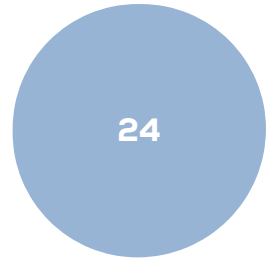




INSTYTUT  
KULTURY  
POLSKIEJ



## View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

**title:**

"Splendid Deformities". An Emancipatory Critique of Cultural Homogeneity in Sin-ying Ho's Deformed Ceramics

**author:**

Alex Burchmore

**source:**

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 24 (2019)

**URL:**

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2019/24-de-formations/splendid-deformities>

**publisher:**

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

**affiliation:**

Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences

## **"Splendid Deformities". An Emancipatory Critique of Cultural Homogeneity in Sin-ying Ho's Deformed Ceramics**

If these observations are rightly founded, what shall we say of the taste and judgment of those, who spend their lives and their fortunes in collecting pieces where neither perspective, nor proportion, nor conformity to nature are thought of or observed; I mean the extravagant lovers and purchasers of CHINA [and] the exorbitant prices given for these SPLENDID DEFORMITIES.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Warton (1722–1800)

Porcelain is often considered an aesthetically "perfect" material, its elegance self-evident in the uniform contours of vessels created for China's emperors and now coveted by collectors within and beyond the country's borders. It is often forgotten that such vessels derive from a process of making in which irregularities are unavoidable and sometimes embraced as expressions of the alchemical metamorphosis of clay into ceramic. For every flawless vessel, thousands leave the kiln cracked, discolored, warped, or otherwise deformed. Alongside the canonical history of ceramic perfection, this equally venerable and even more prolific heritage of deformity poses a challenge to the hegemonic valorization of a faultless homogeneity. To a certain extent, this history has been exposed and adopted by many modern and contemporary artists over the past century, in China and elsewhere, as a primary source for the development of an "avant-garde" ceramic art. Yet despite the frequent discussion of works by such acknowledged luminaries of the deformed as Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, and Lucio Fontana in contemporary writing on ceramics, conventional histories of the medium remain tied to a narrative that Garth Clark has affectionately satirized as "a warm and nostalgic trip

through glaze discoveries and quaint old pottery studios, accompanied by pictures of charming, non-threatening pots," in which all "rancor, unpleasant images or disquieting points of view" are carefully avoided.<sup>2</sup> Porcelain, in the popular imagination and scholarly reckoning, likewise remains defined by the qualities of fragility, delicacy, and refined elegance associated with the enduring stereotype of "the Ming vase," recently deconstructed and interrogated by ceramics scholar Stacey Pierson.<sup>3</sup>

The usually hidden heritage of ceramic deformity is similarly deconstructed and interrogated by Hong Kong-born, New York-based artist Sin-ying Ho, whose composite ceramic sculptures are defiantly amorphous and imperfect. While the work of Voukos, Arneson, Fontana, and other avant-gardist ceramicists can and has been viewed primarily as a contemporary irruption into the otherwise linear development of ceramics as "an art of evolution and not revolution," Ho compels recognition of deformation as a continuous presence in the history of the medium.<sup>4</sup> Her creative method provides a vivid analogy for this deconstructive ambition: using a molding technique in which formally perfect, wheel-thrown vessels are dissected and recombined, she creates sculptural objects that evoke several categories of historical ceramic deformity, defined here as a deviation from expected norms, through lack, mutilation, or excess.

The first category of historical ceramic deformity evoked by Ho's work is the classification of pieces disfigured in the kiln as "wasters," usually regarded with contempt and discarded. In the imperial factories at Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, the former "Porcelain Capital" of China where Ho creates her work, all misfires were required by law to be destroyed to prevent imitation or unauthorized sale. Ho's method of dissecting and recombining vessels reverses this convention, rendering the

deformed desirable while degrading formal perfection to little more than an initial stage in the creative process. A related category of deformity, that of "kiln transmutations" or *yaobian* – wares that have malformed during firing but remain visually appealing – is conventionally held in higher regard. From at least the twelfth century, these were explained by Chinese connoisseurs as a result of divine intervention, and yet, like wasters, were customarily destroyed until the imperially sponsored imitation in the eighteenth century of one type of *yaobian* defused its transgressive potential. Although Ho's sculptures could be interpreted as a comparably artful simulation of chance distortions, rather than seeking to control these effects, she embraces their challenge to normative aesthetics. Unpredictable alchemical transformation is central to her use of digital decal transfers and *terra sigillata* glaze effects, while a certain spontaneity is always involved in the construction of her work.

The final category of ceramic deformity evoked by Ho's sculptures also flourished during the eighteenth century, although in the very different setting of Augustan England: the transcultural aesthetic of chinoiserie and the China Trade that inspired it. While eighteenth-century England is far removed from twenty-first-century New York, Ho has long noted a connection between her work and the history of Chinese export ceramics. Such imported wares and the chinoiserie objects they inspired were routinely derided by aesthetes of the 1700s as deformed. Like Ho's sculptures, Chinese and Chinese-inspired ceramics were caught between cultures, as products of exchange and (mis)translation unable to conform to neo-classical ideals of decorum and purity. For eighteenth-century critics, they perhaps appeared comparable to the "sea sculptures" now often found in shipwrecked cargoes of export ware: fusions of ceramics, crustaceans, and sediment that mirror the accretions of diverse

motifs with which Ho ornaments her work. Each of these objects – eighteenth-century chinoiserie exotica, twenty-first-century sculpture, and salvaged shipwreck cargo – are distorted not only in appearance but also in cultural derivation, defiantly multiple in origin.

This ambivalent, "in-between" state of being is apparent in every type of ceramic deformity and can be identified as a defining trait of deformation in general, as well as a central theme in the narrative of diversity evoked by Ho's work. Deformity is transgressive because it exceeds preconceived norms, raising the disruptive possibility of an uncontrollable excess, of meaning beyond rational limits. It implies a dissolution of the boundaries between self and other, and a fusion of multiple entities, perspectives, or states of being. At the same time, it also exposes the innate flaws within the idea of essential form by revealing the ease with which perfection can be disfigured, either by external forces or internal pressures. Transposed into a cultural realm of inquiry, an analogy could be drawn with the distinction between monocultural and transcultural perspectives – between the idea that cultures are self-contained, and the recognition that they are composite creations of mutual interaction.<sup>5</sup> For Edward Said, these opposed visions of culture correspond to "two historiographies, one linear and subsuming, the other contrapuntal and often nomadic."<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, a desire for isolationist purity and preservation of an alleged cultural essence; on the other, an embrace of diversity, including a realization of the multiple strands of experience united within personal identity, as well as an acknowledgment that "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic."<sup>7</sup> This mirrors the division in the history of ceramics noted in the opening paragraph of this paper, between a comforting ideal of linear

development and the discomforting recognition that imperfection and deformity have always been present in the genealogy of the medium. Ho's composite ceramic sculptures, at the intersection of the historical and the contemporary as well as the boundary between cultures, vividly reveal this heritage.

## Defining the deformed

Deformity has historically attracted a diverse range of responses, from deferential awe to abject revulsion. In Pharaonic Egypt, where even divinities like the jackal-headed Anubis could be considered malformed fusions of animal and human features, deformity was revered as a sign of divine favor. In ancient Greece and Rome, on the other hand, reflecting a cultural fascination with bodily perfection as an index of inner virtue, deformed or disabled people were regarded at best as morally reprehensible, and at worst as omens of disaster. These attitudes endured throughout medieval Europe, where Christian thinking associated deformity with sin, religious or cultural difference, even psychological instability.<sup>8</sup> In ancient China, widespread conflict, civil unrest, and the use of mutilation as a criminal punishment increased the population of the disfigured to such an extent that "an undamaged physical appearance was the exception [...] and it is likely that a perfect physique attracted considerably more attention than a mutilated or deformed one."<sup>9</sup> A negative, portentous view of deformity did develop later, however, during the Spring and Autumn (771–475 BCE) and Warring States (475–221 BCE) eras.<sup>10</sup> Social and cultural attitudes toward deformity, then, can take many forms, some remarkably similar while others are radically divergent, yet all reflect the norms of the contexts in which they developed.

