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The Language of Fire: An Interview with Yao Bo

Christopher Connery

Yao Bo is a ceramicist on the faculty of the Sichuan Fine Arts Academy in Chongqing. In 2012, she published *Zhi taoshude shengcheng* (*Becoming Ceramic*), which combined philosophical (Deleuze and Kristeva were important influences), poetic, and historical discussions of ceramics in an international frame, with detailed descriptions of materials and technique (Yao 2012). In 2013, after consulting the books of and corresponding with Masakazu Kusakabe, a kiln maker from Fukushima, Japan, and after visits with Jian Mingzhao and Zhang Yingkang, both ceramicists with wood-fired kilns who are based respectively in Yingge and Pengshan, Taiwan, and also based on her historical knowledge of wood-fired kilns in different Chinese centers of ceramic production, particularly the traditional stair-kilns of her native Sichuan, she began construction of an artistic and social space centered on a wood-fired kiln of her own design in Geleshan, Chongqing. She rented a dilapidated, abandoned farmhouse at the edge of a mountain village, reached by a three-hundred-meter footpath winding

This interview was conducted by email in the summer of 2014. I posed questions in English, and Yao Bo responded in Chinese; I subsequently translated her responses.—CC

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1 through small farms and duck pens, and next to a sprawling squat brick-
 2 built furniture factory. Geleshan is a mountainous agricultural area in the
 3 northwest of Chongqing. It has lost most of its younger population to the
 4 urban labor market and since the 1980s has seen the development of low-
 5 tech, light manufacturing, so that now ramshackle small factories, failed
 6 or in various states of rebuilding, are interspersed with terraced fields and
 7 farms, an uneven and chaotic landscape not untypical of many rural areas
 8 in China today. Her firings, which occur three or four times a year, are com-
 9 munal affairs and include other forms of art making, performance, music,
 10 and discussion, bringing together potters, would-be potters, and other art-
 11 ists from Chongqing, elsewhere in China, and from overseas.

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14 **CC:** *In the West, we are not accustomed to thinking of ceramics as a*
 15 *medium suited to a critical practice, and of all art forms, it is probably the*
 16 *least theorized: its status as “craft” undoubtedly plays a major role in this.*
 17 *In your writing and in your ceramic practice, on the other hand, ceramics*
 18 *appears as a medium particularly appropriate to the kind of critical inter-*
 19 *vention you want to make in China, both in the art world and in society more*
 20 *generally. This intervention has many dimensions: ceramics as feminist*
 21 *practice, ceramic practice as a mode of questioning the nature of art, and*
 22 *the critical possibilities that inhere in the specific materiality of ceramics, a*
 23 *topic we can develop further below. Your writing also wants to question the*
 24 *division between “artist” and “folk craftsperson.” Although your own ceramic*
 25 *practice is quite distinctive, you also strongly identify with the anonymity of*
 26 *the potter-craftsperson in pre-twentieth-century times, an anonymity that*
 27 *in your writing has a strongly feminist character. Your work, unlike those*
 28 *ceramicists whose work tend toward the sculptural, does not shrink from*
 29 *the identification with craft, and this gives your theoretical claims a particu-*
 30 *lar social resonance. Could you share some thoughts about the social and*
 31 *feminist character of ceramics, and of the particular role you want to play*
 32 *as a ceramicist.*

34 **YB:** This conventional view of ceramics isn't limited to just Western com-
 35 mon sense. Keeping ceramics within the rubric of “craft” is a global cliché,
 36 a consequence of its relegation to the shadowy margins of modernity's
 37 master narratives, and this despite the continual and cyclical recurrence of
 38 counternarratives. By counternarratives, I refer to William Morris's “Arts and
 39 Crafts Movement” of the late nineteenth century; Gauguin's turn to ceram-

