

● *Anjani Khanna*

The China Feeling: Experiments with Clay in the Middle Country



Commenting on a porcelain piece I named “China Feeling” at the Fuping Pottery Art Village in Shaanxi province, young William, one of the Chinese translators assigned to us, made an interesting observation. “Good name,” he said, “*China* with capital C – country; *china* with small C – pottery!” It took me a minute to comprehend what he was saying, but soon realized that he had put an interesting twist on the name I had chosen for my creation. Porcelain has always been so closely identified with China that it is still called “china” in everyday English usage.

China has been home to ceramics for centuries. The earliest pottery was produced here some 20,000 years ago.¹ Burnished and painted earthenware was used by neolithic cultures located along the Yellow and Yangtze rivers over 10,000 years ago. This gave way to high-temperature ceramics of which the earliest were developed during the late Shang period (c. 1766–1122 BCE).² These were the forerunners of the highly prized celadon, which was exported around the world. There are ancient kiln sites that bear testimony to a huge production and trade over centuries.

Not far from one such ancient kiln site – the Yaozhou kiln which was established in the Tang period (618–907 CE) and prospered under the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), and which was known for the exquisite celadon produced there – lies the town of Fuping. Here two Chinese visionaries started a unique project in the early years of this century. Xu Dufeng, owner of a large ceramics facility that produces bricks

and tiles for construction and ceramic artefacts for use and decoration (figure 1), in collaboration with ceramics expert Dr I Chi Hsu, set up a remarkable contemporary ceramics space and programme. They established the FuLe International Ceramic Art Museum on a campus of 1,000 acres (over 4 square kilometres), amidst apple and persimmon orchards. The Museum consists of a number of pavilions that house contemporary ceramic art produced by over 500 artists from countries around the world. The collections have been built up through a unique residency programme where the artists are invited to work for four to six weeks at the Fuping Pottery Art Village. Their works, made using the numerous technical facilities and skills available at the factory, find a home in a building dedicated to their country's ceramic art.

1
Roof tiles and other building materials produced at the factory in Fuping, Shaanxi province, China. Photograph: Mudita Bhandari.



The FuLe International Ceramic Art Museum

The central exhibition building was designed by Liu Kecheng, Dean of the Architecture School of Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, and was constructed in 2004. With an area of over 1,000 square metres, this building has a form based on an ancient tubular pottery kiln and displays works by artists from China as well as other parts of the world. The French collection, housed in a white cube-shaped building, was the first country exhibit, established in 2005, followed by the Scandinavian collection that opened in November the same year. Over the last decade artists from the Americas, Europe, Australia, Southeast Asia and Russia have worked at Fuping and have added their work to the Museum's collection of contemporary ceramics. Artists are encouraged to return to work in Fuping again and again, making it a living museum.

There had been little interest in creating an Indian collection at Fuping until Auroville-based ceramicist Adil Writer met with Dr I Chi Hsu at Clay Edge in Gulgong, Australia in 2007, where Writer made a presentation on the work of contemporary Indian artists working in clay. Dr Hsu was accompanied by the renowned Australian ceramicist and magazine editor, the late Janet Mansfield. As Writer tells it, Dr Hsu admitted that he had till then been under the impression that ceramic art in India was limited to the creation of terracotta horses and elephants. He was delighted to see the work presented and asked Writer to put together a group of Indian artists reflecting the diversity of ceramic art practice in the country. Over 30 artists were invited to send in materials to be vetted by the hosts in China. After several months of communication 18 artists were selected and invited to spend the August of 2013 at Fuping. The hosts generously offered to take care of all expenses and provide material and technical support to enable each artist to fulfil her vision.

We arrived in China with much anticipation and some trepidation. We were met by the lovely Melody, our translator who showed us around the museums and the facility. We saw the works made by other visiting artists and how they had used the traditional low-temperature tricolour Tang glazes in contemporary ways. The beautiful porcelain and celadon had found various forms of expression in their hands. Some had used the bricks and tiles produced in the factory to create new works. Others had referenced their Chinese experience and there were ceramic pillows that told contemporary stories, ceramic umbrellas and works that referenced the Terracotta Army that had been unearthed not very far from Fuping in the 1970s. Other pieces were recognizable as signature works of the artists who made them, but altered by the materials and conditions in which they were made. There were sculptural animal forms that were traditionally made in dough, made by local artists. There was much to be inspired by!

