Ceramics as Matrix. Sean Lean's 'China'

- Adeena Mey

> 臨摹宋體落款時卻惦記著妳
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> *While I am imitating the Song inscription I'm thinking of you*
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> - 周杰倫 / Jay Chou – 青花瓷 'Blue and White Porcelain' (2007)

Taiwanese Mandopop superstar Jay Chou's hit *Blue and White Porcelain*'s music video stages a woman and a man at an antique auction who, as both bid for the same vase, exchange gazes. A couple in a past life set in ancient China, the vase is the symbol of their separation and reconnection across history and the present. The *Qīnghuā* vase is archetypal of blue and white porcelain, a genericity echoed in the song's refusal to anchor the couple to a specific dynasty. In this regard, the *Qīnghuā* vase acts as a condensed signifier of classical Chinese culture and is easily recognisable, to Chinese, diasporic Chinese and non-Chinese alike, as an artefact that has travelled across centuries of the Middle Kingdom's history – much like the enduring bond between the song's two main protagonists. In a context more directly related to what concerns us here, writing about artist and entrepreneur Caroline Cheng, art historian Alex Burchmore contends that in her work, china (the material), serves 'as a gateway to China' (the nation). Further commenting on the metonymic function, of 'china' with regards Cheng, Burchmore further argues that her practice 'relies on the slippage of meaning between these terms, promoting an image of China that is essentially a fabrication but, from a distance, gives the impression of a restorative wholeness.'[1]

Mobilised from pop music to contemporary art – or back to the seventeenth century and the emergence of *Chinoiserie* –[2] ceramics functions as an immediate index of cultural reference, even when the histories it invokes are imagined or fictionalised. In this framework, ceramics become less a medium than a conceptual apparatus, a surface onto which fantasies of 'Chineseness' are projected and unfold. What is more, the histories carried by porcelain are

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[1] Alex Burchmore, *New Export China: Translations across Time and Place in Contemporary Chinese Porcelain Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), p. 170.
[2] See for instance: Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: John Murray, 1961).

neither purely Chinese nor self-contained. Ceramics moved through inter-Asian circuits, propelled as much by Muslim, Malay, Bornean and Philippine networks as by imperial Chinese policies.[3] These were not one-way flows from a civilisational centre to its periphery, but reciprocal exchanges in which Chinese ceramics circulated through Malay, Muslim and indigenous island economies, accruing meanings far beyond the kilns that produced them.

Lean's practice emerges precisely in the heterogeneity of this conceptual field. But what sets his work apart is to work with ceramics beyond the materiality of ceramics. Indeed, Lean is neither a contemporary artist working with ceramics, nor a contemporary ceramic artist exploring the potentials of Chinese tradition or attempting to update it for our present moment. Lean works through material translation by cutting silhouettes of auctioned porcelain pieces into metal, rendering inherited motifs through automotive paint, allowing rust to intrude where glaze should be. His objects do not restore tradition; they simulate it through replicating the palette, motifs and patina of the models he references while distancing himself from the latter by rigorously recombining them. But Lean's relationship to China also stems from the reference to 'china' – the word used by the West when it encountered porcelain and which remained as its generic name – as the paradoxical point of departure for his work. Describing himself as a 'westernised kid'[4], the artist's gaze towards China can thus be seen as having always being mediated by the West.

To locate his work within its context is to recognise the layered nature of Chineseness in Malaysia, a hybridity that precedes contemporary global mobility and extends back through centuries of regional movement. Lean's family history itself follows the established route from southern Fujian to the Malay Peninsula, part of the demographic current that also moved ceramics, textiles and foodways across the region – trajectories that, in his work, are re-oriented and reimagined. Indeed, in many of his works – most notably the *China* (2022) and *Colored* (2024) series – the ceramic vessel appears as a flattened profile, a contour extracted from auction catalogues or museum photography and translated onto metal plates. These shapes echo the standard repertory of export porcelain: bottles, vases, dishes whose silhouettes are legible even when stripped of glaze, decoration and volume. Yet Lean's

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[3] See for instance art historian Barbara Harrisson's account of maritime exchange across the South China Sea who writes that *"*close tributary relations with Ming China, as well as familial ties with Muslim Malacca and in the Philippines enabled Brunei to play a leading role in the regional trade during the fifteenth century*"*. Barbara Harrisson, "The Ceramic Trade Across the South China Sea c. AD 1350–1650," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 76, no. 1 (2003): 99.

