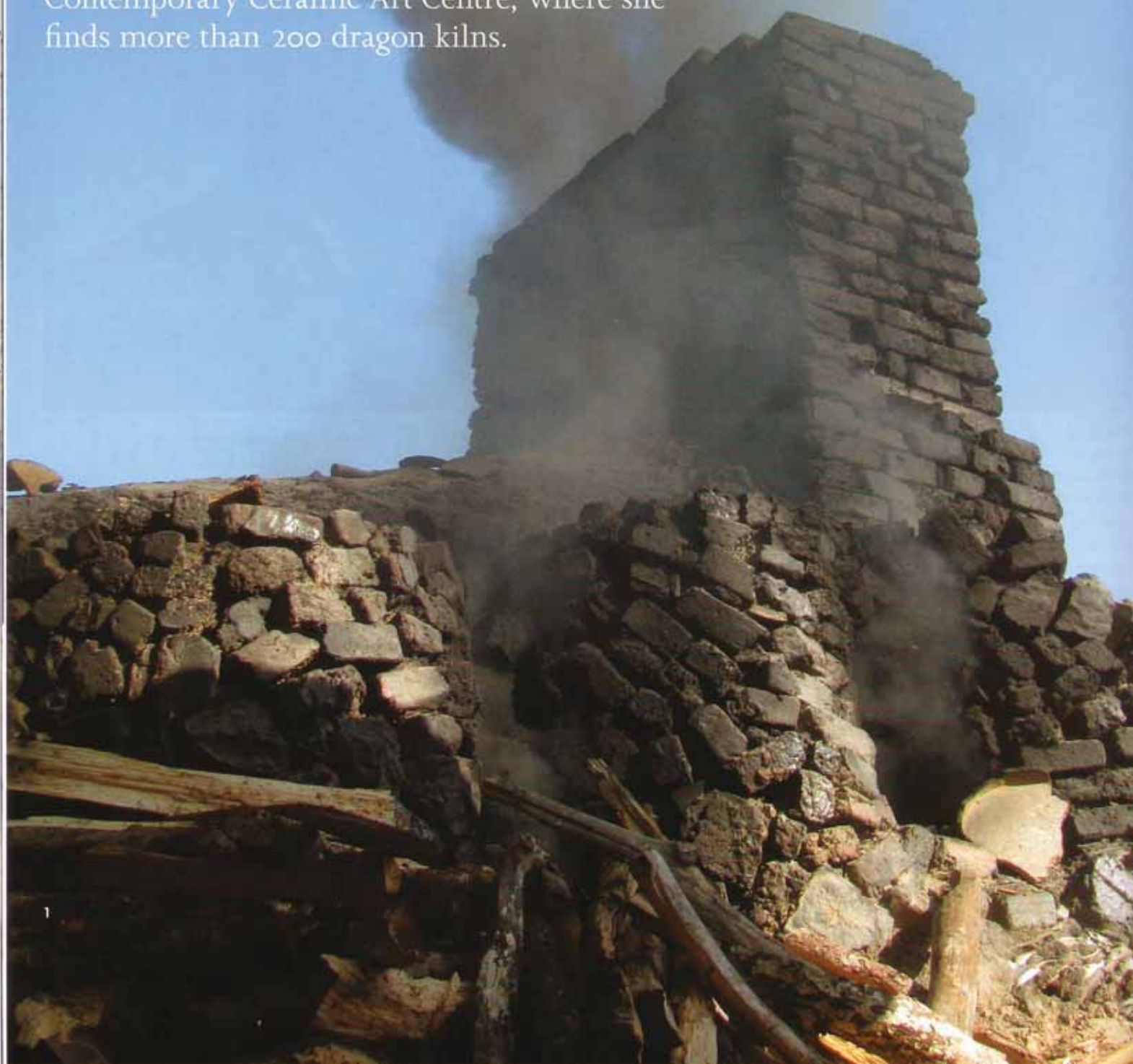


Kissed by the Dragon

Tineke van Gils visits the Yueji Kiln International Contemporary Ceramic Art Centre, where she finds more than 200 dragon kilns.



1 The last chamber of the Yueji Kiln, breathing fire 2 Wheel-thrown saggars drying under a roof; the potter's wheel is at the end 3 Porcelain teapots from the moulds are fired in a saggar, Ø42cm

The dragon kiln is breathing fire when our small group of international potters arrives. It is a living illustration of the text on the red banner in front: Warmly welcome to the honourable guests of the first wood-firing symposium of the Yueji Kiln Ceramic Art Centre in Dehua, China.

LIVING FOSSIL With more than four hundred years of history, the Yueji Kiln is the most famous wood-firing kiln in Dehua County. It is regarded as the living fossil of the climbing kilns. We are walking on 'terra sancta' – ancient history is still alive. The continuous process of porcelain making is all around. We see white fields of plaster moulds in the valley, we hear saws behind the trees, and we smell the burning of wood. There are chimneys on all hillsides. We are told that 239 wood-fired climbing kilns are still in use. They climb the hill at an eight-degree angle and average in length about fifty metres. I imagine those dragon kilns one behind another, creating a 'walking fire' of more than ten kilometres.