ics as a way out of the strictures of painting in the 1880s; Yanagi Sōetsu's promotion of *mingei* (folk craft) in prewar Japan and English artist Bernard Leach's herculean efforts to bring this back to the UK; Picasso's work in ceramics in his later years (1946–73); feminist artist Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party"; and much more. And yet, I'm somewhat uncomfortable with this seemingly obligatory list of famous artists' achievements, since in my view they aren't where the real counternarrative energy of ceramics lies. I find that force in the work of the anonymous artisans who never make it into books, that strong and powerless majority. It's in their work that we can see the most profound explorations into the deeper mysteries of ceramics, and yet we know next to nothing about them. In this respect, the anonymous craftsperson shares much in common with women: as soon as lofty "civilization" rears its head, women are reduced to private property; the sublimity of "high art" likewise requires the foil of the lowly craftsperson. So the discursive space of high culture can only shine forth in all its brilliance through the women and craftspeople who are etched into its underside. But there, beyond the scope of thought and attention, they continued to work and to produce. They didn't become "ceramicists"—I find that word itself to be a product of the dominant master-code—I see in their work a becoming of water, of earth, of wind, of fire, of woman. And through the transformative accumulation of time and generations, this becoming constitutes a line of flight, a rebellion against the dominant ideological current.

CC: *Your book, Becoming Ceramic, which is a combination of theoretical reflection, historical description, elemental poetics, and practical technique, places great emphasis on "becoming": the becoming of the ceramic work, the becoming of woman, and the becoming of a potter. This focus comes in part from the book's practical ambition to instill in students of ceramics a broader poetic and subjective sense of their work, while also providing necessary technical and practical information. Could you develop this notion of becoming, and speak about how it addresses the formation of ceramicists, both in your work as a university teacher and in the kind of space you are creating in Geleshan?*

YB: From 2003 to 2010, I took on the teaching of two art history courses offered by the Sichuan Fine Arts Academy, "The History of Global Ceramic Design" and "An Outline of Contemporary Ceramics." These courses had always been taught by the art history faculty, but since they had become focused on contemporary art criticism, curation, contemporary design, and

1 all sorts of things related to marketing and the art market, there was no one
2 willing to teach the history of ceramics, so that fell on me, a newly hired
3 faculty in ceramics production and technique. So for the historical side of
4 things, I basically began at the same level as the students. As I revised and
5 experimented with the material through repeated offerings, I got further and
6 further away from the perspective of “the history of ceramics” as commonly
7 conceived. My students’ responses spurred me on, and I began to think
8 more and more about how a deeper exploration of the notion of ceramic
9 art had been constrained by this rigid rubric of “arts and crafts,” and how
10 a genuine understanding of what ceramics really was had been prevented
11 by all sorts of wrong thinking. “Arts and crafts” or “art and design” was
12 something imposed discursively from without, and I found that a direct and
13 practical investigation into the field showed quite clearly that ceramics was
14 something at the same time quotidian and ordinary, and very profound.

15 *Becoming Ceramic* was the slow and gradual product of seven
16 years of study, teaching, and creative work, and I think that the book’s
17 long gestation has something to do with its multiple layers of perspective
18 and its speculative unfolding. As I was reading and studying, I kept asking
19 myself, “What have the books left out?” This fossilized reproduction of
20 ceramic history anchored it into such a limited field, subject to what I felt
21 was a constipating excess of disciplinary control. It certainly wasn’t a dis-
22 course that could get the students excited. I got my methodological inspi-
23 ration from Deleuze’s notion of “becoming,” and through the angle of multi-
24 plicity got away from a certain anthropocentric foundation. Rejecting this
25 human-centeredness allows for an awareness of the dynamic and inter-
26 related becoming of the human and of other existent things. It was the
27 pursuit of the precognitive dimension of perception that allowed entry into
28 what I found to be a more innate process of becoming. And that shaped the
29 organization of the book, which was not an orderly progression of chapters
30 and subsections; it reflected the dynamic process of extinction, metamor-
31 phosis, and becoming that was revealed from within the primary elements
32 of ceramics: water, earth, wind, fire, human. These elements brought forth
33 a complex and always mutable multiplicity, and this broke down the com-
34 mon-sense logics of striated space and progressive temporality. By follow-
35 ing this melodic line of becoming ceramic, we see the world in a new way
36 and begin to develop a new mode of perception.