[4] Conversation with Sean Lean, 17 September 2025.

relationship to these forms is not that of a potter returning to a lost craft.[5] He does not go to Jingdezhen to learn from the kilns or to "reconnect" with an origin. Instead, he encounters the objects much as any contemporary viewer might: through reproductions and digital images, among other vehicles. In this sense, his work belongs less to a lineage of Chinese ceramic art than to a broader, trans-Asian field in which objects and images migrate together, and where identity is constructed in the wake of these migrations rather than at their point of departure.

What is more, Lean's practice emerges within a history always already marked by replication. European chinoiserie, Dutch and German porcelain, and British "china" all developed through acts of imitation; Lean's engagement with porcelain silhouettes acknowledges this genealogy without attempting to correct or revoke it. Working from digital images and auction reproductions, he produces what he calls a "fake": as he put it "I'm trying to pay my dues in a rather clumsy way by retracing the footsteps of my ancestors, trying to recreate the image as faithfully as possible. But in the end it's still fake – the material is fake."[6] One could argue that the fidelity he pursues is therefore not technical but conceptual: he repeats the gesture of reproduction, foregrounding the distance inherent to diasporic knowledge. As he notes, he approaches Chinese motifs "as an outsider," despite his ancestry – a position shaped as much by schoolbooks and paternal expectations as by any inherited craft. This sense of exteriority unsettles the assumption that diasporic artists return to authenticity. For Lean, copying is not a deviation from origins; it is the structure through which "China" has been encountered in Southeast Asia. The porcelain outline he traces is doubly mediated – first through centuries of export, then through his own translation into metal.

Filial obligation adds a more intimate texture to this distance. Lean recalls the pressure of a rigorous Chinese upbringing and the persistent feeling of falling short. Early works that reproduce porcelain motifs are, by his own account, attempts at "paying dues," even as they insist on rupture. The vase form, cut into metal, appears reverent yet is literally split open. The act of cutting becomes a means of inhabiting the role of "Chinese son" while simultaneously refusing the image of Chineseness he inherited. After his father's passing, this burden loosens. The silhouettes remain, but without the didactic weight of cultural debt; they become one material among others through which inherited forms might be re-routed. Rather than framing inheritance as a return, Lean's work casts it as a negotiation – one that passes

[5] Who are the subject of Burchmore's study cited above, for instance.
[6] Conversation with Sean Lean, *op. cit.*

through resistance, ambivalence and a cautious relief. The cut metal vase registers this tension: not reconciliation, but a diagram of the compromises required to live with a past that is both imposed and desired.

In this regard, material translation intensifies this ambiguity. Metal and automotive paint – initially chosen out of practicality – become productive miscasts. Rendered in steel, the porcelain silhouette shifts registers: from fragile vessel to industrial chassis. The surface mimics glaze yet shows welding marks, screws and brackets; the work oscillates between icon and infrastructure. Lean's refusal of the "right" material exposes how much cultural authenticity depends on surface, and how easily surface can migrate across technical regimes. The chart-like panels that accompany certain works, documenting layers of automotive paint, invert the secrecy of glaze recipes and treat cultural form as an algorithm – repeatable, adjustable, never pure. Rust advances this logic further. Unsealed metal begins to oxidise, interrupting the timelessness associated with porcelain. Rust brings the object into the present tense, recording humidity, climate and place. Crucially, it develops unpredictably, introducing a non-sovereignty – an openness to contingency and change – that undoes fantasies of mastery. As Lean notes, the rust "grew and covered" sections he left bare, transforming the work over time. The steel remembers its environment more faithfully than any cultural lineage it is asked to bear. In this sense, rust becomes a figure of temporal inheritance: the longer a form is held, the more it stains, shifts, loses edges. In Lean's triptychs, pristine and corroded panels coexist, staging the tension between ideal image and decaying support. Heritage appears neither intact nor dissolved, but held in an ongoing state of transformation.

