

A small Chinese jug – probably 4th or 5th century AD



In Chinese folk legends chickens (or more precisely cockerels) often have an important role. It has been common in China to paint images of chickens around doorways to ward off evil spirits. Chicken blood would be sprinkled to exorcise haunted houses. People used to swear brotherhood by drinking wine mixed with the blood of a cockerel. In some areas live chickens accompanied the bride in a wedding ceremony. These traditions are thought to stem, in part, from the behaviour of a cockerel – it is associated with the coming of light and the banishing of darkness as it crows at dawn each day, and its reliability crowing every morning became connected with the qualities of faithfulness and honesty. It's aggressive behaviour in cockfights was associated with the quality of ambition. Also, the word for Chicken in Chinese sounds similar to the Chinese word for 'auspicious', which is thought to be why these birds are believed to bring good fortune. The Chinese have often found it significant when two different words have a similar sound.

In the third century AD, in south-eastern China, potters started decorating vases by attaching modelled chicken heads on their shoulders, presumably because chickens were associated with good fortune. By the fourth century these chicken heads had become spouts and the vases given handles, turning them into jugs (or ewers, as they are commonly called). Examples of these vessels have been found in a number of Chinese tombs dating from the fourth and fifth century. Some commentators have even suggested that they were primarily made for burying with the dead, though I'm not sure why that should have been the case. Certainly they have occasionally been found with spouts that were not made to pour, and those were presumably intended to be placed in a tomb.

The jug (10 cm tall) in the photo above is an unusually small example of these chicken-head ewers. The spout functions properly but the jug's small size means that it could only have been used for dispensing small amounts of liquid – maybe an oil or dressing of some sort. Alternatively, if it was made for burial in a tomb maybe its size was not considered significant. It was common practice at the time for wealthy Chinese to bury small models of their buildings, furniture, livestock and

servants in tombs, presumably as a message to the guardians of the afterlife that they were important people who expected to be treated as well after death as they were before it.

This jug is made of stoneware, coated with an attractive green glaze. In the West this type of glaze has become known as celadon. The term celadon originated in 17th century France, supposedly deriving from a shepherd of the same name in a pastoral romance of that period, who wore green ribbons. The green colour in the glaze comes from small amounts of dissolved iron, probably initially an accidental ingredient, with the first green glazes being produced in China in the second millennium BC (about three thousand years earlier than similar glazes were produced in the West). The glaze would have been made by mixing clay with wood ash. The wood ash contains lime (calcium oxide) which is a flux which allows the clay to melt at the temperature of the kiln (over 1200°C), forming a glassy layer when it cools. The quality of green glazes was improved significantly around the time of my jug and it is believed that at that time green glazed stoneware replaced many other materials (lacquer, bamboo, wood, metal, earthenware) for domestic utensils in well-to-do homes.

As well as the green glaze, my jug has dark brown spots at three positions on the rim and on the tops of two small lugs on the shoulder of the jug. This was a common decoration on chicken-head ewers at that time, with spots often also on the eyes of the chicken head. The spots were probably made by dabbing a pigment containing a lot of iron. You can see on my jug how the brown colouration diffuses into the surrounding green glaze. I think this diffusion is an attractive effect, but it is probably the reason why potters at the time did not attempt more refined decoration with the iron pigment (e.g. brushed lines).



A pair of lugs were standard features on this type of jug. There were probably, at least initially, functional – either to attach a carrying handle or to tie down a lid or closure of some sort. Later on they may have been viewed as primarily decorative; late in the 4th century or maybe the 5th century, the angular squared-off lug shapes seen on my jug replaced the previous more rounded lug designs. On one of the lugs on my jug the hole has accidentally filled with glaze, so they could not have been used to attach anything.



You can also see a circular groove on the shoulder of my jug, which is again a common feature of this type of vessel. It may have been considered decorative, but it also had a practical use as it would have been made while the pot was rotating on the wheel, to mark the height at which to attach the chicken-head spout, the lugs and the bottom of the handle. The mouth of the jug is dish-shaped, making it easier to fill with liquid while retaining a narrow neck (to reduce evaporation and the risk of spillage). The top of the handle attaches to the rim of this mouth. In later chicken-head ewers the top of the handle was often shaped as the head of a dragon, biting the rim. Possibly my jug was considered too small to make this detail practical or worthwhile.

The jug would have been fired with many other pots in a long 'dragon' kiln – probably so called because they snake up the side of a hill as a recumbent dragon might. To avoid the jug sticking to whatever it was standing on during the firing, the base of the pot is not glazed. It was also common at that time when firing pots to place them on a stand with sharply pointed 'spurs', to minimise the area of contact. However, it has been found that some potteries more remote from the main centre of production instead placed their pots on ring-shaped supports. There is a faint circular mark on the base of my jug (see photo on next page) which indicates that it was made in one of these more provincial potteries. Before the archaeological investigations of kilns in China in the mid-20th century it was often thought that each type of ancient Chinese pottery was made in a specific location. In the case of my green-glazed stoneware it was believed that it was all made at the Yue potteries in the province of Zhejiang. Once archaeologists started excavating kilns in other areas they realised that, as you might expect when demand rises for a particular type of pot, potteries in the surrounding areas imitated the successful ones and produced similar wares.



In subsequent centuries Chinese celadon pottery would be further refined until, by the 9th century and even more so in the 12th century, beautiful vessels with this green glaze were being produced, greatly admired and exported to other countries in large quantities. That, however, is a story for another time.

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