of tea.[5] It is interesting that tea was worthy of being included alongside silver and silk and shows how highly regarded tea had become to the peoples around China. Therefore, it is clear that not only China was prospering, but the surrounding lands and its peoples had the desire and means to partake in tea drinking at this time, creating additional markets for the Jizhou kilns.

Tea culture, however, was different from commerce and treaty tributes. As far back as the first century AD Chinese tea drinking was adopted. This continued into the Northern Song, as Li explains in *Chinese Ceramics Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,* that in the tenth and eleventh centuries as tea drinking increased the "growing area doubled in size during the Northern Song."[6] With a tradition of tea drinking going back hundreds of years and a population of around 110 million, China's cultivation and consumption of tea must have been substantial.

Tea drinking was also incorporated into the Buddhist traditions in China. The practice of Buddhism was well established in China by the Three Kingdoms period, where in Northern Wei, 386 – 534 AD, there were approximately 30,886 monasteries.[7] Later, the Liao Dynasty, located on the northern border of the Northern Song, provided food "in 1078 AD for 360,000 monks and nuns."[8] As we have seen, with a population of about 110 million which included tens of thousands of monasteries it is reasonable to assume there were a million or more monks and nuns alone drinking tea during the Song Dynasties.

The Japanese Buddhists visited China during the Song Dynasties to learn the practices of the Ch'an sect of Buddhism.[9] The Japanese monks took tea drinking and tea utensils back with them to Japan and adopted many of the customs. Translating Chinese to Japanese, the word

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[5] Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 353.
[6] Li, *Chinese Ceramics Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,* 132.
[7] Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in China, An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries,* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.
[8] Dieter Kuhm, The Age of Confucian Rule, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 115.
[9] Mary Tregear, *Chinese Ceramics in the Ashmolean Museum,* (Ashmolean Museum Oxford 1987), 25.

temmoku or tenmoku was created: "Temmoku is Japanese for the tea ceremony wares, which is derived from a site near a hill in Fujian Province named T'ien-mu (Tien Mu), which is outside Hangchow (Hangzhou), where the priests (monks) favored this ware for tea bowls."[10] Tenmoku is a description for dark brown glazed tea bowls, primarily Jian ware, but also includes Jizhou and Cizhou wares as exhibited at the Kyoto National Museum in Japan.[11]

The Jizhou kilns are located in the south of China, in Jiangxi Province, not far from Yonghe, which was market town near Ji'an (Jian). There were other kilns in Jiangxi Province: one of note is the Jingdezhen kilns, only about 230 kilometers south-west. The Jizhou and Jingdezhen kilns were both served by the same riparian network of the Yangtze tributaries.[12] The Jizhou kilns came to be known as "Jizhou" because the region was known by this name as far back as the Five Dynasties (907 – 960 AD).[13]

Although we do not know exactly when the Jizhou kilns started production, it is believed that early on a variety of ceramics were manufactured in poor-quality Qingbai-style. This poor quality is a result of the potassium, iron, and titanium oxide impurities to lead-glaze-enameled wares.[14] There is some disagreement on whether other kilns also produced leaf bowls or not. The picture of the foot of the bowl of this essay appears to be in the light-biscuit category. The Jizhou clay tended to be higher in potassium-oxide level higher than other kilns. In comparison to the typical Jingdezhen porcelains, the iron- and titanium-oxide impurities in Jizhou clays probably prevented any true translucency for developing during firing.[15] These impurities in the clay at Jizhou and other kilns contributed to the oxidizing discoloration in many ceramic wares throughout China, resulting in the kilns using different techniques to address the discoloration. Referring to Figure 1, the foot clay is coarse, and the potting is rough. Outside of the Jian kilns, few other kilns have wares of similar coarseness.

The Jizhou kilns used the wood burning bun kiln (mantouyao), or mantou for short. This kiln type would be consistent with placement along the Gan River. The mantou kiln design consists of a fuel-gate, firing chamber, and chimney, being adapted to permit temperatures of up to

[10] Ibid., 26.
[11] https://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/learn/home/dictio/touji/tenmoku/
[12] Kerr, *Song Dynasty Ceramics, V & A,* 106.
[13] Mowry, *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers,* 36; Tregear, *Song Ceramics*, 10.
[14] Rose Kerr, *Song Dynasty Ceramics, Victoria & Albert Museum – Fare Eastern Series,* (V & A Publications, 2004), 106.
[15] Nigel Wood, *Chinese Glazes* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2011), 152.