Even the English term "deformity" is difficult to clearly define. In a recent article for the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, philosopher Panos Paris observed that the reasons for terming an object or person deformed have not been adequately justified by aesthetic theorists, likely due to the "unpleasant, uncomfortable and perhaps unsettling" decisions involved.<sup>11</sup> Attempting an initial analysis, Paris notes a historical association with ugliness, explaining that "deformed" was once the preferred description for that which was considered ugly, and that it appears frequently in foundational aesthetic treatises like *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) by Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), and *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740) by David Hume (1711–1776). This alignment of the ugly and deformed persists in the many synonyms for ugliness that imply deformity: "disfigured, malformed, contorted, distorted [...] mutilated, spoiled, blemished, incoherent, disunified, and disharmonious."<sup>12</sup> Frank Sibley, one of the few modern philosophers to propose a definition of deformity, explained the latter in "Some Notes on Ugliness" as either encompassing

Abnormalities and distortions [...] covered by a whole range of notions [...] like distorted, defective, defiled, soiled, mutilated, discoloured, blotchy, withered, scarred, disfigured, emaciated, swollen, bloated, [...] stunted, dwarfed, wizened, decaying, mouldering, blighted, festering, and a host of others indicative of abnormality or defect in shape, colour, size, health, growth,<sup>13</sup> etc.

More succinctly, he subsequently asserted that it could be rationalized as "some departure by way of exaggeration, extravagance, or discolouring, being too this or too that, swollen, bulging, twisted [...] from a norm."<sup>14</sup> It is this latter definition that seems most suitable for the analysis of "deformed" works of art: the relatively straightforward assertion that the deformed is

that which deviates in some sense from expected norms.

## Sin-ying Ho's "cut-and-paste" sculptural method and contemporary ceramic deformity

Normative deviation is achieved in Sin-ying Ho's contemporary ceramics practice through her use of a sculptural method that deliberately inverts the desire to erase all defects and instead recognizes the beauty of the deformed. For a series of pieces created between 2004 and 2009, Ho drew on her training as a ceramicist to produce vases, jars, and other conventional vessels to the most refined of classical standards. Rather than firing, glazing, and presenting these as finished works, however, she used them to create plaster casts that she then cut into irregular fragments and reassembled as molds for new, composite forms.<sup>15</sup> Reversing time-honored process, Ho discarded her formally perfect vessels, giving preference instead to their mutant offspring and thereby valorizing the deformed as more desirable than the ideal against which it is usually found to be lacking.

The amorphous and fragmented forms of her first resolved expressions of this method, *Binary code: The link* (2004; fig. 1) and *Matrix no. 1* (2005; figs. 2, 3) indicate no discernible function or unified composition. For *Binary code*, Ho fused a series of vases into a biomorphic sequence of rounded shapes that resembles a spinal column or a strand of DNA. In *Matrix*, bulging curves, attenuated contours, and severed edges taper upward toward an absurdly slender neck, while bodily associations are evoked by the transformation of protruding



Fig.1. Sin-ying Ho, *Binary code: The link*, 2004, porcelain, wheel-thrown and slip-cast, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration, digital decal transfer, and terra sigillata high-fire reduction, 2 x 8 x 1.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



vessel necks into openings that resemble the intestinal valves of a disembodied stomach. The etymology of the title – the Latin *matrix* is most often used to mean “womb” – both confirms this resemblance and evokes the generative chamber of a kiln. Ho thereby alludes to the conventionally dreaded possibility that firing will produce a malformation of the ceramicist’s art, like the fused mass of bowls created in an Egyptian or Syrian kiln during the fourteenth century, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 4). The warped contours and overlapping rims of these vessels echo the arrhythmic fractures of Ho’s sculpture, its silhouette refusing to adhere to the most elementary formal requirements of symmetry and compositional coherence.

Returning to the definitions of deformity offered above, *Binary code* and *Matrix* unashamedly embrace many of the traits listed by Paris and Sibley. Both works are distorted, misshapen, incoherent, and disharmonious, though the formal repetition in *Binary code* does create some semblance of symmetry. Both could be termed extravagant exaggerations of their component parts, warping once-perfect ceramics into distended, dysfunctional fusions, apertures sealed or shifted to an impractical position to prevent either storage or the pouring of liquids for which such vessels are intended. The glazed and ornamented surfaces of both sculptures are also marred by deformity: combining several types and techniques of decoration, their variety causes them to appear blemished, discolored, and blotchy, even blighted and festering, like scabrous or swollen wounds, with glaze accumulating in viscous pools in some areas while elsewhere it peels away, flaking into powder. Against the historical English-language association of deformity with ugliness, however, Ho’s sculptures retain an undeniable beauty in material and composition. Their undulating contours and tactile surfaces invite caress, realigning the ceramic medium with the intimacy of human touch rather than the detached

restraint with which the perfection of porcelain is often associated.

In her embrace of primal tactility and deviation from perfect form, Ho can be positioned as one of many heirs to the twentieth-century development of avant-gardist ceramics. Voulkos is often identified as the founder of this tradition in the US, though a precedent for the trajectory that he established in contemporary ceramics practice can be identified even in the late nineteenth century, in the "unpardonably ugly [...] twisted, broken, torn, and pummeled" ceramics of George E. Ohr (1857–1918).<sup>16</sup> Defiantly crumpled and misshapen, Ohr's idiosyncratic vessels embody many of the defining features of deformity, while the flamboyant persona that he created to accompany his art made a virtue of extravagance and exaggeration. Voulkos, too, with works like his iconic *Rocking Pot* (1956), courted controversy by deliberately distorting and violating the canons of aesthetic perfection by which ceramics were conventionally judged. In the decades between these iconoclastic ceramicists, many European modernists also turned to ceramics in their search for new forms of artistic expression that could disrupt the art-historical canon.<sup>17</sup> This charge was led by Fontana, now primarily celebrated for slashed and pierced canvases paired at the time of their creation with gaudy and disharmonious ceramics like his *Useless Vases* (1947–1949), a jarring assault on the retinas and dictates of good taste, in which function is denied and form is violently contorted. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Arneson, another US-based ceramicist, enthusiastically accepted the dubious honor of becoming the ceramic community's next black sheep after Voulkos, gleefully fusing strident political commentary with aggressively grotesque, repulsive, and erotic forms.

The avant-gardist tradition of ceramics established by these artists has been further developed by contemporary practitioners, many of whom have explicitly sought to define an aesthetics of deformity. US-based Justin Novak, for example, aimed with his *Disfigurines* (1997) to rend "the veneer of delicacy and civility" with which stoneware has conventionally been associated, arranging these malformed and grotesque figures in dramatic tableaux of violence and excess.<sup>18</sup>

Tenille Blair, also based in the US, adopted a similar approach for her *Loathsome Creatures* series (2005), using exaggeration and disfiguration of the body to plumb the repulsive depths of the subconscious. Other artists, like Paul Mathieu and Marek Cecuła, have adopted creative methods similar to those developed by Ho, using molds to create pieces in porcelain in which conventional forms are fragmented or distorted, exemplified by Cecuła's *Mutant* vessels (2000) and Mathieu's *Flower Vase (Matisse)* (2005). Mathieu, along with several other contemporary ceramicists, has also explored many of the same historical lineages of ceramics manufacture and appreciation on which Ho draws to create her composite vessels, from the factories of Ming-dynasty China to the drawing rooms of Augustan England. It is the complexity and diversity of ceramic deformity on display in Ho's work, however, that sets her apart, as well as the extent to which she transforms deformation into a sophisticated aesthetic strategy for communicating an emancipatory narrative of historical, aesthetic, and cultural



Fig. 2. Sin-ying Ho, *Matrix no. 1*, 2005, porcelain, wheel-thrown and slip-cast, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration, digital decal transfer, and terra sigillata high-fire reduction, 20 x 10 x 20 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

subversion. Her composite forms evoke association with multiple categories of deformity in the development of ceramics as an art, which can be usefully summarized here to emphasize the extent to which she enables a thorough deconstruction and interrogation of stereotypes and prejudices within this history.

