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Writing 5: Image and Text

07 February 2025

From Defenseless to Defiant:The Redefinition and Reclamation of Porcelain in Sally Wen Mao's *On Porcelain*

Historically, porcelain has been many things: ancient art, valuable currency, breakable artifact. Museums preserve their patterns behind glass for tourists to gawp at, pin placards to their display cases, and call it history. Yet even as they sit admired on pedestals, the porcelains are prisoners, stolen from their homelands and kept as possessions. In one work from her urn-shaped poem collection, aptly named *On Porcelain*, Sally Wen Mao subverts the westernized definition of this "unassuming" object. The visual shape of Mao's poem and the words of the poem itself work in tandem; they critique the western gaze; they dismantle the gaze's objectifying perception, and by examining porcelain's relationship with both chimera and woman, ultimately restore its autonomy. As Mao synthesizes poetic form and content, she redefines porcelain, transforming it from objectified vessel to empowered entity.

Before she can even begin this process of redefinition, Mao first establishes the status quo: how porcelain within the western gaze mirrors the objectification of women. At first glance, the poem's most striking feature is not its content but its urn shape. Whether in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or otherwise, urn and woman are often synonymous with their curving bodies, and Mao's poem draws on that same literary tradition. With its solid and feminized form, the poem is aligned in a shape reminiscent of a woman's figure. It sits passively on the page, a space in its middle, as if waiting to be possessed. Framed in this way, Mao's poem becomes a

Commented [MOU1]: Points of concern:

- Structure/organization
- Analysis (is it too all over the place? Does it relate to the critical question?)
- Evidence (how well are the quotations chosen? Do they support my argument effectively?)
- Ideas (do they make sense? Are they consistent, or do I sound like I'm making multiple points at once? Are some stronger or weaker than others? If yes, how can the weaker ones be improved?)

Style Definition: Heading 2**Commented [OMC2]:** **OUTLINE**

Critical question: How do shape and content interact to amplify the idea of porcelain within the context of Sally Wen Mao's message in *On Porcelain*?

- MAIN IDEA: Shape and content parallel porcelain with humanity □ highlight resistance and hope in the face of oppression and struggle (both historical and modern)
- Poem presented in the shape of an urn (note: connection to "Ode on a Grecian Urn")
- Narrative of the porcelain chimera mirrors that of colonized □ both stolen, both oppressed, both otherized

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The Interplay of Image and Text**Formatted:** Font: Not Italic**Deleted:** To history**Deleted:** is**Deleted:** history**Deleted:** blue and white**Deleted:** gingerly lift them with rubber-gloved hands,**Deleted:** with paragraph-length descriptions**Deleted:** glass**Deleted:** admired across**Deleted:** ages, the porcelain is prisoner**Deleted:** its homeland. Sally Wen Mao takes this connection between porcelain and humanity**Deleted:** step further in**Deleted:** —**Deleted:** . The last poem of the series in particular casts her message**Commented [OMC3]:** Watch sentence length. Since thesis statement calls for most clarity, keep as conc... [1]**Commented [OMC4]:** Draw on class examples while also providing evidence for statement.**Deleted:** stark clarity. Drawing on porcelain as her vehicle, Mao weaves together the narratives of the object and th... [2]

reflection of the westernized gaze. Just as the colonizers imposed the ideas of delicacy and submission onto both women and porcelain, Mao comments that “to this day, the cliché still stands: a white woman’s skin made of porcelain” (“My century of humiliation began with my body” 2). Just as the colonizers sanitized the story of porcelain’s acquisition for the sake of aesthetic appropriation, we are caught single-minded in our observation; instead of examining the underlying history, we initially see only the shape of the object. Through the literal presentation of the poem’s form, Mao makes us complicit in the perpetuation of the West’s warped perspective. We are then forced to confront what Mao already knows to be true: our view of porcelain has only ever been defined by the objectifying lens of the status quo.

Through her use of visceral language, Mao begins to deconstruct this objectifying gaze, simultaneously describing and criticizing as she reveals it as a source of historical struggle. The poem’s beginning is a characterization of porcelain through the eyes of the West. With words like “strength / hardness / grit / durability / resilience,” the description can almost be read as admiration, and yet, in their listing, the strength of each word is lost; the porcelain is distanced, as if the words are featured in a museum catalogue, and we too become distorted in our viewership, detached from the porcelain’s stained history. Mao then brutally reveals reality with language that is abruptly and shockingly ugly; with words like “property,” “plundered,” “looted,” and “displayed,” the poem depicts porcelain as a war prize. All pretense of distance is shattered, and in its place, the porcelain’s past victimization is showcased in vivid detail. Mao extends this idea of victimhood, directly following the objectifying description with an image of “the Royal British Army sack[ing] a city / break[ing] the glass / ransack[ing] treasures / rap[ing] the women / and transport[ing] the art / to the Buckingham Palace.” Placing these images in such immediate proximity — stolen porcelain, abused women — Mao highlights a parallel between

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Using distinct language

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the two: both women and porcelain have been violated, ruined by the greed and dominance of the colonizers. In this comparison, Mao recognizes both as beings with their own brutal injuries and pasts, deserving of more than ignorance and objectification. Her gruesome illustration of reality reveals the western gaze's destructive nature and removes any possibility of returning to the myopic view cultivated by the western world.

