

Another Silk Road

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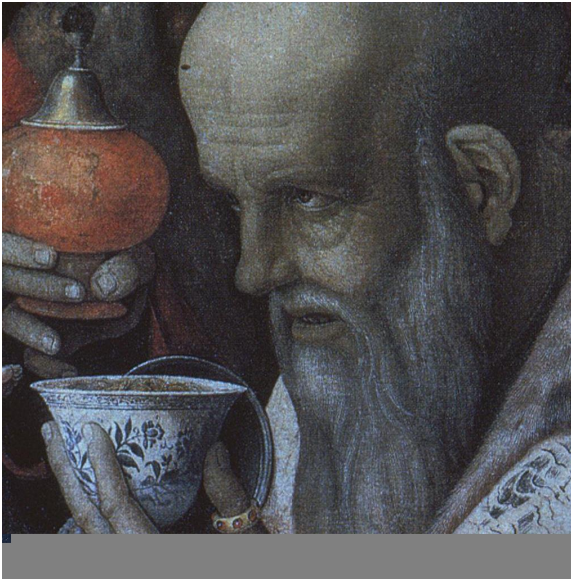
For centuries, the ancient network of trade routes known as The Silk Road traversed the Asian continent, connecting it to the Middle East, the Mediterranean world and Europe. These routes, the conduit for trade in luxury goods became, also, an agent in the transmission of technology, ideas and cultural traditions between the powerful civilisations of Europe and those of the East, in particular China. Not surprisingly then, The Silk Road has become a metaphor for cultural exchange between disparate and distant groups with China as a key destination and hub.

Nowhere is the radical consequence of this interchange more evident than in ceramic production. High fired porcelain, first transported from China to Europe as ballast for less weighty cargo, soon became the focus of a thriving export trade that, from the seventeenth century, impacted even the ancient city of Jingdezhen, a ceramic centre for some 1,000 years, which had flourished under the patronage of successive Imperial households. In the West, the extraordinary value placed on porcelain saw an unprecedented commitment of resources in a competitive quest to discover the secrets of the 'miraculous' translucent material. By the early eighteenth century, porcelain was known as white gold, the quest for its formula displaced the alchemic endeavour, and nation states were bankrupted in its pursuit.

In 2008, many centuries after camels plied Silk Road tracks, the first direct freight train sped from Beijing to Hamburg via the ancient overland route through Mongolia and Belarus, reducing current sea freight delivery times by a massive twenty two days. Intriguingly, the maiden journey delivered Silk Road staples of textiles and porcelain.

Again, in the twenty-first century, the international repercussions from Chinese developments in ceramic production are striking and affect not only the commercial arena, but also individual practice in fine art and ceramic design. *Another Silk Road* engages the metaphor of The Silk Road in considering the role and impact of cultural exchange between diverse individuals, with China as the shared axis and ceramics as a common language. Each of the participating ceramic artists has a connection to China and some to Jingdezhen in particular.

For **Jackson (Jian Shen) Li**, the association with Jingdezhen is fundamental. The rejuvenation of the city, his hometown, has come at a cost to its traditional architecture and dense laneway settlements. As suburban sites are cleared to make way for high-rise dwellings, Li seeks to rescue carved timber facades, even entire buildings, which he reconstructs as artist accommodation at his rural workshop in San Bao, several kilometres from the city. Li's 'Post Imperial Porcelain' objects echo the subtle glazes of the Sung period and the motifs of Ming blue-and-white ware produced in the Imperial workshops of Jingdezhen centuries earlier. Here too, he seeks to preserve the past by refashioning it in the present. The ornate flourishes of Ming brushwork are pared back to a subtle intimation of auspicious natural elements: the spare, repeated silver coil evokes a traditional wave motif and its association via water with purity, while the restrained outline of petals recalls the blossom motif with its reference to spring and regeneration.



The haunting translucency of Li's porcelain objects bring to mind Ming exemplars appearing in fifteenth century European religious paintings (such as Mantegna's *The Adoration of the Magi*, c.1490), the mysterious vessels believed to have magical properties consistent with the sacred offerings they contain.