## Perfection and deformation in China's imperial porcelain factories

Instances of what could be termed deformity have long been recognized in the historical canon of ceramics practice, from the celebrated spontaneity of Tang-dynasty Chinese *sancai* glazes to the renowned Japanese *kintsugi* technique for repairing broken vessels, and the venerable respect for tea bowls defined by idiosyncratic imperfection. As a medium, however, porcelain remains closely tied to the archetypal delicacy, refinement, and otherworldly elegance with which it has been associated for centuries, inside and outside China. The desire for perfection that compelled imperial sponsorship of China's porcelain industry for almost a thousand years is a consummate case-study in the enforcing of a norm and punishment of deviation. In the former "Porcelain Capital" of Jingdezhen, to which Ho, like many contemporary ceramicists, travels to create her work, only the most perfect vessels were deemed fit for the emperor. This mandate to eradicate defects in a manufacturing process already notoriously vulnerable to accident led to an accumulation of imperfect products, including pieces marred by flaws in the clay, dirt, or dust in the glaze, discoloration and, worst of all, sagging, warping, or fusing in the kiln. Firing, when clay and glaze are vitrified by exposure to extreme heat, was the most unpredictable stage in this process and required constant vigilance. Despite such supervision, there was always the chance that improper stacking or fluctuating temperature would result in "thousands of vessels bloated and collapsed into a rock-solid

heap, the kiln owner faced [with] ruin from losing months of labor."<sup>19</sup> Even today, with the benefit of more reliable technology, firing remains a process of trial and error, more likely to destroy the ceramicist's work or to create unexpected distortions than entirely conform to an expected result.

In works like *Binary code* and *Matrix*, Ho deliberately recreates the accidental distortion and fusion of vessels that can occur during firing, implicitly rejecting the pursuit of perfection that drove the porcelain industry for centuries. For the imperial sponsors of this industry, however, the uncertainties of firing were as remote and unimportant as the lives of the ceramicists who labored for them. Their only desire was the creation of flawless pieces, to exact specifications. In Jingdezhen, an imperial presence was first established to ensure this perfection during the Song dynasty (960–1279), with the founding of an office in 1082 to monitor production and punish any irregularities. In the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) oversight was intensified by the founding of a Porcelain Bureau (*ciju*) in 1278, staffed by officials who supervised not only production but also the quality of clay and glaze.<sup>20</sup> During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), supervision attained its peak when the court increased the volume of wares ordered for their use and demanded more difficult designs, some so intricate that fewer than one in a hundred was successful. Even simple wares were



Fig. 3. Sin-ying Ho (b. 1962), *Matrix no. 1* (reverse), 2005, porcelain, wheel-thrown and slip-cast, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration, digital decal transfer, and terra sigillata high-fire reduction, 20 x 10 x 20 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

held to such high standards that only one in ten was accepted – with commissions often exceeding 100,000 pieces a year, this meant there could be as many as ten million rejected. Rather than offering these for sale, however, kiln owners were ordered on pain of death to destroy any piece with the slightest flaw.<sup>21</sup> In a Qing-dynasty (1644–1912) album of ink-on-silk paintings of porcelain production created for the court around 1738, however, all evidence of supervision and the deformities it was intended to prevent is effaced, creating the impression of “an orderly, evenly spaced, and rhythmically paced craft process [as] abstract, generalized [and] transcendent [...] as the final product.”<sup>22</sup>

Ceramic perfection therefore remained the monopoly of the court, while the unpredictability and less-than-perfect results of the ceramicist’s art were, at least in theory, concealed.

Yet the sheer volume of material excess created by this mode of production could not be effaced and has become a defining characteristic of Jingdezhen, interred around, underneath, and even within the very fabric of the city, perhaps inspiring Ho and other contemporary artists to pursue a different objective. Many visitors to the Porcelain Capital have written of the piles of ceramic debris, rivers studded with shards, walls with fragments of earthenware, and streets paved with remnants of flawed vases and bowls.<sup>23</sup> Since the millennial celebration of the city’s founding in 2004, municipal authorities have promoted these sights as tourist attractions, using shards to decorate lamp-posts, traffic lights, and public bins.<sup>24</sup> As early as 1712, when French Jesuit priest *François Xavier d'Entrecolles* (1664–1741) wrote the first of two letters from Jingdezhen that inspired both the rising European porcelain industry and the taste for chinoiserie, the extent of this accumulation proved worthy of comment:

One ordinarily [...] throws [porcelain and furnace debris] on the banks of the river [...] [and] this rubbish, wet by the rain

and pounded by traffic, became at first a place to hold a market, and [...] during great rises of the water level the river carries away much of the broken porcelain; one could say that its bed is completely paved.<sup>25</sup>

The market of which d'Entrecolles wrote here was another unanticipated result of the waste incurred by the pursuit of perfection. Established on a man-made island of ceramic fragments, this emporium for the degraded was comprised predominantly of *zhoudian* or "fringe shops," merchants of opportunity who bought broken or deformed porcelain, repaired the worst flaws, and resold it for a higher price.<sup>26</sup> Although only the finest porcelain was transported from Jingdezhen to the court, pieces deemed unfit for the emperor's use therefore remained a significant presence within the city, an enduring counter-heritage of deformation to which Ho draws attention in works like *Binary code* and *Matrix*.

## Yaobian and the artifice of unpredictability

In addition to their formal resemblance with misfires, the glaze effects that adorn Ho's works evoke comparison with another category of ceramic deformity: the unpredictable phenomenon of *yaobian*, or "kiln-transmutation." Chinese and European definitions of *yaobian* are closely tied to the tension between perfection and deformation in the history of Jingdezhen, and reveal a parallel desire to efface that which exceeds predetermined norms, subsuming the mysterious



Fig. 4. *Bowls*, 14th century, Egypt or Syria, stoneware with painted underglaze decoration. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (11.61.1), public domain



within rationalist frameworks of explanation. The process of firing has long been associated across the world with divine forces, partially because of its volatility but also due to the wonder inspired by the transubstantiation of raw clay. In China, this wonder fostered a long tradition of awed reverence for *yaobian*, a term used since the Song dynasty to refer to a range of transformations.<sup>27</sup> One of the earliest recorded cases was described in 1193 by the scholar Zhou Hui (1126–1198), who reported hearing of ceramics that had taken on a vermilion hue when fired and that artisans had promptly smashed, believing them to be a result of malevolent magic.<sup>28</sup> This early association of *yaobian* with red glaze persisted and was reaffirmed by the European conflation of the term with Qing-dynasty *flambé* ware. Following the example set by ceramics historian Stephen Wootton Bushell (1844–1908), European and North American scholars have persistently transliterated *yaobian* using the French *flambé*, an epithet inspired by the "flashing streaks of crimson and blue, mingling into every intermediate shade of purple" characteristic of this glaze.<sup>29</sup> A deformity once seen as evidence of divine intervention was thereby reduced to artifice, notable for its visual appeal but explicable in empirical terms.

Yet *yaobian* can refer to much more than glaze color, encompassing an almost inexhaustible assortment of miraculous transformations. As Ellen C. Huang makes clear in a recent study of the term, while the association of *yaobian* and *flambé* is not entirely incorrect, it collapses what should be a broad range of meanings into a narrow definition.<sup>30</sup> To clarify this, Huang draws attention to the first European use of the term, in another of d'Entrecolles's letters in which he recalls being shown

[...] a piece of porcelain called *yao-pien* [sic] or *transmutation* [...] caused either by a defect, or from excess heat or some other unknown cause. This piece [...] caused by pure chance, [was] no less beautiful or prized. The worker had planned to



make *soufflé* red vases. One hundred [...] were lost, [yet  
this one] came from the kiln resembling a piece of agate.<sup>31</sup>

While the specific case of *yaobian* to which d'Entrecolles refers does involve red wares, Huang notes that he used both the French and Chinese terms, and so retained the latter's wide-ranging connotations. She also observes that his letter was written in 1722, at least a decade before the creation of *flambé* wares during the later Yongzheng reign (1722–1735).<sup>32</sup> It is likely, then, that d'Entrecolles intended to evoke the broader definition of *yaobian* prevalent during the Ming dynasty, when the Song understanding of the term expanded to include transformations in form and substance. Hangzhou-based merchant Gao Lian (fl. 16th century), for example, wrote in 1591 of vessels that had mutated to resemble "butterflies, birds, fish, phoenix, and leopards."<sup>33</sup> Scholar Tang Bingjun (fl. 18th century), in the Qing dynasty, recorded an especially strange case in which a screen transformed into a bed during its first firing, then a boat when fired again.<sup>34</sup> These and other tales elevate the misfire to the miraculous, redeeming its transgressive potential by reinterpreting it as evidence of divine intervention; nevertheless, most recorded instances end with the destruction of the transmuted object.

