

CHINA 2003

I grew up by my mother's stool in the workshop:
Playing with the clay; hide-and-seek among the jars, vats, pots and jugs:
Picking pine twigs near the old and burning dragon kilns,
imitating rowing a boat with large jars on the river.
I remember the day that I had my feet squashed by the piled jars and pots as fences fell
When I went to the hillside to catch cicadas and other insects.
I also remember the aged cottages with jars as walls where sparrows had their nest in.
The life in my childhood was full of jars and pots.
Pottery was everywhere within my sight.
Therefore it is natural that my life has been integrated
with the clay of this land
Because clay was one part of my life in my childhood.



Zhou Dinfang in her studio with Christine-Ann Richards
(ancient and modern pots side by side)



The words of Zhou Dinfang, who demonstrated the art of making Yixing teapots at the International Ceramics Fair at Aberystwyth Art Centre in 1995 and whose house our small group of potters visited last October, on the 25th anniversary of the Craftsmen Potters Association's first visit to China. In fact her words capture the essence of China and, over two thousand years, the place of the potter within society.

The 2003 trip to China was unique in that it was organised by Li Jiansheng, or Jackson Li as he is known in the West, a ceramicist and founder of the Jingdezhen Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute, and where we were to pause for a week on our journey. Our visit had been postponed for four months with fears over the SARS outbreak but our intrepid travellers were determined, if at all possible, to continue with our visit, which eventually took place in October. We flew to Shanghai and were met by Jackson's sister, Wenying, who is in charge of the day to day running of Sanbao, a wonderful fellow traveller on our journey and friend of Dinfang. Jackson met us in Yixing and so began our encounter with fellow potters.

During the last decade, the access to small gas kilns has completely revolutionised the lives of contemporary potters, enabling them to set up individual and small family run workshops, no longer bound by the factory system where many of them worked in earlier years. When I first visited China in 1978, and even within this past decade very little innovative ceramics were to be found in the 'market place'. Although I had already come across copies, and bought early Dinfang's while she was still factory bound. In the colleges and schools experimentation was taking place, but there was little opportunity to pursue an 'individual' career on graduation. Things are very different today. Artists in general have greater freedom to experiment, set up their own studios and to travel abroad and take up residencies in other countries. A recent exhibition at the Ariana Museum in Geneva showed a broad spectrum of work from contemporary Chinese ceramicists.

Although Dingfang was out of town during our time in Yixing she returned just before we moved south. It was good to be able to visit her home and studio and see her more recent work. Gu Mei Qun a mutual friend of both Dingfang and Wenying not only took us to visit fellow potters but also brought us to her own home and studio and took time to show us how she made her own teapots and a shared family meal on our last evening, among fellow potters, brought to a close our visit to Yixing.



Gu Mei Qun



Tea Pots by He Jian

Although Yixing is known for its teapots, the abundance of different kinds of clays allow for a broad range of wares to be produced. We visited a factory and the studio of Li Shou Cai who works alongside his students producing a range of large pots including garden wares using coloured clays as an applied decoration to already formed pots which are then covered with a transparent glaze.



Li Shou Cai

Out in the villages large storage pots are still made in individual family workshops, but the market is fading as plastic continues to grow in demand. The kiln used to fire the large jars, by the potters that we visited, was first constructed in the 13th century and has continued in use on the same site, with obvious renovations, until the present day, Earlier and recently fired works do not have a market and even the pots being made today may never be finished as the continued cost of firing the dragon kiln may finally have proved uneconomical.



And so began our journey to Jingdezhen, the porcelain capital of China, and our sojourn at Sanbao where we were not only able to share and discuss our experiences among ourselves, our group came from Norway, US, Italy and the UK, but also with the Canadian and American potters who were on residencies there.



Sanbao

Join us again for our 10th anniversary celebratory tour in 2013 and meet the families of potters who still strive to continue making pots in the traditional way and others who have now become independent of the factory system, setting up co-operatives and studios of their own.