Canadian **Paul Mathieu** is a regular traveller to Jingdezhen, often working from The Pottery Workshop, a residency founded by Caroline Chen and hosted by Takeshi Yasuda, both ceramic artists of international stature. As a writer and commentator, Mathieu has long argued the specificity and independence of ceramics as an art form. In the 'Binary Bowl' series, oppositional or binary gestures are enacted in underscoring his thesis: an appropriated traditional Jingdezhen figurative mould has been impressed with a layer of clay and through this action a form with a concave space is produced. The resulting object is thus defined as "bowl". A negative form is made from the first by imprinting clay within its interior space resulting in a pair of objects that, irrespective of their orientation, always display a concave space and are therefore understood as containers. The associated binary oppositions such as form/surface, image/object are, he asserts, particular characteristics of ceramics as an autonomous and singular art form.

It is not surprising that Mathieu, with his ongoing focus on the idiosyncratic practice of ceramics has developed a rare understanding of the history of Jingdezhen porcelain and has been assiduous in seeking out individuals with expertise in niche areas of the city's ceramic production. Unlike many recent Western visitors (and their seventeenth century merchant counterparts) seeking local expertise to produce objects to a pre-determined brief developed with a home audience and market in mind, Mathieu's work evolves from sustained collaboration with Jingdezhen specialists. Seeking to develop an object where the aesthetic decisions were made by others, Mathieu relinquished all decisions on pattern and colour to the Chinese experts who painted the rich enamel surfaces of his 'Binary Bowl' pairs. Ironically, most of these patterns had been developed centuries earlier for a Western market and the palette is described in Chinese as 'foreign colours' due to its origin in early European exemplars brought to China by Jesuit priests.ⁱ In another of the significant reversals that define the series, the binary questions inscribed in Chinese on each bowl were painted by the artist, despite his unfamiliarity with calligraphic letterforms.

Of course, I do not speak, read or write Chinese but it was important to use Chinese, not only because the work was made in China and is informed, stylistically, by Chinese ceramics, but also so that it *cannot* be read readily and remains obscure, ambiguous, possibly invisible.ⁱⁱ

Ambiguity is a term that peppers **Laurens Tan's** discussion of current work. Born in Australia, English speaking, but recently resident in Beijing, Tan finds that the challenge of language, and the politics of identity are a daily reality despite his Chinese ancestry. Following his first visit to China in 1987, Tan produced a number of terracotta pieces that deploy figures from popular fables atop various forms of bucolic local transport (*Monkey Train* [1987] for example).



By 1989, these vehicle forms had morphed to large composite constructions, part rural contraption, part Mad Max (*The Three Graces; Agrarian Love*). Now resident in China for extended periods, his new work embraces the dilemmas of cultural displacement, a perspective that allows Tan to observe and report with the acuity of a recent arrival. The animated video *The Depth of Ease* (2007) extends the metaphor of the vehicle and introduces the three wheeled 'sanluche', "a home-made people carrier, illegal and unsafe"ⁱⁱⁱ but for Tan, a nostalgic remnant of improvisational ingenuity in a frugal community increasingly defined by the language of global design and the Faustian bargain of enhanced material options exchanged for loss of local forms and regional culture

Julie Bartholomew's view of Western culture and its impacts in China is somewhat more ambivalent. During residency periods in China, Bartholomew has traced the advance of global brand marketing and the dissemination of its seductive message in the hushed, climate controlled pavilions of designer boutiques and superstores. On the street, however, she points to the subversion of Western models through the "deliberate and playful misuse of global language [and] brand logos"^{iv} and the enduring co-existence of traditional cultural forms alongside contemporary alternatives, despite the pressures of precipitous modernisation. *Vuitton Dynasty* (2008) and *Qing Prada* (2008) take the form of women's accessories, a reference to the body as a locus for expressions of cultural change. *Vuitton Dynasty*, cast from Chinese copies of latest-release European designer goods, is over stamped with digital decal images of women drawn from Sung Dynasty paintings, while *Qing Prada* is modelled on traditional objects in a museum setting, the clay artefacts carved with the designer logo and wrapped in the lushness of an Imperial Jingdezhen glaze.

While Bartholomew is optimistic about the capacity for China to maintain cultural autonomy, Taiwanese artist **Ching Yuan Chang** argues for artistic forms uncoupled from the security of traditional models and mainland authority. Chang's ceramic work refers to the location – and dislocation – of Taiwanese cultural identity. His recent juror's report for the 2008 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale speaks of Taiwanese self awareness, asserting that the country "has pulled away from its supposed destiny as an 'extension' of the culture of the Central Plains of China"^v, Chang exhorts Taiwanese artists to re-negotiate a relationship with

their own culture and abandon the comfort of resisting change. *Mislocated Matrix* (2009) is an expression of these values and his call for self reflection; a reference to the inner ego as a source and motivation for creativity, independent from the matrix of a hegemonic culture.