1,300°C. There is also evidence that the Jizhou craftsmen used dragon kilns for firing high-fired wares, however this kiln design required a slope and is commonly built along the hillsides.[16] It is impossible to know for sure if the leaf decorated tea bowls were fired in the mantou or dragon kilns. Below are images of both dragon and mantou kilns, demonstrating the large size of the structures.

Figure 2

Dragon kiln in Yunnan, 2007[17] Mantou kiln in Handan, Hebei, 1995[18]

The Jizhou kilns appear to have focused on the tenmoku dark tea bowls to emphasize the glaze effect of decorating of polychrome glazes.[19] Jizhou is one of only two kilns in southern China to produce dark brown/black glazed tea bowls, the other being the Jian kilns. The Jizhou kiln used wood to fire the kilns, resulting in an ash glaze. In *Chinese Glazes*, Nigel Wood explains: the "blackware glazes were applied raw to the wares, which were once-fired to fairly low stoneware temperatures (1,220 – 1,290°C), generally in oxidizing-to-neutral atmospheres, for leaf decorated bowls."[20] The Jizhou kilns appear to have used the available clay and fuel source to the created the tea bowls that optimized to qualities of the resources available.

With the Jizhou kilns south of both the Yellow and the Yangtze River systems along the Gan River, the Jizhou kilns were well placed geographically to access markets. The Jizhou kiln complex was small in comparison to Jingdezhen and others that operated hundreds of kilns within their complexes. In comparison, there have only been twenty-four Jizhou kiln sites found to the

[16] He Li, *Chinese Ceramics, From the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty* (Yale University Press, 2010), 235.
[17] Crick, Frick, Jung, Kopplin, and Kuhn, *Monochrome Principle,* (Museum fur Lackkunst, Munster, 2008) 47.
[18] Ibid., 47.
[19] Li, *Chinese Ceramics Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,* 133.
[20] Wood, *Chinese Glazes*, 151 – 152.

west of Yonghhe.[21] Regardless of the kiln complex size, the location is important because kiln operations usually needed three factors to be successful: raw material in clay, fuel to fire the kilns, and transportation to market.

The Jizhou kilns appear to have declined during the Yuan Dynasty, which may have been caused by changes in taste and the consolidation of kilns during the Yuan Dynasty but appear to have continued to operate to as late as the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644 AD.)[22] At some point, production appears to have ceased abruptly when a disaster appears to have struck the area. A 1958 AD report released by Chinese authorities "suggests an extensive disturbance" occurred.[23] However, we don't know the type of disaster—it could have been flood, earthquake, or some other event. What we do know is the ground was so disrupted by the upheaval that close dating of the sight material is almost impossible.[24] Thus the Jizhou kilns have been lost to antiquity, except for the ceramics that survived in collections around the world.

The tea bowl leaf design ranged from a single small or large leaf to a sprig of two or three leaves. It is proposed the use of mulberry leaves at the Jizhou kilns was probably inspired by the notion of poet Chen Xingyi (1090 – 1138 AD) that the leaf was infused with the Zen spirit. A tea bowl containing the Zen spirit was essential for amateur and master tea drinkers alike.[25] As a result, the leaf bowls are one of the most sought-after Jizhou decorative effects, where the image of a natural leaf, complete with all its veins, and often in sharp outline, is preserved inside the bowl as a lighter image on a black-brown ground.

There is no single explanation of how the leaf decoration was applied to the bowl. Wood states in *Chinese Glazes* that the leaf was laid in the wet glaze.[26] Regardless of the exact technique used to create the leaf decorative the appreciation of these bowls is not lessened, and direct observation makes it evident a real leaf was used.

Taking a close look now at the leaf bowl specific to this essay in Figure 1, this Jizhou tea bowl contains a large single leaf decoration on a dark brown, nearly black, background at the bottom of the interior. The leaf is of golden color, in crisp relief, with minute detail of the veins.