With the western gaze successfully stripped away, Mao begins to unmask porcelain, using symbolism to recast it into a subject of power. Fundamental to this characterization is the porcelain chimera. Appearing almost exactly halfway through the poem, the chimera marks a distinct divergence from Mao's characterization of porcelain first as object, then victim. In her introduction of this creature of mythic power, a representation of the birth of a strong people, porcelain is itself reborn into a symbol of strength and reclamation. Similar to how a well-worded museum placard can mask the violent history of an urn's acquisition, the female figure of the poem's shape is revealed for what it is: a façade for the history and chimera beneath. By including the chimera only within the content of the poem, giving no hints to its existence on the surface level, Mao implies the possibility of power just below the porcelain's surface, discoverable only by those willing to look closely enough.

Mao's juxtaposition of urn and chimera manifests not just in form, but in description. Her introduction of the chimera is phrased in defiant questioning: "jade head of a goddess, captive for centuries / do we dare wish / for freedom / a chimera, part tiger, part panther.../ forged from fury always Another property." Because of Mao's purposeful enjambment, this line can be read in multiple ways. Arriving at the line from the context of the poem's beginning, in which porcelain is defined only by the western gaze and its painful byproducts, there is a sense of captivity; both chimera and "we" are simultaneously "forged from fury" and yet "always another property." As

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the line continues, however, it reads, “Another property of porcelain: high *resistance*.” In this, the definition of porcelain through the chimera is contrasted with its definition through the urn. While the urn reflects the western gaze, everything Mao struggles against, the chimera is a force of nature: uncontainable, dangerous, and resistant. Instead of being depicted as an object in need of guarding like the urn, the chimera *is* the guardian. In this way, Mao restores the chimera’s – and by proxy, the porcelain’s – autonomy. She takes control of the narrative, reclaims a piece of her culture, and, through the chimera, transforms porcelain from an object of stillness and silence into a creature of power.

Mao’s ultimate redefinition of porcelain, however, lies not in contrast but combination; by highlighting the commonalities between woman and chimera, she merges them into a symbol of uprising and change. With her repetitive use of the collective – “our,” “we” – Mao once again channels the symbolism of the chimera – this time as a creature of multitudes, deriving its strength from the combined powers of animals. She claims all the minoritized, objectified women – “Black liberation...Palestine...Indigenous land & water...our mothers / our sisters...our grandmothers” – under one universal identity, and, just like a chimera, they become empowered in their union. Tempered by their “long summer / long simmer / long rage,” Mao transforms the oppressed. They are no longer only reflected in the porcelain, in the chimera; instead, they embody it, their “uprising—a porcelain.” They “become the chimera,” and in the reclamation of porcelain and chimera alike, women assume the qualities of both: resilience, strength, the power of change-making. As the poem ends with that sense of belief – “dear chimera / tonight we dream” – Mao completes her redefinition. By gifting the oppressed the property of resistance, the porcelain becomes a source of something greater: the capacity for hope.

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In the poem's shape, there are echoes of those same ideas of resilience and reclamation.

Even though the urn shape of the poem appears mostly concrete, the hole in the center and the gap at the base make it clear that it is still incomplete. Among the poems in *On Porcelain*, though, this final one has the fewest gaps. Taken as a whole, with this striking progression from emptiness to entirety, the series of poems creates the illusion of rebuilding. Just as the chimera within the poem itself serves as a representation of ongoing cultural reclamation, this last poem acts as the culmination of Mao's journey to redefining and reclaiming her culture. That sense of hope is further hinted at in the poem's structure. Notably, the gap at the base of the poem severs the line "for the strength we believed was all gone." At first reading, that space between "believed" and "was all gone," is reflective of the words themselves. For just a moment, it almost seems like any hope, any strength — like the word "believed" — exists only in the past tense. Yet, as Mao continues the line, reforming the urn's base and the poem's ending with "was all gone," the past tense of belief assumes new meaning; suddenly, it becomes not a lament of faded strength, but a celebration of its resurrection. It promises that even though belief can be cracked, even though hope is fragile, it is also resilient, a message that functions in striking parallel to the hopefulness of the poem itself.

Historically, porcelain has been many things: art, property, war prize. Continuously depicted through the western gaze, its identity has been reduced to an object of obsession. In some ways, Sally Wen Mao's depictions are similar; she compares porcelain to an object — a chimera statue — isolates it as victim within a violent historical narrative. Yet, what differentiates Mao's definition from the West's is one simple but fundamental quality: life. Unlike the urn, the chimera is never passive, never subject to ownership. Instead, it is dynamic, constantly transforming and assuming new meaning. In this, Mao subverts the western tradition and

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redefines porcelain, woman, and chimera not only as alive, but resistant, reborn. Whether through enjambment or shape, word choice or symbolism, Mao empowers, restores the capacity for autonomy and change, and in doing so, reclaims the analogy of porcelain. Through Mao's narrative, porcelain is no longer characterized as western property, or woman's body but as tenacity, as unity, as the strength that it takes to "dare [to] wish," to dream.

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Deleted: ? ask the cops / Who exactly do you serve? / Who do you protect?" Though these questions remain unanswered in the poem, the interplay of image and text is its own answer: to continue to demand of the world

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Watch sentence length. Since thesis statement calls for most clarity, keep as concise and clear as possible.

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Ensure maintenance of active voice

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