37 As a woman/potter wanting to convey the imaginative power that
38 ceramics has given her, I had to shake off familiar modes of research and
39 investigation and pose the questions that arise from months and years

of study and practice. In the concrete practice of making ceramics, we encounter elements in their most basic forms. This primary elemental matter—water, earth, wind, fire—was present at the beginning of the earth and was also the foundation for human life. Their interplay and combination formed an a priori poetics of materiality. Now, what did you ask about Geleshan?

CC: *The name of your space in Geleshan is a Chinese character that you invented—it has something in common with your own relatively rare surname. The character comprises three graphs of the character for earth and one of the character for fire, which of course resonates with what you mentioned about the elements. Your writing makes very explicit the poetic and philosophical resonances of the materiality of ceramics. To give readers a sense of your style, here is an excerpt from your recent catalog copy:*

Women have an elemental and physical affinity with water. Their eyes form water vessels, and the markings on their pots take their form from repetition, symmetry, modulation, and reversal, giving a feminine vitality to the ceramic form.

It is earth, this clump of earth, containing the tragic songs of the accumulated matter of eons past, that energizes the radiance from the crown of my head and the spark of fire from my palms. Water vessels are no longer only the lips of love, the pointed bottoms of amphora, fish-scale markings, long-necked vases, but also are of this substance that oozes through dry riverbeds, as if the maternal itself has seeped into the earth.

Wind is formless. We know it only by the rustling of leaves or the ripples on water. When and where the wind blows, water, fire, and earth are listening, and come together in fusion and inversion, in mutual agitation and transformation.

Fire is always fire, uniform in substance, a glimmer shining through the darkness; it has been so for billions of years. When I walk into the fire, when I speak fire, my thinking disappears, and temporal perception is consumed in the flames. (Tang and Yao 2015: n.p.)¹

1. Yao Bo's spring 2014 exhibition Qixi (a neologism, coined by Yao Bo, which is a homophone for the word for "breath," but which could be translated "vasiferous pneuma") situates these elements in relation to Neolithic vessels from matriarchal societies.

1 *Could you say more about the nature of the elementality—particularly*
 2 *earth and fire—that you bring to your space in Geleshan in the mountains*
 3 *of Chongqing? You wrote once that you wanted “to bring the language of*
 4 *fire back to China.” This refers concretely to your construction of a wood-*
 5 *burning kiln in Geleshan, but the poetics of fire are also central to your work*
 6 *and to the social practice that surrounds your work there. Please also share*
 7 *some thoughts about the language of fire and include some elaboration*
 8 *about how this language was “lost” and what its revival can accomplish.*

9
 10 **YB:** At the same time that I was exploring the poetics of ceramics in writing
 11 this book, I had the seed of an idea for building a poetic space for ceramic
 12 work. In 2005, the Sichuan Fine Arts Academy moved to its new campus
 13 in Daxuecheng,² I started to look for the right place where I could do this.
 14 I looked all over. But this was just at the time of the teardowns and reloca-
 15 tions of the “new rural village” program,³ so there was no way I could get
 16 into a rural village, although I got some offers from people who wanted to
 17 develop arts tourism or some other kind of consumer-oriented rural scene.
 18 In any case, finding the right location became my biggest headache. In
 19 June of 2012, I finally found a farmhouse in Geleshan that had been aban-
 20 doned for nineteen years. Geleshan is between the Shapingba and Daxue-
 21 cheng districts of Chongqing. It’s thirteen kilometers from Daxuecheng
 22 and is at an altitude of six hundred meters. It’s a typical “urban village.”⁴
 23 Because of its uneven and complicated social composition—geriatric centers;
 24 agritourism; mental health rehabilitation centers; truck farms; schools;
 25 small, independently run factories and larger-scale industries—I felt that
 26 despite the scenic mountain setting, it would be pretty hard to develop it
 27 into the kind of tourist destination that the tourist industry imagines. I fig-