This tension finds an echo in the late Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Lê's own relationship to ceramics and historical objects, his passion for Vietnamese, Southeast Asian and Chinese ceramics stemming from their capacity to carry historical knowledge: "These objects are part of Vietnam's history, my history" Dinh stated in an interview.[7] For both artists, ceramics operate not as static emblems of the past but as unstable containers of memory, migration and loss. If Lê collects to preserve a history endangered by political erasure, Lean samples, cuts, paints and rusts inherited forms to expose the gaps, mediations and disjunctions that constitute cultural transmission. He takes as his point of departure a pre-existing image from the dispersed field of Chinese export ceramics – objects encountered

[7] Alexandra A. Seno, "The Collector: Dinh Q. Le—The Vietnamese-American Artist Talks About Loss and Hoarding," *Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 2009, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB125075355676845609. See also Zoe Butt, "Dinh Q. Lê in Conversation with Zoe Butt," *Guggenheim UBS MAP: Perspectives*, January 22, 2013, https://www.guggenheim.org/articles/map/dinh-q-le-in-conversation-with-zoe-butt.

through museum reproductions, auction images and familial memory. Rather than returning to a stable craft lineage, Lean mobilises ceramics as a matrix – semiotic–material–historical – the vase silhouette, blue-and-white ornament, and the centuries-long circulation of porcelain across inter-Asian trade routes. To use a commonplace, his practice unfolds as a strategy of translation, one associated as much with post-conceptualist appropriation as with the iterative reworking of forms already saturated with cultural, political and diasporic meaning. As a matrix, ceramics enables endless permutations – permutations not grounded in technical fidelity or visual likeness, but in the layered histories these objects have accrued through migration, copying and use.

Crucially, Lean is not concerned with quoting or re-contextualising a ceramic original so much as with exposing the mediations through which "porcelain" has been made to signify "China." In *Colored* (2024), Lean's engagement with export porcelain extends into a more explicit confrontation with the Western gaze and its textual imaginaries which once framed China as object of curiosity and racialisation. Each work in the series – *Yellow (G. F. Davidson, 1846)*, *Yielding Grace (Sir George Staunton, 1797)*, *Dragon (Elijah Coleman Bridgman, 1840)*, *Third Generation (Sir George Staunton, 1797)*, *Chaste and Modest (George Ernest Morrison, 1895)* and *Oracles (Matteo Ricci, 1583–1610)* – draws its title from fragments of colonial travel accounts, excerpts that Lean isolates, enlarges and transplants from their documentary contexts onto vessel silhouettes. In the source material he prepared for these works, the phrases – "the dragon too is rousing," "she is incomparably more chaste and modest," "resembling hog's bristles," "nothing gives them greater pleasure than the sullen and insolent rejection of the foreign devil," "seldom continue … beyond the third generation," or "oracles are received through the voices of little children" – appear embedded in semi-transparency. Textual silhouettes on ceramic export wares' deconstructed silhouettes, they expose how porcelain served not only as commodity but as a surface onto which the West projected moral judgement, ethnographic fantasy and racial typology. This is intensified by Lean's interrupting the continuity of the vessel by cutting them into triptychs, literally figuring what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha termed 'Third Space', namely a space "which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation."[8] Both the vessel and these descriptions are rendered unstable, split, dematerialised and subjected to a chromatic logic that oscillates

[8] Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 211.

between glaze-like gloss and industrial flatness and objectivity. *Colored* thus makes legible the textual substrate beneath centuries of Western collecting and imagining, turning the vase into a reading apparatus rather than one of beholding.

Lean's sustained engagement with export wares, their silhouettes and their photographic reproductions affects not only how we read the historical objects but also the conditions under which his own works come into being. Ceramics, in his hands, become a means of thinking the relation between the contemporary and the *longue durée* of trans-Asian exchange: not as a vertical descent from origin to present, but as a horizontal field of circulation in which forms are continually remade. In this sense, the temporal relationship of Lean's work to the history it invokes is not one of inheritance but of adjacency – an ongoing negotiation with a past that persists less as a coherent tradition than as a network of fragments, images and materials that continue to travel.

Adeena Mey, PhD, is a writer, curator and educator. His work explores contemporary art and visual cultures in East and Southeast Asia, artists' moving image, and exhibitionary contexts in relation to cosmopolitical and cosmotechnical thoughts. His curatorial projects have been presented at KCCUK (London), Medrar for Contemporary Art (Cairo), Centre d'Art Neuchâtel (Switzerland), and Post Territory Ujeongguk (Seoul), among others. He is the co-editor of several anthologies on artists' films, videos and exhibitions histories, including Exhibiting the Moving Image. History Revisited and Cinema in the Expanded Field (both with JRP Editions, 2015). Since 2021 he has been co-convening the workshop series "Writing and Publishing Art in Southeast Asia" supported by the British Academy. He is Managing Editor of Afterall journal and a Research Fellow at the Afterall Research Centre, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, and a visiting lecturer at HEAD-Geneva University of Art and Design.