The Qing-dynasty development of *flambé* wares, however, subjected the unpredictability of *yaobian* to rigorous analysis, reducing the miraculous to a simulation that presages Ho's use of molds and glaze effects to mimic chance mutation. Huang explains that *flambé* glaze appealed to the Qing aesthetic valorization of the eclectic as a reflection of a diverse society, while their artifice offered a reassurance that multiplicity could be controlled and contained.<sup>35</sup> The same could be said of the fractured surfaces of Ho's sculptures, likewise unified by a juxtaposition of multiple types of glaze. *Binary code* and *Matrix*, for example, combine underglaze cobalt-blue designs, the crackle

and rough texture of *terra sigillata*, and the contrasting red of digital decal transfers. The latter is another technique Ho developed to suit her personal aesthetic. To create these, she digitally designs (or appropriates) a motif, then uses a laser printer to transfer it, in black-and-white, onto a sheet of acetate. This is soaked in warm water to detach the image, which can be transferred onto a ceramic surface using a printer's brayer. Finally, the ceramic is glazed and re-fired in a low-temperature kiln. This second firing causes the iron particles in the ink to oxidize, taking on a red hue that resembles the copper-based pigments used in *flambé* glazes. After perfecting this process at Louisiana State University in 2001, Ho adopted it as a signature technique, an ideal means to express tension between "old and new [...] technology and hand tools."<sup>36</sup> Another tension could be identified between initial control and the surrendering to chance that recreates the Qing-dynasty harnessing of *yaobian* – both decal transfers and *terra sigillata* are subject to transmutation (or deformation) when exposed to the heat of the kiln.

In contrast to the artisans responsible for *flambé* glazes, however, Ho doesn't seek to restrain the unexpected but retains the mystery of *yaobian* by refusing to confine her ceramics to easily legible forms or ornamentation. Her defiantly amorphous, dysfunctional, and eclectic sculptures instead recall Ming-dynasty understandings of *yaobian* as an inexplicable expression of divine forces, contorting the clay into fantastic shapes. As such, her works elevate deformation into a deliberate aesthetic and valorize deformity as a desirable trait, signifying a fluid multiplicity in which diverse elements fuse and mingle without being contained within a unified composition or subordinated to an external ideal. A parallel could be drawn here with the ancient association of deformity with divinity. Just as deformed or disabled people were once revered as conduits to a realm beyond mortal comprehension, or recipients of

supernatural endorsement, so Ho's deformed sculptures are paeans to the unknown and ciphers of transcendental power. Far from provoking disgust or derision, the mysterious forces of transmutation that they invoke instead arouse wonder and fascination.

## The monstrous aesthetics of chinoiserie

Another historical precedent for Ho's sculptures that sheds further light on their transgressive potential is the eighteenth-century European development of chinoiserie as a mutable form of aesthetic expression opposed to neo-classical trends. While this taste for Chinese and Chinese-inspired objects is far removed in time and location from Ho's practice, many of her works were conceived as responses to the export trade between China and Europe that first inspired chinoiserie. From a steady stream of ceramics, silk, lacquer, and other luxuries, this exchange rapidly expanded in the eighteenth century to satisfy a taste for exoticism among the elite and, increasingly, a middle class enriched by new commercial opportunities, achieving its peak in the 1750s.<sup>37</sup> Three centuries later, Ho was inspired to use ceramics, especially blue-and-white porcelain, by her study of this history and the "cross-cultural fertilisation" it represents.<sup>38</sup> Her earliest pieces, such as *Identity* (2001; fig. 5), are intended to resemble export ware, and draw inspiration for form and ornament from her study of trade ceramics in museum collections.<sup>39</sup> In addition then to the Chinese



Fig. 5. Sin-ying Ho, *Identity*, 2001, porcelain, wheel-thrown, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration and digital decal transfer, 38 x 30.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

imperial disregard for misfires and desire to rationalize the mystery of *yaobian*, the transgressive potential of Ho's work can also be identified with the China Trade and the related aesthetics of chinoiserie.

Rather than specific objects involved in the eighteenth-century passion for all things Chinese, it is the challenge these objects presented to established canons of taste that finds reflection in Ho's sculptures. Writing of the Chinese style in eighteenth-century England, David Porter has observed that chinoiserie arose alongside "the invention [...] of a newly sanctified sphere of high culture inhabited by the self-proclaimed inheritors of the classical mantle," predicated on the preservation of "the correct taste – pure, universal, and unchanging."<sup>40</sup> This championing of aesthetic distinction was provoked by the wealth and status asserted by those traditionally denied access to polite society, who increasingly enjoyed some measure of social mobility in an economy defined by the consumption of luxury goods rather than breeding. For detractors, public fascination with chinoiserie was one of the most egregious manifestations of an inability to distinguish the tasteful from the obscene, "a breeding ground for grotesque [and] barbarous forms [with a] flagrant disregard for classical precepts of measured simplicity and grace."<sup>41</sup> The 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the most vehement critics of chinoiserie, best expressed the issues at stake, asserting that only "a man of breeding and politeness" could distinguish "merit and virtue" from "deformity and blemish."<sup>42</sup> Supporters of the style, on the other hand, such as architect and garden designer William Chambers (1723–1796), who travelled to Guangzhou in the 1740s and became an ardent student of Chinese design, wrote of chinoiserie as a new possibility for aesthetic expression. Chambers celebrated the rich diversity, apparent disorder, and "pleasing, horrid and enchanted" sensuality of the Chinese taste as an antidote to "the dullness and insipidity of the everyday" and the limitations of neo-

classicism.<sup>43</sup> Although radically divergent in their assessment of chinoiserie, Chambers and Shaftesbury, along with other writers on aesthetics, were united in their definition of the style as one of deformity and disfigurement, in contrast to the prevailing values of order, harmony, and formal perfection.

A parallel can be drawn here with the Chinese imperial desire to excise all imperfections from the messy process of porcelain production. The European elite of the eighteenth century also endorsed symmetry, proportion, "uniformity amidst variety," and a "correspondency of parts" as desirable aesthetic standards, rejecting any deviation from these norms as repulsive, fit only for destruction.<sup>44</sup> As Roger Lund explains in one of the few analyses of this topic, these norms were applied not only to art but also to the human form as an incarnation of personal virtue. For European aesthetes of the eighteenth century, just as a beautiful figure and countenance signified "truth and goodness," deformity warned of "wickedness and falsehood."<sup>45</sup> Transposing this distaste for deformity onto luxury goods, chinoiserie was denigrated by critics like Joseph Warton as the "monstrous offspring of wild imagination, undirected by nature and truth."<sup>46</sup> Deformity, in bodies and objects, was a disruptive force that threatened to shatter the classical order imagined by the arbiters of taste, just as the volatility of the ceramics-making process frustrated the imperial Chinese desire for perfection. In both cases, it was the potential of the deformed to challenge the prevailing order and provide an alternative system of values that rendered it transgressive and necessitated its suppression, containment, or obliteration.