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 29 2. [In the 2000s, as Chongqing speeded up its massive project of urban renewal and
 30 development (see my essay in this issue), universities were relocated from the center of
 31 the city to newly developed former agricultural land in the exurbs. Daxuecheng (university
 32 city) was designated as a new high-tech/educational hub.—CC]

33 3. [In order to integrate the rural and urban areas of Chongqing, the provincial-municipal
 34 authorities began a massive spatial reorganization. Many villages were razed for indus-
 35 trial or urban development. Other villages, deemed “new rural villages,” were rebuilt, con-
 36 solidating residences into multistory apartment buildings, with former farmhouses razed
 37 for agricultural production, some of which was commercialized.—CC]

38 4. [“Urban villages”—*chengzhongcun*—are common throughout China’s urban land-
 39 scape and refer to rural villages that are swallowed up and surrounded by expanding
 urban development, and thus form a very uneven space comprising elements of the rural
 village and of the urban.—CC]



Figure 1. Yao space from above. Image courtesy of Yao Bo.

ured that for at least fifteen years, it would be impossible to subject it to the massive urban renewal dislocations that were happening in so many other places. The abandoned farmhouse had been built in the 1970s of stone and blue-clay tile, and it was next to a rock cliff. It's a space of about one-quarter of an acre at the border of the villages of Fangyantang and Xiaochangping (the village names mean "Square Weir Pond" and "Saltpetre Factory Meadow"). It's in a low-lying dell, so it is shadowy and secluded. Except for a big brick privately run furniture factory to the northwest of the front terrace, it's surrounded by farmland either under cultivation or abandoned. As soon as I settled on the spot, I began clearing the overgrown land and repairing the buildings. On March 18, 2013, I moved in and named it "the Yao space" (Figure 1). Yao is a graph that I invented—it's pronounced "yao" in the second tone—and it is a homophone for my surname, whose form it somewhat resembles, and also for the word for "kiln." The composition of the word—three earths and one fire—expresses the two fundamentals of ceramics and also is a representation of what happens inside the kiln.

Over the last few years, the question of "what is contemporary art" has been a hot topic in art and cultural studies. As a woman potter working today, it's a question I have to ponder myself, but what I want to ask is, "What does it mean to become 'contemporary'?" If becoming contempo-



Figure 2. Inside the Yao kiln. Image courtesy of Yao Bo.

rary means amnesia, dislocation, and destruction—and this is China’s contemporary reality—then without doubt I am not contemporary. In our world, with its ceaseless destruction, what can we do to combat the destructive force of these changes, how can we construct a form of everyday life that goes against the dominant current, how can we fashion a line of flight out of this relentless and destructive renovation? This is the exploratory path I envisioned for the space at Geleshan in 2012. In this computational and image-centered era, it seems that one can forego quite a lot—physical labor, technique, and thought, for example. Ours is a simplifying and reductive modernization. It fosters boredom, listlessness, and a generation of the bored, who moan and groan without knowing why, in a life filled with ceaseless procrastination and deferral. It’s precisely within this context that the pressing need arises to reexamine the course of modernization. Making ceramics is a point of entry into the ceaseless flow of the present, and by thus becoming a “comrade of time” (Groys 2009), I place myself firmly within the contemporary.

As for bringing the spirit of fire into contemporary China, I hope that the Yao space will continue to develop the following three concrete trajectories (Figure 2):