A tour of the factory revealed a number of clays to choose from, including porcelain from Jingdezhen (the pre-eminent historical and living centre of Chinese porcelain). There were test kilns, large gas kilns as well as an enormous tunnel kiln, which ran 24x7 and was used to fire bricks and tiles. We learnt we could use any of the facilities and that there was no limit to the number of firings we could have (something that invariably limits potters as firings are expensive not only in terms of fuel, but also time





and effort). They would accommodate our work in any kiln that was being fired on that day, provided we wanted to fire our work at that kiln’s maturing temperature.

We were shown the glazes available and the coloured clays that could be used as slips to coat our objects. We saw the plaster workshop where there was already an array of moulds available for use, or where we could have moulds made if we required them. In the factory shed, some workers were making sculpture with moulds, while some were painstakingly carving away glaze to reveal intricate patterns; others were producing large platters using a jigger and jolley system. The bricks in the factory were machine extruded, but hand cut and manually loaded on the trolleys that fed the tunnel kiln. The facility was a mix of skilled handwork, manual labour and mechanization – and we would have access to most of it!

The possibilities were immense, but time was short and we were eager to get down to work soon. We needed buckets, tables, boards, newspaper, plastic sheets, brushes and a myriad other things. And while the hosts were happy to provide, we soon realized that things in China could be as difficult as in our own country, though in the larger scheme perhaps more efficient. Getting what we needed involved the usual badgering and follow-up familiar to us in India. Much was lost in translation and even gestures didn’t work. We discovered, for instance, that using fingers to indicate numbers did not work as the Chinese use different finger gestures for numbers. But as we got to work, items the lack of which we had griped about began to materialize. The frustrations of depending on Melody and another initially reluctant translator Eric, who seemed overwhelmed by the unseasonal heat, eventually blossomed into a wonderful working relationship. We got to know the girls who brought us clay and helped with random tasks, the various shifus – managers and kiln and plaster masters – who oftentimes struggled to understand what we wanted, and warned us if we headed off in a direction that they knew would be disastrous given their long

2

“Hsuan Tsang’s Dream I, II, III”, by Vineet Kacker. Ceramic and thread; three pieces, each 22.9 x 22.9 x 76.2 cm. Photograph: FLICAM.

familiarity with the materials that were new to us. The language of clay seemed to bind us all.

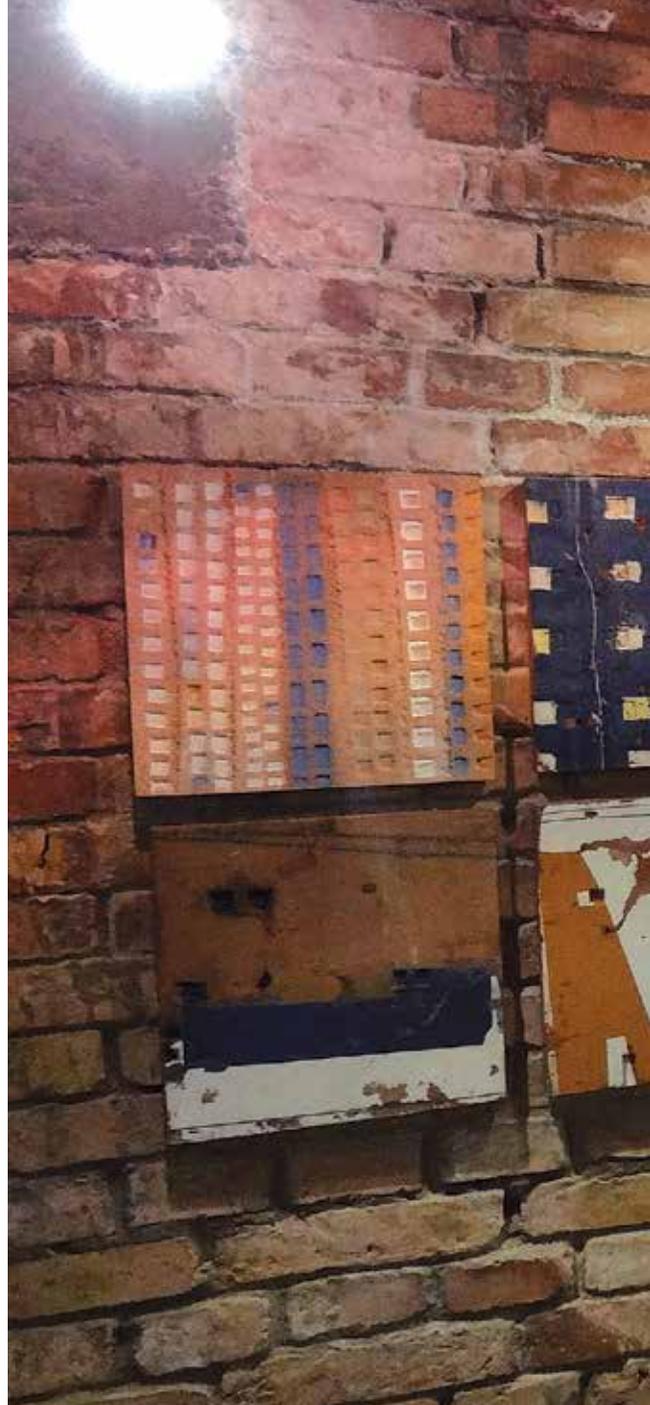
In Hsu's letter of invitation to each of us he had said he hoped that our "China Feeling" would imbue the work we made in Fuping. The hosts arranged for us to see the famous Terracotta Warriors for which Xi'an is internationally known. We trooped across the Shaanxi countryside, past cornfields and apple orchards curiously devoid of the human presence so familiar in rural India, to the World Heritage site where the Terracotta Army was unearthed. The army was buried as a part of the tomb of the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, and dates back to 210 BCE. It was intended to protect the emperor in his afterlife. It is believed that the tomb was raided and burnt soon after the emperor's death and most of the thousands of sculptures destroyed in a fire. In contemporary times, the Chinese have painstakingly recreated the warriors from the shards found at the archaeological dig site. As one gazes at the warriors and their terracotta horses arranged in military array one cannot help but wonder at the imperial vision of the past and the intentions of the present dispensation.

