

## Let Spirit Flow and Evolve Naturally in Action

By Ma Yongjian

The first time I visited Ah Yu's studio in the Guangzhou Fine Art Academy, I didn't see her. Instead, I saw one of her pottery pieces. It was not a big piece and seemed to have been made rather randomly. By first look, it was quite like a Chinese folk pottery work. Yet when I examined it, I found its shape and technique conspicuously different from traditional folk art. It was much more relaxed and natural, not bound by any rules. There was an devotedness into art, though she was born in the 1970s, she is already a mature and outstanding in her artistic expression.

Her achievement should be attributed to the influence from her father, Mr. Tan Chang. When most of the children in 1970s got in touch with arts through playing with mud, graffiti or handicraft at handicraft class, Ah Yu was brought into the world of art by her friend-like father. She would have finished her earliest "work" by the side of her busy father in the pottery factory in Shiwan. I believe these casual children's "games" have marked her mind deeply. Yet her father's influence is much more than just providing an artistic environment. He has also cultivated her understanding of arts, her ability to handle materials and shapes as well as the affection to traditional folk arts. Most importantly, he set a model look up to for Ah Yu—a simple yet passionate artists who cares little for money and fame. The Ah Yu we see today is a most passionate and creative artist. When talking about her work, Ah Yu called herself a "laborer" because she spent most of her life busily working, including some heavy "physical labor". But one can sense her real happiness at her talk. This can be proved by her work photo. Ah Yu in the photo is completely focused at her work, there seemed to be nothing but the work in front of her. Different from many who talk more and act less, Ah Yu constantly seeks for inspiration in actions and turns her work into a daily and lively action. She employs all possible time to create, including the exemplification she does in her class, which is an extension of her thoughts. Even the long, tedious and monotonous trip to the University City is exploited as a time for contemplating or clearing thoughts. She calls it a "capture trip",

meaning a time when she captures all the fast ideas in her mind and formulate them in her notebook

Such an approach of combining life and art closely makes me think that any simple technical analysis of Ah Yu's work will be impudent and superficial, because her work is intricately connected to a spiritual life and spiritual world. These images generated from heart, though austere and silent, would never be ignored. Every time I look at Ah Yu's work, I would feel a power to suck me into that unique spiritual space. That is a complete and sufficient world generated from heart and grows in a most natural condition. It sparkles with an inner spirit. Though it is somewhat connected to reality, one would forget about the existence of real world and would want to accomplish a special and happy heart journey with the artist. Naturalness and self-sufficiency are the fundamental features of Ah Yu's work and therefore her creation always seems to be free and boundless.

I think with her work, Ah Yu has aroused the torpid spiritual power within our hearts, a power uncontaminated by civilization yet has inevitably be suppressed in modern society because people have got lost and superficial with their fathomless desires for materials and cannot see their own hearts clearly any more. Therefore in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many western artists tried to seek inspirations from pre-historical aboriginal arts, primitive arts or marginalized folk arts, and tried to use such lively spirit to confront the hard yet cold reality and "civilized diseases" in a more and more refined modern world. However, many approached these artists' work from the perspective of a simple "format revolution" and failed to conceive their meanings in a more spiritual sense. Some "followers" can imitate very well, yet their imitations would seem stiff due to a lack of an inner power. Such intentional study and imitation actually replaces the former boundaries with new doctrines. Yet we do not see such limitations in Ah Yu's work. I think this is a result from the spiritual influence from her father, her own simplistic personality, the enjoyment from a totally selfless working mentality and the efforts of constantly defying rules. I don't see simple appropriation from any object, any former artistic domain or fellow artists' experiment in Ah Yu's work. Instead these elements are like seeds in her mind, after

her long cultivation has grown into artistic images hallmarked with her own spirit.