The most deviant and transgressive qualities of chinoiserie are recalled in the bulging contours and over-ornamented surfaces of Ho's ceramics. Porter identifies three defining qualities of the style: "exaggerated concern with superficial prettiness," an "inescapable hybridity [guided] not [by] purity and integrity but thorough-going mongrelisation," and "unmistakable exoticism."<sup>47</sup> Chinese porcelain was regarded during the eighteenth century as quintessentially superficial and gaudy, emblematic of lustful pleasure, vanity, irrational fantasies, and a lack of substance.<sup>48</sup> For Ho, however, the ostentatious visual appeal and whimsy of porcelain are among its most attractive characteristics, and her work is distinguished by the care she devotes to ornament, covering the surfaces of her sculptures with compositions of unashamedly extravagant design. Her decision to confine these to a palette of contrasting blue and red is also driven by a desire to render her work as striking as possible, calculated to enchant the eye rather than provoke a "deeper" search for meaning. Even *Identity*, her most conventional piece, derives aesthetic effect from the finely painted motifs covering its surface. This broad-shouldered, round-bodied vessel, closely resembling a conventional Chinese *guan* or wine jar, is ornamented with a mixture of floral motifs, foliate medallions, a wave-pattern band, and a conventional wish for prosperity, status, and longevity (*fu lu shou*) around the collar. Ho has described this patterning as a camouflage to lull viewers into complacency, believing this to be "just another export ware."<sup>49</sup> On closer inspection, however, the horizontal bands that separate the motifs are revealed to be a repetition of



Fig. 6. Sin-ying Ho, *Identity* (detail), 2001, porcelain, wheel-thrown, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration and digital decal transfer, 38 x 30.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

the word "CASSANDRA," Ho's chosen English name, while the motifs themselves dissolve into a transliteration of her Cantonese name in Chinese characters and English letters (fig. 6). In addition to the extravagance of the decoration, then, cascading across the voluptuous curves of the jar, Ho suggests the transgressive incorporation of that most allegedly pure form of signification – the written word – into the disorderly chaos of unrestrained ornament.

*Identity* also displays Porter's second and third traits of chinoiserie: hybridity and exoticism. Again, although at first the vessel's ornamentation seems straightforwardly Chinese, it draws on a diverse range of sources: the peacock-feather pattern on the shoulder is more commonly seen on Italian *majolica*, the foliate medallions around the belly on ancient Greek terracotta, and the floral medallions around the foot on Qing-dynasty blue-and-white porcelain. Ho did not adapt these from past examples, however, but from illustrations in *The Grammar of Ornament*, an anthology of designs compiled by Owen Jones (1809–1874) in 1856. Each motif is several times removed from its origin, blurring authenticity and fabrication while resisting identification with a "pure" cultural essence. What appears to be image is text, while signs of "Chineseness" are in fact Renaissance Italian and ancient Greek motifs seen through the eyes of a nineteenth-century English architect. Porter writes of the exoticism of chinoiserie that it was not only novelty that rendered the style "exotic" but also "the curious disjunctures of cultural difference to which [it] alluded and hence [its] potential saturation with largely unintelligible meanings."<sup>50</sup> It was this opaque illegibility that enabled chinoiserie to suggest a counter-aesthetics, in which the neo-classical sublimation of sensual pleasure within detached intellectual appreciation is displaced by the comparable "distancing effect of cultural estrangement" that removes viewers from the familiar and



compels them to confront the possibility that meaning may elude rationalization.<sup>51</sup> By repeatedly displacing motifs from their places of origin and juxtaposing them in a seemingly quixotic composition, in *Identity* and other works Ho confronts us with just such a scene of radical difference, forcing recognition of the unrestrained, unintelligible, and deformed.

## Deformation and the "in-between"

It is in *Binary code*, *Matrix*, and other composite sculptures, however, that Ho best expresses the transgressive potential of deformation. The tension in her works between formal perfection and the vagaries of chance, transmutation, and taste has been discussed in European and Chinese contexts. Yet their most notable feature is their resistance to confinement within any single culture. Reflecting Ho's experience as a citizen of multiple countries, these are fundamentally "in-between" objects, fusing alternately convergent and conflicting cultural identifications. As such, they evoke comparison with a final category of deformity: the distorted amalgamations of porcelain, marine sediment, and organic matter often found in shipwrecked cargoes of export ware. Rather than the unpredictability of kiln flames warping and fusing vessels into unforeseen, often bewildering shapes, "sea sculptures," as they are often termed, are products of the ineluctable pressure of underwater currents and the intervention of deep-sea organisms. One example of such an object, now in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, (fig. 7) vividly shows the



Fig. 7. *Sea sculpture*, c. 1725, Jingdezhen, found in Vietnam, porcelain with underglaze decoration, shell and coral growths, 17 x 22 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (FE.7-2007)



contrasting effect of each element. The fractured Qing-dynasty blue-and-white vessels that comprise this piece are believed to have been fused by a fire on the ship carrying them from China to Vietnam, while centuries of underwater interment from their manufacture around 1725 to their rediscovery in 1998 have exposed them to the cautious forays of crustaceans. Another example from the same wreck (fig. 8) is crowned with a magnificent horn of coral, jutting from the fused remains of a series of brown-glazed bowls. Both objects show the transgressive amalgamation of entities and experiences that deformation can accomplish, especially when deformity is itself produced by a union of opposing elements.

The idea of existing "in-between" states of being is central to all the categories of deformity so far discussed and is a fundamental characteristic of Ho's "deformed" sculptures. Misfires that didn't meet the standards of the court were relegated to uselessness immediately after firing and discarded as abortive objects scarred by traces of the unpredictability involved in their making. Products of *yaobian* occupy another in-between realm, shuttling between the abject materiality of flame-distorted ceramics and the grandiose mystery of the divine. Qing-dynasty *flambé* glazes and subsequent examples of artificial *yaobian*, on the other hand, foster an interplay between chance and calculation that blurs the boundaries between human action and fortuitous accident. Finally, a transgression of the boundaries held to separate various states of being is a key quality in Porter's definition of *chinoiserie*, especially those between cultivation and vulgarity – the provocative appeal of novelty and the patina of antiquity.<sup>52</sup> It is this last form of "in-betweenness" that finds clearest expression in the composite forms and eclectic ornament of Ho's sculptures, fusing old and new, elite and vulgar in dizzying accumulations of cultural signifiers that revel in their deformation of the classical, unitary, and formally perfect.

Ho's sense of the in-between is partially a result of her composite life experience, condensed and reflected in the equally transcultural medium of porcelain. A fractured sense of cultural belonging is the primary subject of *Identity, Binary code, and Matrix*, each of which combines a range of sources and influences, including text, motifs drawn from *The Grammar of Ornament*, and, on *Identity*, reproductions of the artist's ID documents. Five of these are emblazoned on the vessel in pseudo-classical medallions, evoking comparison with the armorial ware commissioned by European and North American patrons for production in Jingdezhen from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Rather than the hallowed certainty of a family crest, however, the aspects of her identity that Ho has reproduced reflect a fragmented biography – a Hong Kong ID card, British National (Overseas) passport, Chinese travel visa, Canadian passport, and US Green Card – while a sixth medallion stands empty, indicating the potential for additional identification acquired on future journeys. The first three documents record Ho's childhood in British Hong Kong, raised by Cantonese-speaking parents but taught to speak Mandarin in public, English in school, and compelled to adopt the name "Cassandra" to ensure acceptance by colonial institutions. The artist recalls that "growing up in a colony [fostered] a sense of displacement [brought about by a] constant negotiation of my identity" and, consequently, she felt she "was never a member of any kind of cultural group."<sup>53</sup> Although Hong Kong is her



Fig. 8. *Sea sculpture*, c. 1725, Jingdezhen, found in Vietnam, porcelain with underglaze decoration, shell and coral growths, 20 x 17.5 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (FE.8-2007)

birthplace, Ho positions it as her first experience with "cross-culturalisation,"

where I witnessed the dominance of a colonial society by a foreign culture. To fit into society, I changed my Chinese name [...] use[d] an English identity card, stud[ied] the English language, sample[d] Western foods and [went] to a Christian church.<sup>54</sup>

This sense of the unfamiliar dwelling within and rupturing the familiar is inherent also to Ho's chosen medium: porcelain, "a prime material vehicle for the assimilation and transmission of artistic symbols, themes, and designs across vast distances"; an emblem of Chineseness that is at the same time a product of multiple influences.<sup>55</sup> Emblazoned across the surface of *Identity*, Ho's Hong Kong ID card, British National (Overseas) passport, and Chinese travel visa present a vivid register of these contradictions and their deformation of monocultural identity, making clear the extent to which even one small island is far from an isolated, unitary whole.