A trip into Xi'an revealed an extremely modern metropolis built over an ancient city, parts of which were restored and rebuilt almost obliterating any signs of age. The Great Wild Goose Pagoda, which was built in 652 CE under the Tang dynasty and renovated in subsequent centuries, once held the sutras that were brought to China from India by Xuanzang, the 7th-century Buddhist monk and traveller known as Hsuan Tsang to Indians. As one walked around the monument references to India were explained in accompanying texts, creating a connectedness that one had not expected to feel. Similarly, a visit to the Great Mosque of Xi'an on the occasion of Id left one questioning one's assumptions of modern China.

Mr Xu, our generous host, invited us to view his own private collection of Chinese ceramics. He had a warehouse full of treasures that spanned a few millennia of Chinese ceramic history. We had a rushed walk through the collection that seemed designed to shock and awe, which it certainly did. We also visited the Yaozhou Kiln Museum and Chen Lu village, an ancient village where once there were thousands of functioning kilns embedded in the hillside producing ceramic-ware in large quantities.

The Artists and Their Works

Each of the artists negotiated their experience in different ways and while some chose to allow the materials to drive their aesthetic choices, others allowed China to colour their work. Delhi-based Vineet Kacker, known for his work inspired by Buddhist architecture, made chortens called "Hsuan Tsang's Dream I, II, III", referencing the pilgrim's 17-year journey to India and back (figure 2). Says Kacker, "And now here I was, making these ancient forms in a new China that seemed so impatient with history! On my Chinese chortens the spires are wrapped with red thread, indicating today's China, with its new values systems. The stark black and white bodies of the chortens accentuate the dual nature of things – the yin against the yang, the spiritual against the material, the unchanging eternal against the rapidly changing transient."





3
“Changing Landscapes”,
by Reyaz Badruddin.
Ceramic; 365.7 x 76.2
cm. Photograph: Reyaz
Badruddin.

Mudita Bhandari from Indore and Reyaz Badruddin from Delhi too are influenced by architecture and spaces. Mudita used the roof tile extrusions that were being produced at the factory. She chose these tiles to explore the possibility of creating spaces with ins and outs and to play with light and shadow. The Art Village itself was an inspiration to her. There were no boundaries dividing the public and private spaces; the huge kiln-shaped museums stood quietly and concurrently with neat green public parks bubbling with local people and their evening activities. She says, “For me it was a space that disconnected me from the outer world and took me for a walk within. At night it invited one into the mysteries of the beautiful play of dark and light.”

