



A Dragon May Have Breathed its Last

By Jerome Lim

A shelf being prepared inside the kiln

The last two dragon kilns we find today were established in a rural area of Singapore, off Jalan Bahar. Drawn by the availability of white clay and a demand from the rubber plantations (which covered much of the area's hilly terrain) for clay latex cups, the two were among nine similar kilns found off a stretch of Jurong Road from the 13th to the 17th milestones.

The two kilns continued to operate into the 1990s, switching to producing flower pots after the hills had been flattened and industrialisation saw the demise of rubber production in Singapore. Both are currently involved in supporting the work of clay artists. One, the former Guan Huat Kiln, has been part of the Singapore Tourism Board-funded Jalan Bahar Clay Studios since 2004. The other is Thow Kwang, a privately funded kiln where firing was restarted in 2003 and survives only because of the enthusiasm of its owners.

At the height of the demand for latex cups, work in and around the kilns would have gone on round the clock. The Teochew kilns, referred to as dragon kilns because the long, semi-circular cross-sectioned chamber resembles the body of the mythical beast, were fired as frequently as four times a month. The actual firing took place over a 24-hour period, after which the kilns were left to cool, then were unpacked and repacked for the next firing cycle.



An uneven glazed finish that a wood-fired kiln provides can be seen on this piece.

The kilns today are rarely used, fired on average twice a year when sufficient quantities of clay pieces accumulate. As a consequence, firings have become occasions for the artists' communities to celebrate and events to which families and friends are invited. The firings also provide the artists and kiln operators with the opportunity to further their understanding and to document the process and its results.

An opportunity to observe the preparations and the firing of one of the kilns, Thow Kwang – the older of the two, came in March 2012. The kiln, built in the 1940s, is run by Mr Tan Teck Yoke and his wife Mrs Yulianti Tan. In 1965 Mr Tan's father bought the kiln from its previous owners, the Goh family. The kiln has 17 stoke holes, used to feed the fire through each intermediate area of the chamber. While in the past all 17 would have been used, only six were used during the March firing.



A view inside the firing box

Besides the rush to complete the clay pieces, other preparations for the firing were made in the lead-up to the actual event. During the week before, work to set up kiln shelves starts; they need to be carefully arranged in the chamber in the areas between the stoke holes. Wadding, balls of clay used to support clay pieces on the shelves, are dropped from the stoke holes to help determine if the shelves are correctly placed. The clay pieces are then stacked on the shelves, as each set is completed. Each piece is supported on cockle shells or wadding to prevent it from fusing to the

shelves during the firing. Once the necessary number of shelves has been set up and stacked, the access openings to the chamber are sealed with bricks and clay.

Firing commences only after prayers to the kiln god have been intoned and offerings have been placed on an altar above the firing box. Wood is fed into the firing box over the better part of the day until the desired temperature of 1,260°C is reached. The box is located at the bottom end of the kiln. These days, temperature sensors and pyrometric cones help to determine if the correct temperature has been reached. This is where part of the art of kiln-firing has been lost – the temperature was traditionally determined through the observation of the colour of the flames in the chamber.

Wood is fed to fuel the fire – a manual task that requires the artists to take turns – an effort that they feel is rewarded by the finishing that only a wood firing can give to a clay piece. Wood-fired clay pieces are unevenly (and unpredictably) glazed by a mix of salt (which is thrown into the stoke holes) and wood ash on the windward side. Once the temperature is reached in the firing box, its openings are closed and the feeding of wood is transferred to the first stoke hole. This moves the fire up the chamber and the process is repeated for the subsequent stoke holes until the required section of the chamber has been fired.

The length of time required for the kiln firing session depends very much on the effects that are desired now that kilns are used to fire artistic pieces rather than latex cups.



Looking into the stoke hole

The session in March went on for some 36 hours. The unpredictable nature of wood-firing does carry risks of damage to the artwork. The first shelf collapsed during the March firing and resulted in several large clay pots being broken.

For Mr and Mrs Tan the motivation to keep the kiln going is one that is driven by a desire to preserve history as well as a tradition that began when the first potters arrived in the area (there is evidence of a Hokkien three-chambered kiln that predates the dragon kiln on this site). It is a tradition that was continued by the builders of the historic kiln and maintained by Mr Tan's father and is one that they strongly feel should not be lost to Singapore's future generations.

While the Tans are determined to continue with the tradition for as long as they can – a firing took place at the end of November 2012 – the future for

the kiln does look rather bleak. Its current lease expires in 2014 and with the development of the CleanTech Park fast taking shape in the area, the dragons of Jalan Bahar may well have drawn their last breaths.

Jerome Lim blogs on *The Long and Winding Road* (www.thelongandwindingroad.wordpress.com) about his impressions and experiences of life.

All photos courtesy of the author



Wood being fed manually into the firing box. An altar to the kiln can be seen on top.

Awaken the Dragon Kiln is a project that conducted workshops throughout December 2012 to create 3,000 pieces of ceramics. These will be placed in the Guan Huat Dragon Kiln and fired during a three-day festival in January, just before the dragon year ends. For more information go to www.awakenthedragonkiln.wordpress.com