

## A Single Shard Synopsis

### Characters:

Tree-ear – young orphan living under a bridge in Korea, named for mushroom “that grows without benefit of parent seed”. Tree-ear scavenges for food from garbage heaps and fallen grains of rice. The boy is polite and respectful.

Crane-man – disabled old man, proud and ethical, raises Tree-ear from a very young age. Shriveled foot. He would have moved into the monastery to be cared for but a fox-an animal that is greatly feared in Korea at the time= appeared on the path and scared him away. Straw-weaver. He teaches Tree-ear to live according to a code of integrity, not stealing or begging.

Min – best (but one of slowest) potter in the village. He is a gruff perfectionist who forms and discards more pots than he keeps.

Ajima, Min’s wife – kindly woman who refills Tree-ear’s bowl every day so he has a full meal to take back to the bridge each day. Also, gives the boy clothing from her deceased son.

Kim- royal emissary

### Setting:

Ch’ulp’o, Korea, a coastal town famous for its pottery. The clay in the region allows potters to glaze their pots a beautiful prized gray-green color called celadon. The story takes place in mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century.

### Story:

- Tree-ear scavenges for food most of the time, (Have you eaten well today?) but after a meal he loves to watch the potter Min at work, secretly hoping to become a potter himself.
- One day he sneaks into Min’s house for a closer look and damages a box. Min assigns Tree-ear to collecting wood for 9 nine days to repay the damage. The hard work involves collecting wood.
- After the nine days, Tree-ear offers to work for free in hopes of getting to make his own pot.
- Min’s kindly wife provides a midday meal to Tree-ear each day. The boy eats half the food and hides the other, bringing it to the bridge to Crane-man each day.
- Tree-ear works by collecting clay, learning to drain it in a stream, making purified clay and glazes. Community of artists. Communal kiln.
- Tree-ear learns that Min will not teach him, due to the potter tradition of a potter passing on the skill to his son. Min’s son died many years ago,
- An imperial emissary named Kim visits the town to look for a new commission for the palace. The position is well paid and extremely honorable It is the dream of many potters.
- Tree-ear watches other potters in the village now and sees the use of a newly decorative and innovative technique. He decides it is not ethical to reveal this information to Min. The potter who uses this technique is sloppy and Tree-ear realizes Min would be excellent in this work.
- When Min finally sees the other potter’s work, he demonstrates the inlay technique, but early attempts are ruined by brown spots (oxidation) during the glazing process. Despite this, the emissary recognizes Min’s fine work. Min creates other samples and sends Tree-ear on the long journey to the emperor in Songdo with his best work.
- Along the way, Tree-ear is attacked by robbers looking for food and all the pots are smashed leaving a single shard to display his master’s skill.
- He continues his journey and shows the shard to Kim. The emissary likes the work and assigns a royal commission to Min.

- Tree-ear returns to the town by sea and learns that Crane-Man died of a heart attack during his absence, during an accident in the cold river.
- Min adopts Tree-ear and he and his wife change his name to a form of his dead son's name – Hyung-pil. Tree-ear knows their son's name was Hyung-gu and that it is a custom to give a name that shares a syllable. Offer to adopt as a second son.
- Min agrees to teach Tree-ear in the art of pottery.

#### Notes:

- Traditionally Korean art borrowed heavily from aesthetics of both Chinese and Japanese art
- Cultural exchanges with the Song dynasty in China during this period
- Coastal city that is setting in book would be open to Chinese exchange. Two main centers for pottery – Puan where Ch'ulp'o is located and Kangjin, were coastal districts with easy access to and from China across the Yellow Sea.
- 12<sup>th</sup> century a time of peace and prosperity for Korea.
- Buddhism flourished and temples increased. Demand for vessels increased by monks and the aristocracy. Royal tombs.
- In the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Korean artists, some who were schooled in China began creating celadon by using inlay and copper glazing techniques first developed in China but only fully developed by Korean artists. Became revered even by the Chinese for elegant, simple beauty.
- Temple bell used each morning sounds as beginning of the day.
- Vases, jugs and bowls are popular shapes. Graceful, simple shapes. Potters also produced ceramic pillows (used by monks), incense burners, roof tiles. Floral patterns of lotus leaf and flower, peony, chrysanthemum flowers, grapevines and birds. Many motifs especially cranes and clouds are associated with Buddhism.
- The cause of the brown spots in Min's initial work known to be oxidation. Because it contains iron the celadon glaze acquires the desired finish only if fired in an atmosphere of reduced oxygen. Too much air entering the kiln will "rust" the iron in the glaze and cause undesirable color.
- Much of surviving celadon marred by signs of oxidation. Even equipped with this info today's potters have been unable to exactly reproduce the color (from A Single Shard notes). Color aiming for is "kingfish blue."
- Landscape of Korea mountainous. Journey would be challenging.

Link to Met museum on celadon pottery:

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cela/hd\\_cela.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cela/hd_cela.htm)

## The History of Korean Celadon

### Celadon (*Cheong-Ja*) – the Stuff of Kings

Though the history of Korean pottery stretches back to the Neolithic age and the rough "Black Comb Pottery" produced by early tribes, the pinnacle of Korean pottery was the development and perfection of celadon (*Cheong-Ja*) during Korea's [Koryo](#) Dynasty.

The Koryo Dynasty, which lasted from 918 to 1392 AD had a strong Buddhist influence which shaped many of its cultural achievements. Buddhist temples flourished during the [Koryo](#) period, and with them grew a need for fine vessels to be used during the many ritual ceremonies. In the middle of the 10th century Korean artists, some who had been schooled in China, began creating celadon by using inlay and copper glazing techniques which were developed first in China but only fully developed and perfected by Korean artisans. The Korean use of these techniques were unique in the history of pottery. The level of fine quality and beauty they were able to achieve in their work surpassed that of other countries and came to be revered by even the Chinese for its elegant, yet simple beauty. The [Koryo](#) Royal Court also used some of the finest examples of celadon pottery in their palaces both as vessels for daily use and as objects of fine art.