Reyaz was shocked by the growing urbanization in and around Shanghai, when he first landed in China. He says, “I could see many skyscrapers in the process of being built, some in the centre of fields, which were still green with monumental construction in the making.” One doesn’t see “homes” anymore, but “square holes” which are modern homes for millions. The changing landscapes and ideas of home/house/belongings are becoming an integral part of his work, he says. While at Fuping he used extruded clay slabs to create his own landscape (figure 3).



4

“Visitors to the City”, by Shampa Shah. Urbanscape, porcelain; 61 x 35.6 x 15.2 cm and 50.8 x 30.4 x 15.2 cm. Hybrid forms, terracotta with porcelain slip; 25.4 x 30.4 x 15.2 cm, 55.9 x 35.6 x 15.2 cm and 71.1 x 40.7 x 20.3 cm. Photograph: FLICAM.

Shampa Shah who until quite recently was the head of the ceramics section at the Indira Gandhi National Museum of Man in Bhopal, was also affected by the towering cityscape of Shanghai on arrival. The stacks of bricks and tiles produced at the factory she felt were a miniature representation of the urbanscape and this was reflected in the geometrical forms she developed in porcelain. However, she says, “My cityscape has visitors – trees and flowers and other curvy creatures from the Fuping orchards and Chen Lu pottery village – who cast their shadows and reflections on it.” She wove her signature hybrid animal and plant forms through the geometric porcelain (figure 4).

Singapore-based artist Madhvi Subrahmanian recalls the scale of the brick factory, the dust, the heat and the geometry of the brick that she first encountered at Fuping. She says, “I was drawn to the mass of bricks and the scale of the factory that epitomized the frenzy of building taking place in China.” Attracted by the brick’s form, she worked subconsciously, deconstructing the raw brick, slicing it like bread and reconstructing it into lingam-like forms, with architectural and city overtones (figure 5). The brick, she says became both her material and inspiration.

Amrita Dhawan from Bangalore in her wall installation entitled “Ganga Jamuna” alludes to a cross-cultural language in textile and colour – India and China connected *by* and *in* silk. Eight vertical slabs of slip-painted clay refer to both the Indian Kanjivaram sari and the Chinese silk wall-scroll (figure 6). She says, “At the ends of each length of billowing black silk lie symbolic colours: a Turmeric Temple Pallu [the end of a sari draped over the shoulder]; a Red-is-for-Luck-or-Communism Border. Look again! It is the Imperial Yellow of the Emperor’s robes; the red of Kumkum [vermillion powder].”

Delhi-based artist Ela Mukherjee used the slip-casting facilities offered at the factory to create an array of ceramic bottles, set against mirrors which multiplied

the numbers, referencing she says the display of the terracotta warriors arranged in formation. The repetition of form is an integral part of her work and she also created another installation referencing ancient Chinese rattles, now only available in cheap plastic.

Ashwini Bhat found new impetus developing her work inspired by Chinese pillows encountered on a previous visit. Though she had been working on the form, she says her work changed to become more animated, more architectural, more defined (figure 7). She also found that one of the clays available at Fuping took very well to stretching. In fact she says it was better than all the other clays she had worked with, allowing her to stretch it to create a landscape entitled “Silk Route”.