A re-evaluation of this order, triggered by extended separation from her home country, lies at the heart of **Ying-Yueh Chuang's** recent practice. Now resident in Canada, Chuang speaks of the legacy she has abandoned since leaving her native Taiwan and that which she has preserved. She identifies this personal recalibration in a Western setting as a form of conscientious selection not dissimilar from the strategy of natural adaptation in the biological world. Chuang, an inveterate collector of the botanical and marine forms she finds in her new environment, brings to these objects both forensic observation and an exuberant imagination to invent colourful hybrid confections that speak as much of her relationship to dual cultures as they do to her fascination with the natural order.

It is said that the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, on reaching Peking in 1601, asked for directions to Cathay, the extravagant land of European fables. Like many others who followed over the centuries, Ricci's expectations were built on tales of a bountiful landscape, fauna of extraordinary variety and a people who emerged from delicate pavilions to enjoy leisured pursuits in a perpetual spring garden – an image that was little modified more than two centuries later in the Willow Pattern of eighteenth Century England. **Wenmin Li**, arriving in Australia from China in 2002 and anticipating a highly sophisticated urban environment, found a similar disjunction between supposition and reality. For Li, the distance between both her homeland and her expectations of Sydney provoked an intense reassessment of the traditional values of her birthplace. Li's tessellated drawings are deeply personal: they are an account of the scope and detail of her daily life and the excavation of a new definition of self in a disrupted environment. Like the 'chinoiserie' tile constructions of seventeenth century Europe, the works casually juxtapose objects from both Eastern and Western contexts to produce a singular domestic landscape. Defined by the series title 'Reaching Likeness through Unlikeness' they convey not only the resolution of a relationship between East and West, but the painter approaching her narrative drawings through the unfamiliar medium of ceramics.

Douglas Cham's experience of displacement in the Australian setting is the catalyst for his 'Banana Kids' series. The title invokes the barbed description "yellow on the outside, white on the inside" applied by first generation immigrants to Australian-born Chinese deemed to embrace Western cultural forms at the expense of traditional values. Chan's grouping of twelve native Australian animals, configured as oversize chopstick holders, are assembled in three discrete families, each member ascribed a range of personal qualities developed from Cham's sardonic assessment of Australian stereotypes fused with Chinese beliefs about particular animal types. Originally exhibited as a vast table setting conforming to the protocols of a traditional Chinese restaurant, the work for *Another Silk Road* includes a selection of the chopstick holders and documentary video footage referring to inter-ethnic tension in Australia that parodies the more banal loops screening in local restaurants across the country.

Guanghui Chen is a ceramic artist and educator, part of the bustling contemporary arts environment of Shanghai. Chen's recent work invokes the form of the chair, looming oversized thrones frequently installed as a single element in cavernous architectural settings they are dramatic, arresting, yet somehow intimate. For Chen, the allure of the chair is personalised: "like meeting a stranger who you feel you've met before".^{vi}

And meeting strangers is particularly important to Chen who has forged a reputation for generating lively collaborative projects that routinely draw Western artists to Shanghai. His '2010 China-China' program comprising exhibitions and a documentary film, underscores the slippage between the English word for his country of origin and the generic term for the porcelain it has provided to an enthusiastic Western market over four centuries. The artists of *Another Silk Road*, like those of the 'China-China' project, debate the realities of cultural affiliation, displacement and exchange in a world that has shifted from "a time when the journey between continents, between cultures, was ... arduous and undertaken by few"^{vii} to a period of proximity and accelerated interchange. It is, however, a world in which The Silk Road metaphor retains its potency as definitions of East and West resist the impact of global commerce and refuse to blur.

ⁱ Liz Magor, "Making China in China", <http://paulmathieu.ca> accessed 28 May, 2009

ⁱⁱ Paul Mathieu, email to Jacqueline Clayton, 2 June, 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Laurens Tan, email to Jacqueline Clayton, 25 May, 2009

^{iv} Julie Bartholomew (2008) *Zhongjian: Midway* exhibition catalogue, Wollongong City Gallery touring exhibition, p 102

^v http://www.ceramics.tpc.gov.tw/biennale2008/en/essay01_04.html, accessed 6 February, 2009

^{vi} Guanghui Chen, exhibition catalogue, September 16 – October 15, 2006, twocities gallery, Shanghai

^{vii} Guanghui Chen, '2010 China-China', project statement, p1