The final two ID documents reproduced on *Identity* – Ho's Canadian passport and US Green Card – record her decision to leave Hong Kong in 1992, first for Ontario, then Louisiana and New York, where she has lived since 1999. In North America, the dislocation that became such a part of her identity in Hong Kong was heightened by her experiences as a cultural outsider. Language continued to be a source of confusion and contention, gaining additional social consequences:

[...] you say that you fit into society, you learn all the systems, you try to be the best, but you cannot compete with others, people whose English is [their] native language [...] that kind of social tension [...] is very strong in [...] Canada [and] the US.<sup>56</sup>

In such a competitive setting, spoken and written communication are exposed as coded systems only completely accessible to those who have learned their logic since birth. Ho addressed this challenge directly with a series of vessels created alongside *Binary code* and *Matrix*, titled *Gibberish* (2005; fig. 9). Like *Identity*, these take a flawless classical form – a *meiping* or “plum vase” – but disfigure it with the addition of fragmented ornament. On *Gibberish no. 3*, for example, Chinese characters and English letters appear in bands on the body of the vessel, prominently displayed rather than disguised as on *Identity*, but are rendered almost illegible by their partial distortion. In the central and largest band, sections of a classical poem, “Prelude to Water Melody” (*Shui diao ge tou*) by the scholar Su Dongpo (1037–1101), are written vertically, right-to-left in Chinese characters, with an English translation horizontally left-to-right but obstructed by horizontal lines of gibberish – symbols in no apparent order, interspersed with arbitrary combinations of words. <sup>57</sup> These are derived from the corruption of emails sent by Ho’s sister using Chinese characters that her computer could not display without the appropriate language pack, while the poem is one that Ho memorized at school in Hong Kong but has since admitted she never completely understood. Lines of binary code on the foot and shoulder reinforce the connection with technology and imply that, while meaning is fractured, the disparate cultural elements on display have been

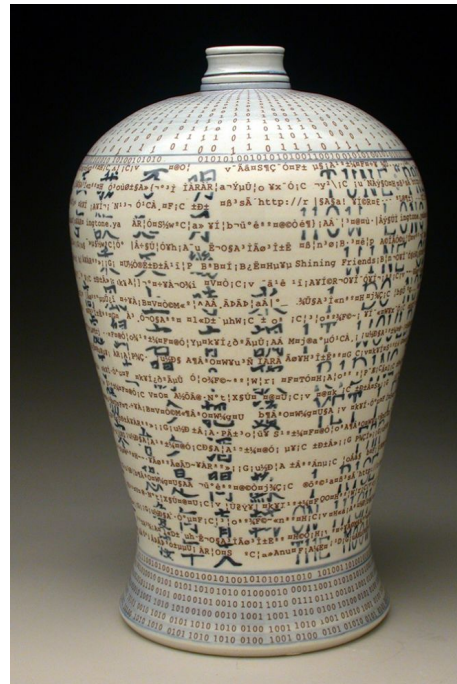


Fig. 9. Sin-ying Ho, *Gibberish no. 3*, 2005, porcelain, wheel-thrown, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration and digital decal transfer, 39 x 25.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

transformed into a new form of expression that, like binary code, is unintelligible to those without the requisite knowledge but has the potential to communicate across former cultural boundaries.

In each of the works by Ho so far discussed, the aesthetic perfection of classical harmony and the hegemonic imposition of a "pure" cultural essence are subjected to deformation. In *Identity*, the first work in which Ho explored her composite heritage and the difficulties she faced as a Chinese migrant, the reduction of her multiple names to ornamental motifs and her merging of already-corrupted Chinese, classical Greek, and Renaissance designs creates a subtle deformity. Text and image on this vessel are incoherent, disharmonious, polluted, and visually jarring, too densely arranged and lacking decorum, combining the personal and the universal. This deformation is intensified on *Gibberish*, for which a celebrated Song-dynasty poem has been disfigured, even rendered incoherent by its partial translation and juxtaposition with nonsensical symbols algorithmically generated by a malfunctioning machine. Each of these works is transgressive in its revelation that hegemonic norms are vulnerable to disfiguration, but it is the inclusion of binary code on *Gibberish* that most powerfully conveys this radical potential, alluding to a dream of transcultural union given concrete form by the composite structure of Ho's later work. Equating programming language with the biological sequence of DNA, *Binary code* suggests a future unity born of a radical merging of disparate parts, while the amorphous, womb-like *Matrix* could be read as a crucible for the birth of a new form of life, multiple and indeterminate, outside the canons of self-contained perfection.

## Otherworldly deformities

Between 2007 and 2009, Ho elaborated on her aesthetic of deformation with a series of works that combine classical and pop-cultural motifs, historical and personal narratives, and perfect and imperfect form. These composite sculptures expand on the radical statement of unity-in-deformity suggested by her earlier references to binary code and DNA by not only juxtaposing motifs but exposing the fragility of the boundaries that usually force them apart. Ornament here takes on the same mutable quality as sculptural form, evoking a celebration of fluid diversity that stands in stark contrast to the rhetoric of perfection with which imperial Chinese porcelain has historically been associated. Against similar calls for "uncontaminated" homogeneity in our contemporary global context, this commitment to inclusivist pluralism opens a discursive space in which alternate forms of identification and social relations can be explored, fostering a minority discourse that encourages criticism of an oppressive monocultural unanimity. These works invite viewers to imagine a world in which multiple perspectives can combine and co-exist, while acknowledging the ruptures and slippages of meaning that will always prevent the achievement of perfect union.

This merging and deformation of cultural entities is expressed most clearly in the paired works *Trilogy no. 1* (fig. 10) and *Trilogy no. 2* (fig. 11). A fusion of characters from contemporary and classical fiction appears on these pieces, drawn together by their



Fig. 10. Sin-ying Ho, *Trilogy no. 1*, 2007–09, porcelain, wheel-thrown and slip-cast, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration, digital decal transfer, and terra sigillata high-fire reduction. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

blending in Ho's personal life. The composition of *Trilogy no. 1* is dominated by the cobalt-blue image of a scene from the Chinese classic *Journey to the West (Xiyouji)*, showing the Buddhist pilgrim-monk Xuanzang accompanied by the monstrous Zhu Bajie, partially obscured but recognizable by his iconic muckrake. Curving around the side and reverse of the vessel, the Monkey King Sun Wukong appears with another image of Xuanzang. More prominent, however, are repeated iron-red decal images of contemporary pop icons Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty. Classical and twentieth-century global entertainment culture are here combined, although an antagonism is suggested by the partial obscuring of the literary scene. Benign crowds of Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty figures seem to encroach upon the narrative like the nonsensical symbols on *Gibberish*, preventing a clear reading. Like a bloom of mold they seep across the surface of the work, exposing the white of the clay and highlighting crackle lines in the glaze. This could be read as a commentary on the encroachment of mass culture into the dream-world of a now-lost classical China, replacing the authenticity of the past with a superficiality that recalls the excesses of eighteenth-century European chinoiserie.

On the other hand, differences between the elements of the composition are not as stark as they seem – each motif is a blending of multiple elements and a product of transcultural adaptation. Hello Kitty first launched in Japan in 1974 before travelling to the US in 1976, Europe in 1978, and back to a broader Asian market in 1990.<sup>58</sup> The hybrid form of the character – part-human, part-cat – echoes this cultural multiplicity while at the same time, in the context of the work, evoking a parallel with the comparably hybrid characters taken from *Journey to the West*: Zhu Bajie – part-human, part-pig – and the divine monkey Sun Wukong. Charlie Brown, though not a hybrid figure, has been associated since his initial appearance in US cartoonist Charles M. Schulz's comic-strip *Peanuts* in 1950,



with the anthropomorphic dog Snoopy, a twentieth-century<sup>59</sup> descendent of Xuanzang's semi-human companions.

Like Anubis and other deities in the ancient Egyptian pantheon, these characters could be considered deformed or less-than-perfect approximations of the idealized human physique as an emblem of inner virtue, yet Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie both wield awe-inspiring divine powers, while Hello Kitty and Snoopy are potent idols of contemporary pop culture, cherished around the world. As in the distant past, deformity here seems to be the key to a realm beyond the mundane, an otherworldly plane of existence where the ability to transcend singular definition and incorporate multiple frames of reference is more desirable than adherence to hegemonic norms.

