

Rediscovering Korea's *onggi* Potters

by Robert Sayers

In 1895, colorful, opinionated Mrs. Isabella Bird Bishop, world traveler, descended the Lower Han River southeast of Korea's capital to a remote potters' village – a place she later describes in her journal account, *Korea and Her Neighbours* (1905):

At the village of Tomak-na-dali, where we tied up, they make the great purple-black jars and pots which are in universal use. Their method is primitive. They had no objection to being watched, and were quite communicative. The potters pursue their trade in open sheds, digging up the clay close by. The stock-in-trade is a pit in which an uncouth potter's wheel revolves, the base of which is turned by the feet of a man who sits on the edge of the hole. A wooden spatula, a mason's wooden trowel, a curved stick, and a piece of rough rag are the tools, efficient for the purpose.

Elsewhere in her book, Mrs. Bishop again describes the product of these potters as "... great earthenware jars big enough to contain a man, in which rice, millet, barley, and water are kept."

What is extraordinary about this account is that it could very well have been written in 1982, since a virtually identical pottery industry is still a viable part of South Korea's domestic economy. That such an industry should exist at all in an era when most of Korea's consumer goods are manufactured in modern highly mechanized plants can be attributed largely to the conservatism in Korean dietary habits and means of food preservation. Korean housewives today still depend on coarse stoneware jars—as a general category called *onggi* – for the preparation and storage of diet staples like soy sauce, soy bean paste, red chili paste, various cereals, and a spicy cabbage dish called *kimch'i*.

Each fall, small neighborhood groups of women set aside several weeks to prepare their winter stores of such food. Once filled, the sauce jars of varying sizes are placed outdoors on a raised stone or concrete platform called a *changdoktae* (literally, "place for sauce jars"), while the *kimch'i* jars are partially buried in the ground so that their contents will not freeze. City dwellers who lack the enclosed courtyards typical around older homes keep their sauce and *kimch'i* jars on rooftop terraces and balconies.

The sturdy jars, ranging in color from plum red to a deep brownish-black, are sometimes embellished with an encircling dragon line (*yongddi*). Over this are the sweeping leaves of the orchid plant (*nanch'o*).

Since they are purchased in the marketplace, probably few Koreans actually know where the jars are made. Indeed, the *onggi* factories are usually located in the countryside or on the outskirts of cities and towns where their presence is not advertised. Obscure though they may be, such factories we now know are directly descended of private ceramic workshops called *chomchon* which existed during the latter part of the Yi dynasty (1392-1910). Such workshops, curiously enough, were also a refuge for large numbers of religious outcasts – Korean Catholics – who suffered increasingly at the hands of the Confucianist ruling class after 1800. Driven to mountain hideaways, the Christians found relative safety in the contemptible occupations of potter and peddler. To this day, the majority of Korean *onggi* potters are Catholics and can call up vivid recollections of their ancestors' tribulations.

The division of labor in the 200 or so remaining *onggi* factories in South Korea is probably similar, if not identical to, that which prevailed during the period of the *chomchon*. This includes an owner, either a retired potter or simply an entrepreneur; several skilled wheel turners called *taejang*, who also load and fire the kiln; and a smaller number of assistants, called *konaggun* or *taenmodo*, who prepare the clay coils for the potters and glaze the ware after it is turned. Other workers, called *saengjilgun*, do a variety of odd jobs about

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"Onggi Potter" by the Korean artist Kisan, ca. 1886. Photo courtesy National Museum of Natural History.

the grounds. Typically all of these men live with their families near the work-site, usually in quarters provided by the owner.

The potters and their assistants work in a small mud-walled enclosure with a thatched roof (nowadays covered with corrugated iron) supported by sapling posts and rafters. This style of architecture, one of Korea's oldest, is ideal for pottery-making, since the thick walls insulate the workers against extremes of heat and cold and also retain moisture in the mounds of clay stored within. Illumination for the potters is provided by small low windows adjacent to their workplaces.

The wheels themselves are composed of two thick wooden disks, a meter or so in diameter, joined in the center by four posts; in cross-section the apparatus has the appearance of a large spool. Each wheel, after the manner described by Mrs. Bishop, is set into a depression in the earthen floor and rotates freely on the point of a wooden spike. The potter, who sits on the edge of the depression with his feet below floor level, is able to rotate the wheel backwards and forwards with a heel-and-toe motion of his left foot. As he builds the sides of a vessel, slowly adding coils and flattening these with wooden paddle and anvil, he turns the wheel in a clockwise direction. For thinning and smoothing, the potter uses a pair of metal or wood chips, while the wheel is rotated rapidly in counter-clockwise fashion.

Changdoktae, or "place for sauce jars."
PHOTO BY RALPH RINZLER



In turning especially large vessels, a perforated can filled with live coals is lowered into the partially-finished cylinder to stiffen the bottom courses of coils; while this and a similar heater set next to the vessel are drying the clay, additional coils are added to complete the jar. Once the rim is formed using cloth and leather smoothing strips, and the sides are contoured and smoothed, the jar is carried off by the potter and his assistant in a cloth sling.

After drying for a time in the sunlight, the ware is glazed with a mixture of wood ashes and an erosian silt called by the potters *yakt'o*, or "medicine clay." Then the pots are carefully nested and stacked in a nearby kiln. Until 10 or 20 years ago, Korean *onggi* potters fired their ware in a long single-chamber *taep'ogama*, or "cannon kiln;" more recently, they have adopted a form of chamber kiln called a *noborigama* or *gaeryanggul* ("improved kiln"). Some 30-35 meters in length, such a structure normally has between 8 and 12 chambers and, like its predecessor, is inclined at about 25 degrees so that a powerful draft of heat rises from its firemouth to its upper end.

Firing takes place over the course of 5 to 10 days, beginning with a warming fire to purge the kiln and ware of moisture, and proceeds until a maximum temperature of 1150°-2000° Centigrade is attained. During the last stage of firing, round vents are opened along the length of the structure and additional firewood is passed through these into the separate chambers. After this procedure, the vents are resealed as is the firemouth and any draughtholes at the "chimney" end; the kiln is then left to cool for two or three more days. Once the ware is unloaded from the kiln, the 1000 or more jars and lids are arranged into groups of ten for counting, then left to await the arrival of the ware vendor's truck.

In comparison with Korea's classical ceramics – its celadons and porcelains – *onggi* has received, until recently, only minimal attention from art historians and other scholars. The tradition persists because *onggi* is still a practical necessity in food preparation, despite the enormous amount of labor involved and the minimal financial rewards for the workers. Even the introduction of mass-produced plastic and stainless steel containers during the decade of the 1970s has failed to arrest the market for *onggi*, since many housewives prefer the taste of food preserved in the older ceramic vessels. Therefore, until a practical substitute can be found, the *onggi* tradition is likely to continue for some time to come.

Onggi potter at Kaya village in Kyonggi Province, 1972.
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