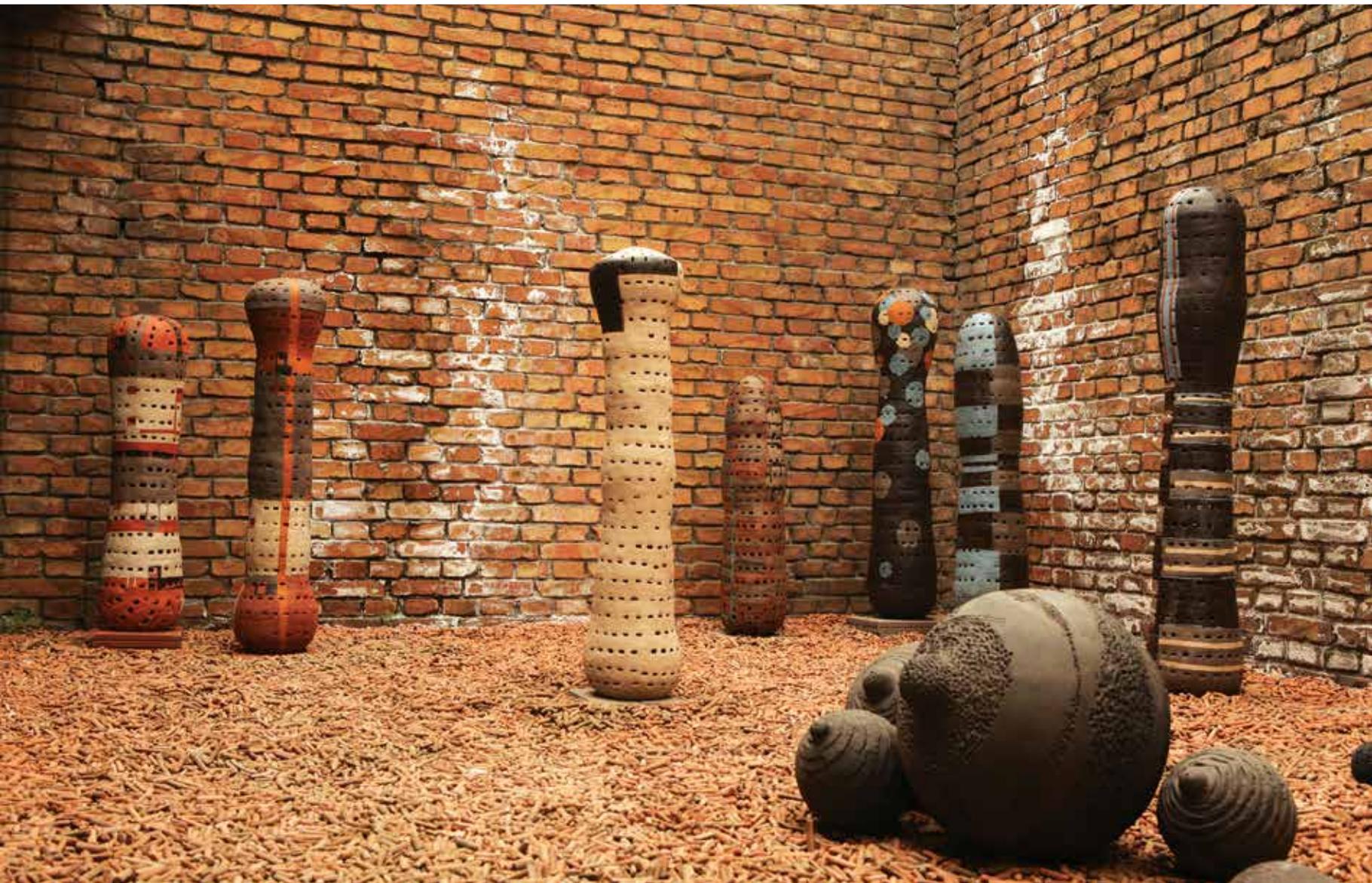
While Aarti Vir from Hyderabad had been working on the idea of thresholds, of beginnings, of departures, of being on the brink, neither inside nor out, inspired by worn temple steps seen in Bali, in China she was influenced by the cloud patterns she saw on almost every other object in the Fuping factory. She says, “It appeared on the Mosque in Xi’an, on the Pagoda and on the Taoist temple. It was light, it travelled up

5

Background: “Untitled”, an installation by Madhvi Subrahmanian. Black brick clay and terracotta brick clay with coloured slips; 142.2 x 155 cm.