*Journey to the West*, though regarded as one of the "Four Great Chinese Classics," can also be read here as a narrative of hybrid multiplicity rather than cultural purity. The novel is based on the historical monk Xuanzang's (c. 596–664) pilgrimage to India in the mid- to late 7th century in search of Buddhist scripture, returning in 645 with almost seven hundred manuscripts. The monk of the novel, however, is entirely different. Pilgrimage remains a central theme, yet after eight centuries of adaptation, embellishment, and fusion with folklore between the Tang dynasty (618–907) and the publication of *Journey to the West* in 1592, it became "a tale of supernatural deeds and fantastic adventures, of mythic beings and animal spirits, of fearsome battles with monsters and miraculous deliverances from dreadful calamities."<sup>60</sup> Already a composite text, it has subsequently been subject to further deformation, from translation and abridged editions, theatrical and cinematic adaptation, to comic-book and graphic novel retelling, even animated versions for children. It was through these iterations, rather than the novel itself, that Ho came to know the narrative during her childhood.<sup>61</sup> The contrast on *Trilogy no. 1* and *no. 2* between classical Chinese characters, Charlie Brown, and Hello



Kitty, an ancient text and contemporary consumerism, is therefore not as disjunctive as it might seem. Each character fuses multiple sources, and each exists in an ever-evolving constellation of composite forms.

Ho's effacing of the boundaries between past and present, classical and kitsch, is accomplished even more successfully on *Trilogy no. 2*, in which the vision of a future community founded on mutual recognition and cross-fertilization is extended beyond the confines of the planet. To the "trilogy" of Charlie Brown, Hello Kitty, and the protagonists of *Journey to the West*, she adds a fourth character that clarifies her aims: E.T., the protagonist of Steven Spielberg's 1982 film, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Unlike Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty, with whom the alien seems to share a closer connection, E.T. is depicted in cobalt-blue rather than iron-red decal and so is compositionally integrated into the scenes from *Journey to the West*. These, in turn, are even more fragmented, reduced to an ornamental series of narrative splinters from which only the rotund figure of Zhu Bajie emerges clearly. Ho has explained her juxtaposition of these images as a representation of different "layers" of pop culture within her life. As a child, she watched animated and cinematic adaptations of the Chinese tale, while her older sisters watched Charlie Brown cartoons; during the 1980s, they all enjoyed Spielberg's film; and, during the 1990s, her niece collected Hello Kitty merchandise.<sup>62</sup> The merging and ambiguity of cultural spheres



Fig. 11. Sin-ying Ho, *Trilogy no. 2: Monkey King, Charlie Brown, Hello Kitty and ET*, 2007-09, porcelain, wheel-thrown and slip-cast, with hand-painted underglaze cobalt blue decoration, digital decal transfer, and terra sigillata high-fire reduction, 39 x 27.5 x 27.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

suggested on *Trilogy no. 1* is therefore made explicit, with Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty interacting with elements of the literary scene, while E.T. completely transgresses the border between worlds.

It is significant that this transgression is accomplished by an alien life-form, representing both an ability to transcend earthly limitations and an essential inability to conform to the normative standards endorsed by the various cultures on this planet. As an "Extra-Terrestrial," E.T. is the quintessential traveler between worlds, cast adrift from any clear contextual background that might limit his identity. Like Hello Kitty and the protagonists of *Journey to the West*, he is a hybrid, caught somewhere between human and animal spheres of existence. His appearance therefore makes clear that both *Trilogy* vessels are representations of transitional, deformed states of being. Drawing from one of the most widely known narratives of travel – including both geographical travel and movement between divine and mortal realms – they valorize characters defined by their ability to exist simultaneously in multiple states of being. Inserted into the trilogy of sources on these works, E.T. is a substitute for the artist-as-migrant and for the transgressive figure of the traveler in general as one who moves easily between different contexts. He is also an archetype of deformity, as defined by the aesthetic theorists cited in the opening sections of this paper: "disfigured, malformed, contorted, distorted," "stunted, dwarfed, wizened [...] swollen, bulging, twisted [...] from a norm."<sup>63</sup> Yet E.T. is unanimously cherished by those who have watched Spielberg's film as an endearing, amiable yet ultimately inscrutable and mysterious figure, not a monstrosity to be spurned and disdained. In the film, and in Ho's work, he suggests a new mode of engagement with deformity driven by tolerance, mutual respect, and a willingness to look beyond the norm.

Despite the conventional association of porcelain with formal

perfection, Ho's contemporary porcelain art is suffused with an aesthetic of deformation. This is most visibly expressed in the composite sculptural form of *Binary code*, *Matrix*, *Trilogy no. 1*, and *Trilogy no. 2*, evoking comparison with the distorted contours of a "waster," a disfigurement or fusion of ceramics in the kiln usually regarded as defective and promptly discarded. *Identity* and *Gibberish no. 3* are more conventional, even classical in form, revealing their deformity instead in the fragmented text, corrupted symbols, and adulterated motifs that adorn their surfaces, subverting viewers' expectations of unitary meaning and defying any rational explanation. The hegemony of reason is also challenged by Ho's use of *terra sigillata* and digital decal transfer glaze effects on each of these vessels, in the making of which there is a tension between control and chance that recalls Qing-dynasty efforts to harness the natural forces of *yaobian*, or "kiln transmutation," although in Ho's work the transgressive mystery of these forces is retained. These deformations of sculptural form, ornament, and surface effect are echoed by an iconographic distortion most noticeable in *Trilogy no. 1* and *Trilogy no. 2* but characteristic of all Ho's works. A parallel can be drawn between this aspect of their deformity and the monstrous aesthetics of chinoiserie: in Ho's twenty-first-century sculptures and the objects of the eighteenth-century Chinese taste, visual appeal, exoticism, and hybridity take precedence over abstract ideals, harmonious composition, and an essentialist cultural purity. In her two *Trilogy* sculptures, Ho follows the combinatory logic of her earlier work to its logical conclusion: the amalgamation of cultural forms into an amorphous mass that dissolves the boundaries between historical and contemporary, ideal and personal. These works also reiterate, however, that the forms chosen for combination, even those most redolent of cultural purity, were always a product of multiple heritage and a constant deformation of meaning. In these and Ho's other ceramic sculptures, deformity becomes a quality to be

celebrated rather than scorned or avoided, endorsing an emancipatory narrative of diversity and open-minded tolerance that stands in stark contrast to the imposition, historical and contemporary, of a prejudicial, isolationist homogeneity.

- 1 Joseph Warton, *The World* no. 26 (June 28, 1753), 155. Emphasis in the original.
- 2 Garth Clark, "Between a Toilet and a Hard Place: Is the Ceramic Avant-Garde a Contradiction in Terms?," in: *Shards: Garth Clark on Ceramic Art*, ed. John Pagliaro (New York: Ceramic Arts Foundation, 2003), 329.
- 3 Stacey Pierson, *From Object to Concept: Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 57–81.
- 4 Clark, "Between a Toilet and a Hard Place," 347.
- 5 Philosopher Wolfgang Welsch has provided one of the clearest explanations of the distinction between these perspectives: a monoculture, he writes, is "characterised by three elements: by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation. First, every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals, making every act and every object an unmistakable instance of precisely *this* culture [...] Secondly, culture is always to be the *culture of a folk* [...] Thirdly, a decided *delimitation* towards the outside ensues: every culture is [...] to be distinguished and to remain separated." The recognition of the transcultural, however, implies an acknowledgment of "the *inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures* [that] encompass [...] a number of ways of life [that] interpenetrate or emerge from one another [and are] interconnected and entangled with each other [as] a consequence of migratory processes, as well as of worldwide material and immaterial communications systems and economic interdependencies." Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality – The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today," in: *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, eds. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage, 1999), 194–195, 197–198. Italics in the original.
- 6 Edward W. Said, *Culture & Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), xxxii.
- 7 Said, *Culture & Imperialism*, xxxii.
- 8 R. Sullivan, "Deformity – A Modern Western Prejudice with Ancient Origin," *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* vol. 31, no. 3 (2001), 262–265.
- 9 Olivia Milburn, "Marked Out for Greatness? Perceptions of Deformity and Physical