Apart from these spiritual seeds, the artist is very curious about unknown domains and incidental shapes. Such curiosity has undoubtedly stimulate the artist to go into a broader spiritual world. Many times I am surprised by Ah Yu's sensibility towards shapes. Such sensibility, on one hand provides her a sharp observation into random changes in shape; on the other hand enables her to make full uses of such random changes in her work and incorporate these changes harmoniously into her style. In other words, Ah Yu often travels freely in the world of shapes and masters the changes of shapes, make them to grow like an organic creation one after another. In her work, shapes can take the form of full volumes, or can appear in anti-volume "empty holes". They gain life in expanding, intertwining, winding, infiltrating, including or even splitting from each other. They make an easy reference to what 20<sup>th</sup> Century American artist Bullock's words: "I want to become nature". This is a nameless, endless creation that beats with heart. Ah Yu once described to me her creative process. She said she respected the incidental inspiration in her work. That is to say, Ah Yu's creation often does not follow a plan. Most of the time, she just have an idea about what she wants to make. The idea is not the same to the final work. The incidents in the process of creation are a vital part in her work. She thinks creation is a kind of "adventure", a brave endeavor to break "being set up". As a result, Ah Yu's long time in work is not a "repetitive product-making" process, but a constant venture into untouched domain. This also makes her working process intriguing. In this process, any possible or impossible elements can become her motive to create—like a sudden whim or an accident, they can all be part of her new work. No doubt such experimental creation makes the shapes in her work out of control, yet it is also one way of stimulation for her. It should be noted that Ah Yu has mentioned the influence of the artist Zeng Peng many times in her notes, especially his improvisation and quick expression. These are actually an expression of privity between the artist's mind and materials and shapes, gained through long time in working and exploration.

Ah Yu's early work is mainly pottery. In recent years, she has started with metal sculpturing and has been more into the characters of materials. This is a message that

Ah Yu has now purposely expand her art space and is also a sign of further development in maturity. Metal sculpturing and pottery are totally different fields in materials. Although they both take form as shape-building, the processes of making them and their effects on the viewers' psychology differ rather greatly. This means some experiences gained during long time working in pottery can cause failures in metal sculpturing. She needs to transform smoothly while maintaining her unique personal style. But obviously she has fully understood and overcome the challenge in such differences. Her metal sculptures make use of features in metal sculpturing very well and have brought many new concepts into material expressing. I think such efforts will help Ah Yu to further identify herself in art and put the shadows of former artists and folk art tradition behind. It has also influenced her pottery work back. I have also noticed that Ah Yu wrote in her notes that she was planning to take a journey to the Northeast in order to understand a certain metal making skill. She said this was unimaginable to herself before. Yet I think this is exactly a sign of further artistic maturity, because she has begun to "communicate" with her materials more rationally and more particularly to ensure the natural flow and evolution of her artistic sensibility.

As a contemporary female artist, Ah Yu has never promoted herself with more modern notions, like the popular ideas of "identity" or "gender". Instead she always makes her art with a quite simplistic mind. It is just such spiritual purity that endowers her work to be beyond time and culture. It makes her work move the viewers no matter in clamor or after the clamor with its spiritual power. One will feel peaceful and relaxed. I think that might be what is most needed in today's flamboyant world.

Film : « Une vie d'argile » / « A clay life »  
Jacques Kaufmann  
Vice-President of UNESCO

La chine est réputée pour être une très ancienne culture. Pour la céramique, on ne peut dénombrer les contributions qui ont leur origine dans ce pays depuis des temps immémoriaux – on parle de 6000 ans -, et qui ont ensuite essaimé dans le monde.

Certaines sont encore actives, soit dans certains centres réputés internationalement (Jingdezhen pour la porcelaine par exemple, Ixing pour les théières, etc...), soit au contraire dans des lieux extrêmement reculés, voire oubliés de l'histoire.

Les changements actuels de la société chinoise, rapides et profonds, exigent de conserver comme un trésor de l'humanité les témoignages encore vivants de techniques ancestrales, avant qu'elles ne disparaissent purement et simplement.