1. Experiments with wood firing. I designed a smaller-scale smokeless kiln based on the “stair kilns” common to traditional Sichuan folk pottery,⁵ kilns that are rapidly disappearing throughout the province. The idea was to explore new structural possibilities in kiln construction and also to delve into the aesthetic potential latent in wood firing. Wood firing takes wood itself as its elemental fuel, and the language of fire can be further explored through different firing techniques, such as smoke firing, salt firing, soda firing, and high-temperature raku firing. This is the path favored by the potter who knows how to have a dialogue with fire, and it places the potter existentially within the flow of change and transformation. It’s a process filled with failed experiments, a mesmerizing scene comprised of repetitions and differences, random chance, spontaneity, and surprise. Burning wood is a mode of thought and of life that centers on chance, so the art practice that grows out of the potter’s everyday life becomes a means of exploring future time. For the potter, wood firing’s greatest attraction and deepest charm is that it allows her to work intimately with chance and randomness.
2. Supplementing what is lacking in the academic context. I want the space to make up for what’s missing in academic instruction by creating a platform for students who want to continue on the ceramics path in a deeper way. The institution can’t provide a space for instructors and students to both work and live together, so teaching and learning remain at an elementary stage. I feel that the atmosphere created by the space opens up many more possibilities for new modes of artistic production. The workshop, the door of the kiln, the courtyard, the spaces where we gather together to drink tea, all of these are places where art and life mix together, and as we explore the language of fire, we are also constructing a more vital and energetic form of life.
3. Plans for residency and exchange. I want to open the space to “folk craftspeople” from China as well as potters from abroad for exchange and research into the aesthetics of wood firing. I plan to continue to invite artists with an independent spirit to participate in various artistic practices concerning the spirit of fire. This will be done twice a year, with residences of one or two months. A single

5. [“Stair kilns” are long brick kilns constructed on slopes that facilitate conducting of fire and heat through the length of the kiln.—CC]

1 wood firing takes three days and three nights, and the whole pro-
 2 cess, from loading to unloading the kiln, takes ten days. Wood
 3 firing is a really arduous production, and one of its requirements
 4 is that you need to get a lot of people together. Besides the con-
 5 crete and direct exploration of the language of fire that this entails,
 6 the process itself opens up a range of other possibilities. You can
 7 imagine the kinds of dances that a Japanese butoh dancer could
 8 develop out of the gaze into the flames. Our exploration of poetry,
 9 song, music, literature, theater, film, or social problems can be of
 10 a piece with the mounting intensity of the fire itself. In this way, we
 11 could also develop new forms of social relationships, completely
 12 different from those social relationships based on profit and inter-
 13 est that lie within commercial-capitalist logic.

14
 15 **CC:** *Beginning about five years ago, you began creating pieces that are*
 16 *neither thrown nor molded nor hand built, but have used air-filled balloons*
 17 *coated with thin layers of slurry clay to craft objects that are formed through*
 18 *the gradual interaction of the drying clay with the mutating shape of the*
 19 *slowly deflating balloon form, objects which further mutate in the firing and*
 20 *finishing process. In your most recent work, you have turned from the more*
 21 *abstract forms that characterized your earlier work with this method to utili-*
 22 *tarian objects (pots, teapots, bowls, etc.) that combine the balloon tech-*
 23 *nique with hand forming. Could you reflect on how you came to the work*
 24 *with balloons and what it enables in the materiality of the medium, and on*
 25 *the principles that have guided your later development of this technique?*
 26 *Is there a connection between this approach to clay and your work on the*
 27 *language of fire?*

28
 29 **YB:** By 2010, I had been doing ceramics seriously for twelve years. This
 30 could be generally divided into three phases: (1) large, semiabstract sculp-
 31 tural pieces using coil technique, which I did mainly in Rongchang, a cen-
 32 ter of Sichuanese traditional ceramics; (2) porcelain figural sculpture, all of
 33 women, usually in groups, which I did mostly in Jingdezhen, the center of
 34 Chinese porcelain production; and (3) deformed wheel-thrown work, which
 35 I did in the studio at the university. In September of 2007, I finally got my
 36 own studio with a .5 square meter electric kiln in the 501 Arts Space in
 37 Huangjueping, near the original location of my university. I began to experi-
 38 ment with what I referred to as sagggar smoke firing.⁶ What later began to

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 6. [Sagggar is a technique where pieces are put in a ceramic container within the kiln to prevent exposure to smoke and debris; Yao Bo developed the technique of adding vari-



Figure 3. From the *Vasiferous Pneuma* series. Image courtesy of Yao Bo.