- Impairment in Ancient China," *Monumenta Serica* no. 55 (2007), 6.
- 10 Ibid., 1–2.
- 11 Panos Paris, "The Deformity-Related Conception of Ugliness," *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 57 no. 2 (April 2017), 139–140.
- 12 Paris, "The Deformity-Related Conception of Ugliness," 141.
- 13 Frank Sibley, "Some Notes on Ugliness," in: *Approach to Aesthetics*, eds. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 197.
- 14 Ibid., 203.
- 15 Sin-ying Ho, interview by the author, April 19, 2017.
- 16 Garth Clark, "George Ohr: Avant-Garde Volumes," in: *Shards: Garth Clark on Ceramic Art*, op. cit., 157.
- 17 For a recent discussion of modernist engagement with ceramics, see: Edmund de Waal, "High Unseriousness: Artists and Clay," in: *Kneaded Knowledge: The Language of Ceramics* (Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2016), 44–58.
- 18 Justin Novak, cited in: Judith S. Schwartz, *Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic* (London: A&C Black, 2008), 74.
- 19 Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 30–31.
- 20 Maris Boyd Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 14–15.
- 21 Ibid., 19.
- 22 Ellen C. Huang, "An Art of Transformation: Reproducing Yaobian Glazes in Qing-Dynasty Porcelain," *Archives of Asian Art* vol. 68, no. 2 (October 2018), 147–148.
- 23 See, for example: Frank B. Lenz, "The World's Ancient Porcelain Center," *National Geographic Magazine* vol. 38, no. 5 (November 1920), 398; Robert Tichane, *Ching-Te-Chen: Views of a Porcelain City* (New York: New York State Institute for Glaze Research, 1983), 15–17, 34; Jack Troy, "Gleanings: A Potter in China," *Ceramics Monthly* no. 44 (November 1996), 48; Kristen Den Hartog, "Air and Grace," *Ceramic Review* no. 220 (August 2006), 29; and Carol Grant, "The Porcelain City," *Ceramic Review* no. 267 (June 2014), 18.

- 24 For a description of these tourist-oriented municipal embellishments, see: Carla Coch, "Jingdezhen: Tradition and Promise," *Ceramics Monthly* vol. 53, no. 7 (September 2005), 64; Hajni Elias, "In Search of China's Ceramic Past: A Visit to Jingdezhen and Laohudong," *Arts of Asia* vol. 37, no. 2 (April 2007), 144; and Anna Wu, "Jingdezhen Today," *Arts of Asia* vol. 41, no. 6 (December 2011), 89.
- 25 François Xavier d'Entrecolles, "Letter I," trans. Robert Tichane, in: *Ching-Te-Chen: Views of a Porcelain City*, op. cit., 109.
- 26 Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital*, 27.
- 27 Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*, 37–38.
- 28 Zhou Hui, *Qingbo zazhi*, cited in: Lan Pu and Zheng Tinggui, *Ching-Te-Chen T'ao-Lu or The Potteries of China*, trans. Geoffrey R. Sayer (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 78.
- 29 Stephen Wootton Bushell, *Oriental Ceramic Art, Illustrated by Examples from the Collection of W. T. Walters* (London: Frederick Muller, 1981), 120.
- 30 Huang, "An Art of Transformation," 136.
- 31 François Xavier d'Entrecolles, "Letter II," in: *Ching-Te-Chen: Views of a Porcelain City*, op. cit., 120.
- 32 Huang, "An Art of Transformation," 135–136.
- 33 Gao Lian, *Zunsheng bajian* (1591), cited in: Huang, "An Art of Transformation," 137. In *Oriental Ceramic Art*, Bushell dismissed such transmutations as "merely accidental resemblances of the coloured patches so often produced during the firing of these glazes," and even cautioned his readers that "an artificial patch is [often] daubed on in modern imitations to deceive the unwary." Bushell, *Oriental Ceramic Art*, 75.
- 34 Tang Bingjun, *Wenfang sikao* (1778), cited in: Lan and Zheng, *Ching-Te-Chen T'ao-Lu*, 81. Lan and Zheng identify the types of *yaobian* described by Gao and Tang, i.e. the appearance of images in the glaze or a complete change in the form of the ceramic, as "heaven-made," and explain that these "arise naturally from the magical nature of fire," in contrast to those "man-made" effects like *flambé* that "are produced [...] by deliberate manipulation of the glaze into magical colours and shapes." Lan and Zheng, *Ching-Te-Chen T'ao-Lu*, 119–120.
- 35 Huang, "An Art of Transformation," 140–143.

- 36 J. Penney Burton, "Tradition in Flux," *Cahiers Metiers d'art* vol. 1, no. 1 (Summer 2007), 27.
- 37 The development of chinoiserie as a style has been exhaustively documented in: Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: John Murray, 1961); Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977); Madeleine Jarry, *Chinoiserie: Chinese Influence on European Decorative Art 17th and 18th Centuries* (New York: Vendome Press, 1981); and Dawn Jacobson, *Chinoiserie* (London: Phaidon, 1993).
- 38 Jane Marshall, "Cultures Colliding: New Work by Sin-ying Ho," *Ceramics: Art and Perception* no. 84 (2011), 8–9.
- 39 Sin-ying Ho, interview by J. Penney Burton, May 3, 2006, cited in: Burton, "Tradition in Flux," 33; Sin-ying Ho, "Artist Statement," *artasiamerica: A Digital Archive for Asian /Asian American Contemporary Art History* (2010), <http://artasiamerica.org/documents/7687/514>; Sin-ying Ho, interview by the author, April 19, 2017.
- 40 David Porter, "Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 35, no. 3 (Spring 2002), 399.
- 41 David Porter, "Chinoiserie and the Aesthetics of Illegitimacy," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* no. 28 (1999), 39.
- 42 Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), cited in: Porter, "Chinoiserie and the Aesthetics of Illegitimacy," 39–40.
- 43 Erik Ringmar, "Malice in Wonderland: Dreams of the Orient and the Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China," *Journal of World History* vol. 22, no. 2 (June 2011), 279–281; Porter, "Chinoiserie and the Aesthetics of Illegitimacy," 42–44.
- 44 Roger Lund, "Laughing at Cripples: Ridicule, Deformity and the Argument from Design," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 39, no. 1 (Fall 2005), 96–98. Quotations cited by Lund from Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), and Henry More, *Antidote Against Atheism* (1653).
- 45 Lund, "Laughing at Cripples," 98.
- 46 Joseph Warton, cited in: Porter, "Monstrous Beauty," 402.

- 47 Ibid., 402–405.
- 48 Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, "'Frailty, Thy Name Is China': Women, Chinoiserie and the Threat of Low Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *Women's History Review* vol. 18, no. 4 (September 2009), 661–663; Jane Hwang Degenhardt, "Cracking the Mysteries of 'China': China(Ware) in the Early Modern Imagination," *Studies in Philology* vol. 110, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 158–167.
- 49 Sin-ying Ho, cited in: Burton, "Tradition in Flux," 33.
- 50 Porter, "Monstrous Beauty," 404–405.
- 51 Ibid., 405–406.
- 52 Ibid., 398–400.
- 53 Sin-ying Ho, cited in: James Tarrant, "The Medium Is the Message," *Ceramics: Art and Perception* no. 64 (2006), 27; Ho, "Artist Statement."
- 54 Sin-ying Ho, cited in: Schwartz, *Confrontational Ceramics*, 58.
- 55 Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*, 5–6.
- 56 Sin-ying Ho, cited in: Burton, "Tradition in Flux," 29.
- 57 Lines 1–7 of the first verse are written in Chinese characters. The entire first verse and line one of the second verse are written in English: "How long will the full moon appear? / Wine cup in hand, I ask the sky. / I do not know what time of the year / It would be tonight in the palace on high. / Riding the wind, there I would fly, / Yet I'm afraid the crystalline palace would be / Too high and cold for me. / I rise and dance, with my shadow I play. / On high as on earth, would it be as gay? / The moon goes round the mansions red [...]"
- 58 Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.
- 59 Stephen J. Lind, *A Charlie Brown Religion: Exploring the Spiritual Life and Work of Charles M. Schulz* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 18.
- 60 Anthony C. Yu, introduction to *The Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en, revised edition, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1, 4–6, 60–61.
- 61 Sin-ying Ho, email to author, April 25, 2017.



- 62 Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with author, April 14, 2017.
- 63 Paris, "The Deformity-Related Conception of Ugliness," 141; Sibley, "Some Notes on Ugliness," 197–203.