Le travail de Tan Hongyu s'inscrit dans ce champ de recherches, et s'apparente à celui de l'anthropologue, soucieux de témoignages qui puissent rendre compte de modes de vie comme de savoirs en danger.

Tan Hongyu observe et filme ainsi, à partir de ses connaissances personnelles dans le domaine et avec un sentiment d'urgence humaniste, ces aspects d'une céramique qui se formulent par des contenus comme : ruralité et besoins locaux, techniques héritées dans la parentalité, besoins vitaux et symboliques.

Le contexte rural donne le cadre, et l'on retrouve les animaux du quotidien, l'agriculture et ses rythmes, les chants du travail ou du repos.

La qualité du document filmé, la véracité du témoignage, les contenus techniques et ethnologiques en font un film émouvant pour tout amateur de céramique, et de manière générale, pour tous ceux qui cherchent les traces d'une humanité échappant, encore un peu, à la mondialisation.

**“A CLAY LIFE”**  
a film by TAN Hongyu

Jacques Kaufmann

**China is famous for its extraordinarily ancient culture, going back an estimated 6'000 years. In the field of ceramics, its contributions to the art of pottery are incalculable. Many of the traditions that have spread throughout the world after originating in China are still alive and actively practised in the country – sometimes in centres that are well-known internationally such as Jingdezhen for porcelain or Ixing for tea pots but, in other cases, often confined to extremely remote rural areas that history has long since passed by.**

**Faced with the pace and depth of the changes taking place in contemporary Chinese society, it is essential to recognize what is left of these ancient skills as a treasure of humanity that must be preserved before it is too late.**

**Tan Hongyu's work is part of just such an effort and can be likened to anthropological work attempting to document techniques and ways of life that are in danger of disappearing. Informed by his own practice of ceramics and motivated by a real sense of urgency, Tan Hongyu identifies and records on film**

**aspects of ceramic practices that are rooted in issues such as rural life and local needs, the transmission of techniques handed down over generations, utilitarian and symbolic functions.**

**Against an bygone rural background, she presents us with a world marked by the domestication of animals, the rythms of small-scale agriculture and the traditional songs that accompany periods of work and rest. The documentary quality of the film, the authenticity of the protagonists, the importance of the technical and ethnographic information it contains make the film particularly moving to anyone interested in ceramics and, more generally, to all those concerned with the survival of human culture in an increasingly globalized world.**

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### A propos d' «Une vie d'argile » de TAN Hongyu

J'ai rencontré TAN Hongyu ainsi que Caroline CHENG au 7° FIFAV de Montpellier où nous avons présenté avec Jean-Paul Pénard notre film sur le Vietnam « Sous le vent de la mondialisation : Bat Trang, un village de métier vietnamien ». Il convient même de dire que c'est grâce au Festival que nous avons rencontré ces deux céramistes. Comme je travaille maintenant depuis 14 ans en Chine où, en tant que chercheur CNRS et socio-anthropologue, j'ai réalisé de nombreuses études dans les villes, les industries et les activités et réalisé là 4 films documentaires de recherche, nous avons vivement sympathisés.

Caroline CHENG m'a ainsi invité en mai 2010 à présenter notre film dans son atelier et centre d'artistes de JINGDEZHEN, berceau de la céramique chinoise. J'ai passé 3 jours là-bas et donné une conférence après la projection de notre film, sous-titré pour la circonstance en chinois. Cette séance a donné lieu à un débat passionné et passionnant sur les formes de développement de cette activité et sur les problèmes rencontrés actuellement. D'éventuels nouveaux projets de tournage communs sont d'ailleurs envisagés sur les évolutions de cette ville, au passé brillant mais aujourd'hui quelque peu sinistrée.