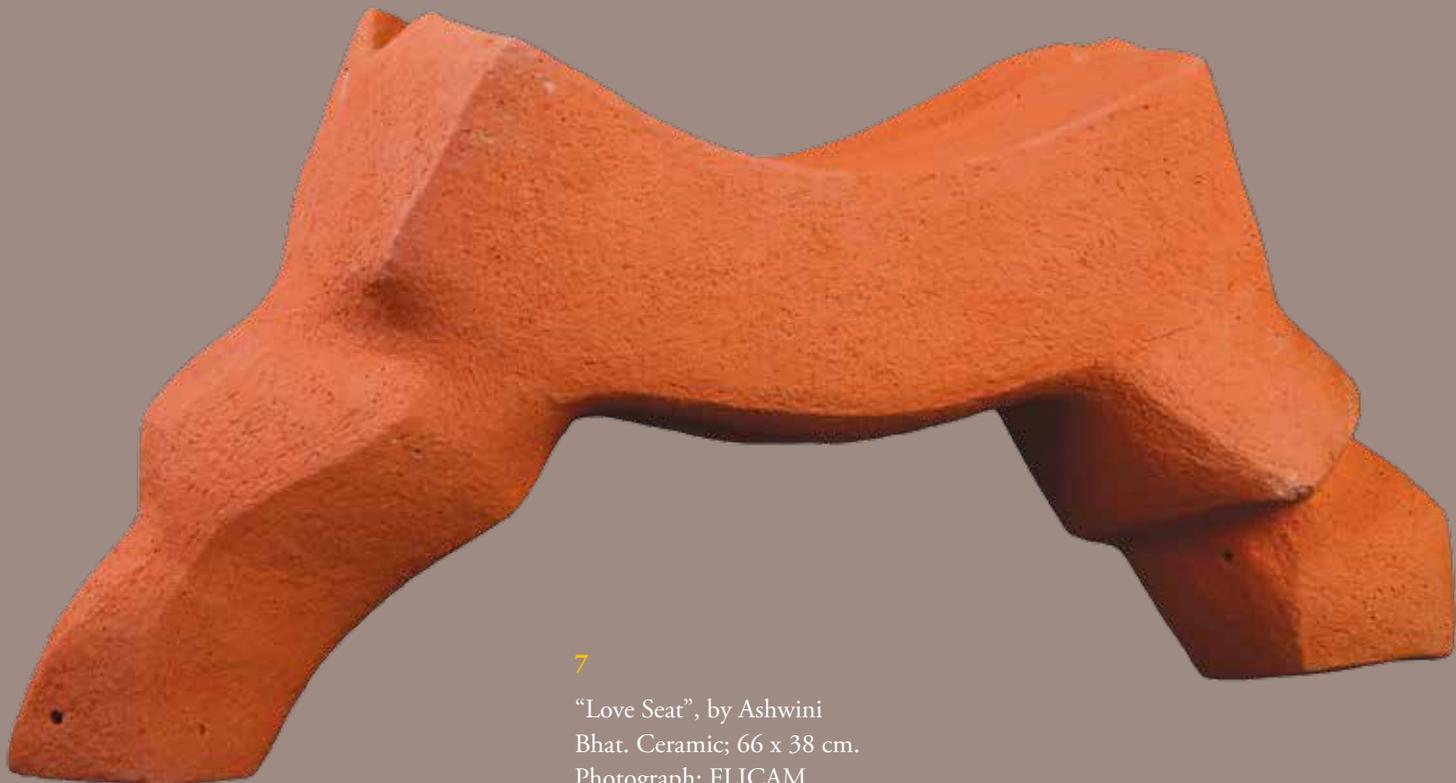
Right foreground: “Mountain-Bosom of the Earth”, an installation by Aniruddh Sagar. Porcelain and smoke-fired terracotta; various sizes.

Photograph: FLICAM.





6
“Ganga Jamuna”, a wall
installation by Amrita
Dhawan. Ceramic;
91.4 x 152.4 cm.
Photograph: FLICAM.



7
“Love Seat”, by Ashwini
Bhat. Ceramic; 66 x 38 cm.
Photograph: FLICAM.

8

“Blue and White 1”, by Deborah Smith. Porcelain, straw tassel; 16 pieces, each 30.4 x 8.9 cm. Photograph: FLICAM.



9

“Jar”, by Rakhee Kane. Ceramic; 43.1 (diameter) x 68.6 cm (height). Photograph: FLICAM.



to the skies . . . it appeared on my forms. Thresholds still, steps still. Journeys still. And then, of a sudden, stepping through the clouds, into the light? Into the darkness? To be lost, to be found, to step into or step out of . . .”

Sharbani Das Gupta travelled from New Mexico in the United States to join the Indian team. Her work has been about the human dependence on and exploitation of the environment. Two aspects, she says, that seem to contradict each other. In Fuping her installation “Cloud Catchers”, comprising three towers that finger-like trail through porcelain clouds and have water on tap below, reflects a rising concern with the use of natural resources. “Searching for China” uses the form of an auger to reflect her experience of trying to penetrate the walls that obscure an understanding of China.

Architect ceramicist Ray Meeker also drew inspiration from the enormous Terracotta Army site. He says, “Pit One, the main attraction was of course stupefying in scale in every sense, but it was Pit Two that I found most compelling. It was the architecture – the geometry of excavation. Again, the monumentality. Deep terraced steps, a maze of inverted ziggurats, covering a field of ‘unknown soldiers.’” In keeping with his work in India, he created two large works using extruded bricks from the factory.