interest me most were the possibilities arising from the pliability and fragility of the clay itself. I started to make objects by applying thin layers of slurry clay onto a cloth and forming objects with the clay-coated cloth. I discovered that an excess of conscious intent, as well as too much application of hand technique, actually hindered the natural flow of the clay itself. So I starting looking for a way to let the material work by itself, to give it a field for a more free play. A chance happening gave me the inspiration I was looking for. On December 7, 2009, my birthday, I was giving a party in my studio, and one student brought a bunch of colored balloons. I hung the balloons in the attic, and after a few days, a few of the them had somewhat deflated, and the textured wrinkles that had appeared on the surface looked like skin when observed under a magnifying glass. This discovery inspired me to start making objects with slurry-covered balloons (Figure 3). The passing of time and changes in weather determined the unfolding changes in texture and surface, which sometimes were slow and carefree, and sometimes quick and erratic. In humid and rainy weather, you just had to wait it out, but sometimes with a loud pop the clay would splash all over the room, and in a single instant, the form would be reduced to nothingness. I felt I had finally

ous organic or inorganic material to the saggar along with the ceramic object in order to experiment with intensified effects of smoke and debris.—CC]

1 found a way into the generative power of clay, as if the clay itself grew into a
2 dynamic, living thing, capable of innate extension unto its limit point.

3 My own artistic practice matured and developed along with a grad-
4 ual diminution of my own self-conscious intent. Throughout this process, I
5 grew more and more distant from experiential self-expression, and more
6 interested in the autogenerative possibilities of the clay balloon matrix.
7 So my work was really about providing the conditions of encounter, and
8 my own role in this process of becoming was dissociative, drifting, and
9 amazed. When I moved to my space in Geleshan in March of 2013, my first
10 firing was of wheel-thrown objects I had made for practical daily use in the
11 space—cooking, eating, and tea utensils. The more I used these things in
12 my everyday life, the more I delighted in these small utensils I held in my
13 hand. As I looked at the objects I'd made with balloons—tranquil and still,
14 but objects for contemplation in the end—I thought that it might be more
15 interesting if I could hold those objects in my hand. So for my fourth firing,
16 I made some cups and vases with the balloon technique, but since the clay
17 was too thin, the pieces changed shape too much, so I had to start working
18 with thicker layers of clay. For the fifth firing, we'd invited Cui Jian, a “folk”
19 potter from Yixing who works in the red clay—what Westerners call boc-
20 caro ware—that defines the Yixing style. His mallet-formed slab ware tech-
21 nique was very useful for me in making pots and covered containers with
22 the balloon method. When they came out of the kiln after firing, we were
23 captivated by the beautiful integration of the clay's wrinkled and variegated
24 surface texture and the traces of fire, and it's this complex and changing
25 surface texture that continues to surprise, through repeated experiments
26 with firing (Figures 4 and 5). Our work with wood firing has a lot in common
27 with many types of investigation into the nature of materiality and of being.

28
29 **CC:** *You maintain some distance from the gallery/museum world in China*
30 *and have shown little interest in the cultivation of gallery owners, curators,*
31 *and patrons that is so common in the contemporary art world. Could you*
32 *discuss some of your reasons for this and also elaborate on what possibili-*
33 *ties inhere in this “outsider” stance?*

34
35 **YB:** I'm not all that rigid about this, but you're right that I don't spend time
36 working on these relationships, something that's required in the art world
37 here in China, so I do have a certain distance from it. But I don't proclaim
38 my outsider status, either; it's just my mode of being. My own position as a
39 woman potter, my identification with folk craftspeople, and my work to cre-
ate the Yao space has all led me into the maze of the everyday, where what



Figure 4. Teacups. Image courtesy of Yao Bo.



Figure 5. Bowl. Image courtesy of Yao Bo.

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1 I'm really about, on the intuitive level, is creating the possibility for a differ-
2 ent kind of life. The "object" is, in the end, not the product of artistic practice
3 but only the visible residue of a no longer visible process. My own practi-
4 cal and temporal conception of "utility"—or use-value, to use another lan-
5 guage—puts my work at some remove from objects that are "exhibited" in
6 museum space. I value the dark and quiet emanations⁷ that arise from the
7 kinds of "defects" that are anathema to the commercial sphere and thus
8 craft objects that are neither art objects nor commercial products.
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