

the singapore dragon

by Madhvi Subrahmanian

A community comes together to save a dragon kiln that is one of the last remaining of its kind in Singapore.

2012 was the Year of the Dragon, and as it wound down in February 2013, Singapore bid adieu to the powerful year with a celebration of its first ceramic festival "Awaken the Dragon" centered on its last surviving dragon kiln. The project invited 3000 members of the public to participate in making a collective sculpture made from clay and fired in the dragon kiln. The 140-foot-long dragon that has been in slumber for years was awakened during the festival with the first firing of the entire kiln in three decades.

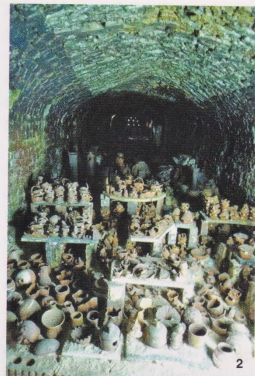
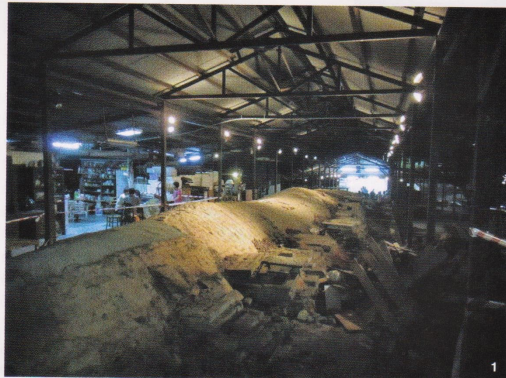
As a global financial hub, Singapore is hardly a place one thinks of as home to dragon kilns. This densely populated city-state of

five-million-plus people is located on a small island that can be criss-crossed in just half an hour. Given its rapid pace of development, the old has constantly been making way for the new, leaving hardly any room for nostalgia. Now the fate of the last dragon kiln on this space-starved island hangs in the balance.

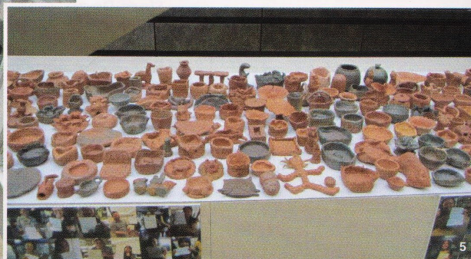
The dragon kiln traces its origin back more than 2000 years ago to the Warring States era in China (475–221BCE). Named after the mythical auspicious creature, the kiln is built on an ascending slope and is 100 m in length. The "mouth" is located at the bottom, otherwise known as the firebox, and the "tail" at the top of the slope. The bricks form the "scales" while the firebox "breathes out fire."

It was the free and indentured Chinese immigrants from the 19th and early 20th century who brought ceramic technology to Singapore to produce bowls, roof tiles, pipes, flower pots, crockery, and latex cups for rubber tapping. With a healthy supply of clay on the island, it is believed that more than 30 such kilns once existed on this tiny island. Over the years, technology changed and industrial brick making took over, fulfilling the demands for construction. Eventually the drive towards industrial development and better use of land led to the demise of the many long dragon kilns.

Jurong, where the first ceramic festival took place, was home to about nine kilns but only two remain today. In its heyday, the Thow Kwang Dragon kiln was fired once every two weeks with a few thousands wares. This kiln is now slated to be torn down by the end of the year to make room for a clean-energy industrial park.



1 The Guan Huat dragon kiln. 2 Over 3000 pieces of work packed inside the dragon kiln. 3 Front of the dragon kiln, with a shrine on the left and Mr. Toh, caretaker of the dragon kiln on the right.



4 Top view of the 3000 fired ceramic pieces displayed at the National Museum. 5 Detail of the fired pieces on display.

The last remaining dragon kiln, the Guan Huat (Guan in Mandarin means “origin or root” and Huat means “firing”), has a two-year lease on life before its fate is finalized. It was built in 1958, during Singapore’s pre-independence era, but slowly fell into disuse and was overrun by vegetation. In 2001, the area was revived and converted into the Jalan Bahar Clay Studios with several gas and electric kilns, throwing wheels, and studio spaces for potters and artists. The whole kiln, measuring 140 feet (42 m), was last fired for commercial use some 30 years ago. Based on the refractoriness of the materials used, it is believed that the kiln was designed to fire pots in the range of 2012–2192 F° (1100–1200 C°). In the last three decades however, contemporary potters have rebuilt the front 20 feet (6 m) of the kiln in high-temperature bricks and portioned the kiln to fire it partially to 2372 F° (1300 C°). The kiln has since been fired only partially and only once or twice a year.

In a young country like Singapore, strong tensions exist between holding on to the past and expanding into the future. Numerous petitions have been signed to save the last dragon kiln and recognize it for its heritage value. But here, like many places, market forces tend to prevail, thus the kiln and studio space may well get sacrificed to 21st-century technologies and the growing needs of the tiny island.

The “Awaken the Dragon Festival 2013” was a community-based art project organized to draw attention to this site and bring the larger ceramic community together. This altruistic project is the brainchild of artist Michelle Lim, Woon Tien (founder of the Post Museum), and Jennifer Teo (director of the Post Museum). Great excitement was created as the festival drew the participation of schools, the elderly, museums, offices, etc., to produce about 3000 pieces of work for the firing.

“We want to tell people the story of the dragon kiln. Hopefully people will tell their children and their children’s children about the dragon kiln and the stories will remain although the kiln may not,” says co-organizer and ceramist Michelle Lim.

The organizers invited Ian Jones, Moraig Mckenna, and Janet Deboos from Australia to give workshops, lead the firing, and participate in panel discussions. There were raku workshops, along with forums and demonstrations by various local and international artists. Galleries around town hosted ceramic exhibitions by local artists and the studios were abuzz with activities and celebrations.

Singapore has quite a sizeable ceramic community and there were about 100 volunteers who came together to work on this event. The festival was centered on the three-day firing, which was fueled by furniture scraps from numerous furniture makers around town. The firing and festival was a great success and the organizers felt encouraged enough to plan another festival in 2014. The next festival though may well be the swan song of the Guan Huat dragon kiln and the Jalan Bahar studios. “As a Singaporean, I am pragmatic,” says Lim, “maybe there is no point holding on to a kiln which has no role to play in contemporary times. But I do hope the dragon kiln transforms into a new avatar, playing an educational role and whispering stories of times gone by.”

References:

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