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[21] Li, *Chinese Ceramics Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,* 139.
[22] Mowry, *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers,* 36.
[23] Margaret Medley, *Yuan Porcelain & Stoneware,* (Faber & Faber, 1974), 125.
[24] Ibid, 125
[25] *Emperor's Treasures*, (Chinese Art from the National Palace Museum, Taipei), 64.
[26] Wood, *Chinese Glazes*, 154.

The tip of the leaf extends three-quarters of the way to the rim, whereas the stem and right edge extend one-half of the way to the rim, with the left edge near the bottom center of the bowl.

The bowl's everted rim is smooth and unblemished, with a lip on the exterior for easy drinking. The bowl is undercoated with a medium brown slip nearly to the foot, only slightly revealed between the dark brown glaze and the unglazed foot. The foot reveals the body clay as fine grained with a coarse surface and tan to light brown or biscuit color. The dark brown glaze evenly covers the interior and exterior, with many small worm holes, seen as white specks in the photo. The leaf is nondescript and doesn't appear to resemble a leaf from a pipal or mulberry tree, however other bowls may exhibit a closer resemblance to a mulberry leaf.[27] This also appears to be the case for the comparative leaf bowl in Figure 3.

Figure 3

The comparable Jizhou leaf bowl above is in the Shanghai Museum

Returning to Figure 1, the bowls' potting is even and smooth on the interior, in contrast to the slightly irregular exterior where concentric rings from the pooters wheel are apparent through the glaze. The concentric rings demonstrate a lower quality of potting which is consistent with the lessor quality workmanship of Yuan Dynasty in comparison to the Southern Song wares.

The bowls' foot is very short with the exposed clay having speckles of reddish/orange coloration, suggesting oxidation during the cooling period of the firing and is consistent with sources noted in the discussion herein which indicate the kiln atmosphere for Jizhou leaf bowls was oxidizing-to-neutral.

[27] Wood, *Chinese Glazes*, 154.

In conclusion, the tea bowl in Figure 1 is a fine example of a Jizhou ware with leaf decoration and exemplifies the culmination of centuries of ceramic development in China. Looking at the influences that made these tea bowls possible, Chinese civilization has made many technical advances over the centuries This populous land of large cities connected with a vast network of water works to transport goods has existed for centuries. The visiting Japanese were heavily influence by the culture and religion, to the point that Japanese adopted many Chinese traditions and Buddhism as their own. The Jizhou kilns were part of this influence, with innovative glaze techniques and decorations, reaching its highpoint during the Southern Song to Yuan Dynasties. The Jizhou decorated leaf bowl, named leaf temmoku by the Japanese, was the apex of ceramic development at the Jizhou kilns after centuries of technical improvement and creativity. Coveted in China and Japan the temmoku leaf tea bowl never lacked social acceptance and prestige. Although the Imperial Court preferences didn't favor the Jizhou kilns, there is no doubt the Jizhou glazes, glaze effects and decorative styles were original and unmatched. For example, a Jizhou bowl with paper cut decoration is considered a "nation treasure of Japan" and many museums throughout the world collect Jizhou wares. [28]

Those of us fortunate enough to have seen a Jizhou leaf bowl in person and the few that have been close enough to handle such a treasure count ourselves as extremely lucky. Researching this writing has increased my appreciation of the Chinese culture and the aesthetics of Jizhou wares which I hope the reader has come to share with me.

[28] Seizo Hayashiya and Henry Trubner – Gakuji Hasebe, Yoshiaki, Hiroko Nishida, William F. Rathbun, Catherine A. Kaputa, *Chinese Ceramics from Japanese Collections – Tang through Ming Dynasties,* (The Asian House Society, Inc., 1977) 74-76; Jay Xu and He Li – Jay Xu, Fung Ming-chu, Ho Chuan-hsin, Alferda Murck, Tianlong Jiao, and curators from the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, *Emperor's Treasures – Chinese Art from the National Palace Museum, Taipei – Masterworks of the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties* (Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 2016) 64;