OPEN-AIR FACTORY From our rooms upon the hill we have a view of the Yueji Kiln opposite. In the valley the porcelain factory is draped like a blanket around the foot of the kiln. Thousands of plaster moulds filled with clay dry in the sun. They transform the valley into a dazzling white field, bordered by circles of dark roofs. In one look you can see what's happening in all the separate spaces under those roofs. Like dolls' houses there are no front walls. The moving straw hat in the white field of moulds belongs to the worker who takes teapot components out of the moulds (everything here turns around teapots) to carry them on long boards to the workshops. From dawn until midnight men and women create an eternal flow of spouts, lids, and handles. When the teapots are assembled and raw-glazed, a man brings them to the gates of the kiln. He carries on his shoulders a wooden construction with ninety-one teapots arranged on seven boards, bringing 20,000 teapots for each firing. After the firing, they are stacked into big baskets, hung on a beam, and carried down again. Near each door of the kiln, pillars of saggars are waiting to be filled with teapots.

The place in the valley where the saggars are thrown is easy to spot from above. Like pawns on a square, the big round shapes of local ochre clay dry in the sun beside the road. In Dehua the potter's wheel is used almost exclusively for trimming porcelain and throwing saggars. In a pit filled with local clay two buffalo knead the clay with their hooves as they walk in circles. The 'hu-hu' of the farmer, walking barefoot with them, can be heard from far away. Along the paths are stacks of branches and there is the continual sound of sawing. From a shed in the background we hear hammering and watch long waves of wooden hammers rise and fall as they pulverise the dry porcelain, filling the valley with their incessant rhythm. After a few days the sounds become familiar to me.

WOOD FIRING Dehua is one of the porcelain capitals of China. The translucent porcelain, which local artists have used to create



4 Putting the finishing touch to a spout
 5 Farmer with two buffalo walking the local clay for the saggars
 6 Tineke van Gils bringing her installation pieces to the dragon kiln
 7 Tineke van Gils – *Three Teapots in a Saggar*, 2009, H40cm
 8 Firemen putting sticks of wood in the side holes of the kiln
 (Photo: Anthony Stellaccio)

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devotional figures and sculptures since the Tang Dynasty (681-907), is known worldwide as *blanc de Chine*, and is a favourite of art lovers. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279) the porcelain industry reached its greatest prosperity, exporting products in large quantities. Over the centuries the process of pottery making in Dehua remained constant, but times are changing. In the twentieth century electricity changed firing methods, as Dehua porcelain can be fired in an oxidising atmosphere. It contains an exceptionally low percentage of iron, which means there is little visual change when reduced. So although wood is used for the kiln, it is not needed for reduction.

The people of Dehua are experts in firing quickly and economically. In the dry season, when the working process can go on continuously, the Yueji Kiln, filled with 20,000 teapots, can be fired with fifteen tons of wood to 1330°C in just twenty hours every ten days. To keep the porcelain white it is protected in saggars against the effects of wood ash. The teapots go by threes into the saggars, which are piled upon each other. Nowadays white Dehua porcelain is fired in electric kilns more and more. We see electric kilns firing next to dragon kilns that are falling into decay. And there is another change – during the last decade people have been moving to the cities. In Dehua it is not the younger generation carrying the pots and firing the kilns. In the future the potters' knowledge will disappear. To fire the dragon kilns strength and physical force are needed, but also expertise and skill.





KISSED BY THE FLAMES For a few days I can only absorb all this overwhelming living history as I walk around in this ancient pottery atmosphere. Then, all impressions turn into inspiration. I am a teapot maker, invited to a country where everything is focused on the making of teapots in moulds. Of course I must make teapots my way. To tell the story of the Yueji Kiln I decide to create an installation called *Three Teapots in a Saggar*.

First I go to the saggar-maker to ask for three saggars, wet and

fresh, wheel-thrown from local clay. After that I start throwing teapots in Dehua porcelain. For this project I make the teapots like balloons, without holes inside the spout and with the lid fixed to the pot. This porcelain may be the most beautiful and excellent in the world, but it is also the most difficult to work with when wet on the wheel. It is almost impossible to throw it thin and alter and assemble the soft pots immediately on the wheel. Waiting is no option because the water sinks in very quickly and then the plasticity is gone. For my teapots I fix the wet handles onto wet pots, keeping a hot air gun to hand to dry parts if collapse is imminent. In the meantime I blow into the pot using a straw that I stick through the clay. Then I drop the wet teapots into the wet saggars. I intentionally make the teapots too big for the saggars so they transform each other. My teapots, together with the local saggars, become an indissolubly new and meaningful installation.

This first symposium in the Yueji Kiln Ceramic Art Centre is a wood-firing symposium. We all wish for the beauty of the wood ash on our pieces; we hope our ceramics will be kissed by the dragon. This is quite opposite to the wish of the Dehua potters. For the first time in Yueji Kiln history the last chamber of the kiln is filled with the work of foreign artists and fired with extra wood and bark. After the firing I see that my work has met the dragon; the happy tears of ash are on the surface of my teapots. ■