J'ai retrouvé pour sa part TAN Hongyu dans son studio de Canton en juin 2011. Je savais, par nos échanges de mails, qu'elle poursuivait son travail ethnographique présenté et primé à Montpellier sur les minorités ethniques (« Pottery of the ethnic minorities in southwest China ») et qu'elle était allée tourner dans l'île de Hainan. J'avoue avoir eu un choc en découvrant ses rushes et ses premiers montages. Ca n'était plus de la simple ethnographie des gestes du travail des potiers : c'était de l'anthropologie, portée par une caméra très sensible. En travaillant seule cette fois, TAN Hongyu cherchait –sans renoncer à retrouver et sauvegarder la gestuelle technique des potiers de cette île - à intégrer aussi dans son approche la dimension humaine du travail, l'histoire humaine de ces potiers d'un autre âge ; façonneurs de terre ; mais eux-mêmes tellement façonnés par la terre ! C'est ce qu'en les filmant TAN Hongyu essaye de nous faire percevoir. Et ceci, sans aide et sans moyens, seule avec sa petite caméra, son regard et...sa poésie. Nous avons alors beaucoup discuté de ce virage qu'elle prenait presque quasi-intuitivement vers cette approche plus largement anthropologique qu'elle ignorait jusqu'alors . Je l'ai pour ma part vivement encouragée à poursuivre dans cette voie, et à aller au bout de ses intuitions. « Une vie d'argile » est ainsi né au cours de l'été ; un film court, tout aussi sobre qu'émouvant, sensible et prometteur ! Certes ; dans le domaine filmé, TAN Hongyu a encore à apprendre : mais elle expérimente là en Chine une voie nouvelle, pleine de promesses. Une ouverture à soutenir en attendant d'autres projets (peut-être communs)... et d'autres moyens.

**Lyon le 27 Aout 2011**

**Bernard GANNE**

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## **A film dedicated to the land**

Liu Qingyuan,

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CHINA

The once barren land has turned into a world of feasting and revelry as if in a fleeting second. China is now going all-out to face today, an age with constant development and changes.

The chaotic world ignites the desire for limpidity. We all expect a world parallel with artistic creation. Tan Hongyu, director of *Being with Clay*, a professor of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and a ceramist, employs her professional knowledge to record the primitive pottery making technique of the Li nationality in southern China's Hainan Province with her camera. The technique, originating from the Neolithic Age, has a history of 6,000 years. Today, the traditional technique seems like the scenery passing by outside the car window along a highway. We can only imagine its stories through videos. *Being with Clay*, however, introduces a teller of the stories named Yang Bailiang, an 85-year-old potter of the Li nationality in Hainan Island. She opens for us the secret door to the road of pottery making in ancient times, unveiling human life in early days in microcosm, including the production mode, living skills and ethnic identity. The traditional culture, after disappearing for quite a time, revives accordingly.

Lis are the aboriginal people who have lived in Hainan Island since the pre-historical period. As the earliest immigrants and pioneers of Hainan, they have left unique marks on the once desert island's civilization with their techniques. Pottery making is one of the most important of all techniques. Women made pottery out of local clay for their own use and for barter trade with other nationalities. The technique, passed down to generations for thousands of years, is the daily life background of *Being with Clay*. In the film, we see how Yang Bailiang realizes her life goal through pottery making even though it is simply about survival, the most basic life goal of all. Pottery making is her breath. Could we make light of the breath, the only breath a person has, casually? It should be known that looking down upon a person's breath equals doing the same to a living ethnic group the person belongs to. No one has the right to do so to a person or a group.

In this age, the Lis, proud survivors of the economic waves who have traditions and ethnic culture flowing through their blood vessels, continue their living with handicraft techniques. Their lifestyle adamantly carries the breath of the soil under human feet, the song from treetops, the fresh air in mountain forests and vitality of all creatures. The lifestyle has long become the useful weapon of the minority adopted to guard their tradition in this age. These survivors of changes, these people showing respects to the land, are demonstrating the world's diversity and uniqueness of regional culture in another way.

The film pays homage to a person's breath, a land's silence and an ethnical group's progress with the most primitive scenes and the most devout attitude.