Deborah Smith who founded and manages Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, which has set the standard for functional wood-fired stoneware pottery in India, chose to work with porcelain. She has long experience painting cobalt blue patterns on stoneware and she explored her painting techniques on Jingdezhen porcelain to create a distinctive body of work (figure 8).

Abhay Pandit from Mumbai worked with textured slabs and Aniruddh Sagar from Bhopal created a striking installation of textured spheres in varying sizes (see figure 5). While some of the spheres were made in porcelain, others were smoke-

fired. In the later part of the residency we discovered the smoke kiln, which was used to blacken traditional ware that is carved through to reveal the fired clay below. Sagar and Auroville-based artist Rakhee Kane used the smoke kiln to advantage. Kane also produced a series of large jars and platters using the porcelain as well as the earthenware clays available. Her platters were characteristically made with poured slips and stretched clay, fired in the tunnel kiln to striking effect (figure 9).

Leena Batra from Delhi and Adil Writer from Auroville explored the various offerings available at Fuping. They painted on platters produced at the factory. Writer converted the terracotta warriors into his Parsi brethren (figure 10), and Leena immortalized – in a series of heads – the shifus at the factory with their characteristic dangling cigarettes and floppy hairstyles. Writer’s architectural training found expression as he manipulated extruded bricks to create sculpture.

10
“Endangered Species”,
by Adil Writer.
Stoneware; six pieces,
each 45.7 cm high.
Photograph: Adil
Writer.





11
 “China Feeling”,
 by Anjani Khanna.
 Porcelain; five pieces,
 each 45.7 cm high.
 Photograph: Anjani
 Khanna.

I personally was steeped in my China experience, trying to decode so much that I did not understand – the contradiction between the seemingly vibrant daily life of urban Chinese (young women dressed in Western garb, moving far more freely than in India, well-fed people, clean streets) and the foreign perspectives of a one-party system, a totalitarian government and fears of growing Chinese hegemony. My work has long questioned the idolizing of people, societies, nation-states and I continued to question this with my figurative sculptural piece, “Untitled”. On the other hand, “China Feeling” was a light-hearted piece using porcelain miniature terracotta army soldiers altered to reflect my impressions of China (figure 11).



12

The art works on display in the Indian pavilion at FuLe International Ceramic Art Museum, Fuping, Shaanxi, China.
Photograph: Anjani Khanna.

The five weeks of work culminated in a grand opening of the Indian pavilion (figure 12), in conjunction with the inauguration of the 4th International Ceramic Magazine Editors' Conference, attended by editors of all the major international magazines on ceramic work. The Chinese hosts outdid our expectations with a grand stage for speeches, performances by traditional drummers and a fireworks display. As Writer said, "Only good comes out of working outside one's comfort zone. My time in Fuping has only been rewarding ... and indelible." All the Indian artists who had the opportunity to participate in this programme echoed these sentiments. Not only did we gain much from being in China and working at the Fuping Pottery Art Village, but the chance to work so closely with other artists from India was also unique. While we left our work behind, we carried back memories of an enriching experience.

GLOSSARY

Celadon: refers to a number of transparent glazes in a variety of colours, predominantly green, grey or pale blue, used on porcelain or stoneware clays. Pieces on which these glazes are used are often referred to as celadons.

Earthenware: a ceramic material which is fired at a lower temperature than porcelain and stoneware and can be porous.

Glaze: a layer of glass that is fused into place on the body of a ceramic object.

Jigger and jolley system: forming a pot using a spinning plaster mould, which shapes either the inside (jigger) or the outside (jolley) of the pot.

Porcelain: a ceramic material made by heating clay to temperatures between 1200 and 1400°C. It is tough, vitreous, strong and known for its whiteness and translucence.

Slip or engobe: a suspension of clay in water that is used to decorate ceramic ware.

Stoneware: a ceramic material that is fired at lower temperatures than porcelain and can be opaque. It is usually strong and resistant to scratching, and not very porous.

Terracotta: the orange brown fired colour of an iron-rich red burning clay, usually fired to earthenware temperatures.

Tricolour Tang glaze or Tangsancai: a kind of low-temperature glazed pottery, primarily yellow, brown and green, which was popular under the Tang dynasty.

NOTES

1 Xiaohong Wu et al., "Early Pottery at 20,000 Years Ago in Xianrendong Cave, China", *Science*, 336: 6089 (June 29, 2012), pp. 1696–1700.

2 <http://www.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/ceramics/early-chinese-ceramics-bronze.cfm>.