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BEIJING'S PASTIMES OF YESTERYEAR



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藏书章



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Text by Liu Shiyu, Zou Jinhua

Photographs by Wu Wei et al.

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PREFACE

Apart from the obvious example of Beijing Opera, the Chinese capital is home to a multitude of traditional toys, games, handicrafts and pastimes which, even today, bear witness to its cultural vibrancy. Amongst these are: snuffbox collecting, *kongzhu* (Chinese Yoyo), *yanghua* (slapping the card), *layangpian* (peephole theatre), the mud man, the mud whistle, the china doll, hand puppet shows, the cloth tiger, decorative lanterns, kites, potpourri, cricket fighting, the paper ball, colored glass trumpets, the rattle-drum, top spinning, windmills, the blown candy man, candy pictures, straw braiding... all these toys, games and pastimes were closely interwoven into the daily lives of old-time Beijingers, epitomizing the city's culture, and even now bring back memories of those times.

For many of these older Beijingers, the clearest memories of their childhood are of the traveling peddlers. Children and adults alike were fascinated by the these peddlers' wares — much of it handmade: Little colored figures made of flour, others made of candy and inflated by blowing into them, windmills with little red flags on top...all of these can never be forgotten by Beijing children of the time. In addition there were hand puppets, mud men, decorative lanterns, kites, *shuahuoer* (traditional clay toys), hairy monkeys, paper cutting, silk men and coarse hair dolls — all beautiful handicrafts which have been passed down until today and have become a very special part of modern Beijing culture. In fact this whole

area is of particular interest to both domestic and international tourists.

In the past, peddlers walking the *hutongs* (traditional alleyways) of Beijing were a common sight. They carried their wares on a pole balanced over the shoulder from which all kinds of handicrafts were strung; and to catch children's attention they sounded a hand held rattle-drum. Colored glass trumpets, tangrams, kaleidoscopes, roly-poly dolls, cloth tigers, clay masks... all of these completely captivated the young Beijing children. There were also entertainers who could make little figurines of flour or blow a little man from candy, monkey trainers, mouse trainers, gold fish sellers, *layangpian* (peephole theatre), hand puppet shows, and many, many more. All these have disappeared from the *hutongs* today, and are even hard to find in the temple fairs held during the Spring Festival period.

While compared with the variety of children's toys today, the number of these traditional toys and games was relatively small, every single one of them was fun! The noisy *kongzhu* (a type of Chinese Yoyo), the turning windmill, the colorful kite... all of these filled the dreams of children. Kite flying, cricket fighting, hoop rolling, slapping the card, shuttlecock kicking... all these childhood memories once filled the ancient *hutongs* with happy laughter.

And festival periods were even better for children! They visited the traditional temple fairs during the Spring Festival, played with decorative lanterns at the Lantern Festival, flew kites on the *Qingming* (tomb sweeping) Festival, prayed to the 'Rabbit Grandfather' on the Mid-Autumn Festival. At these special times brilliant reds, bright yellows, blues and greens...every imaginable color bedecked the streets; the ordinary street scenery was suddenly transformed and became as varied and colorful as if seen through a kaleidoscope.

The temple fair during the Spring Festival was always a good opportunity for children to look for interesting toys. There were all kinds of these available as mentioned before, as well as delicious food and marvelous sights which little eyes could barely take in — it was all so fascinating that any thought of going

home went out the window! Children could buy their own favorites with the traditional "lucky" money they had received at the Chinese New Year while adults paused in their steps to simply watch and enjoy the fun.

All children, whether they are boys or girls, love to play and there are always certain favorite childhood toys. The *yanghua*, rolling the hoop, spinning tops, the *kongzhu* and cricket fighting were the boys' realm; while shuttlecock kicking, rubber band skipping, and throwing the sandbag were girls' favorites. But whether belonging to girls or boys, all these games filled those childhood days with joy. However, time flies, we all grow up, fashions change. But the entrenched memories of this old Beijing are like a bottle of vintage wine —— well worth savoring again and again.

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CHILDHOOD PASTIMES IN THE HUTONGS



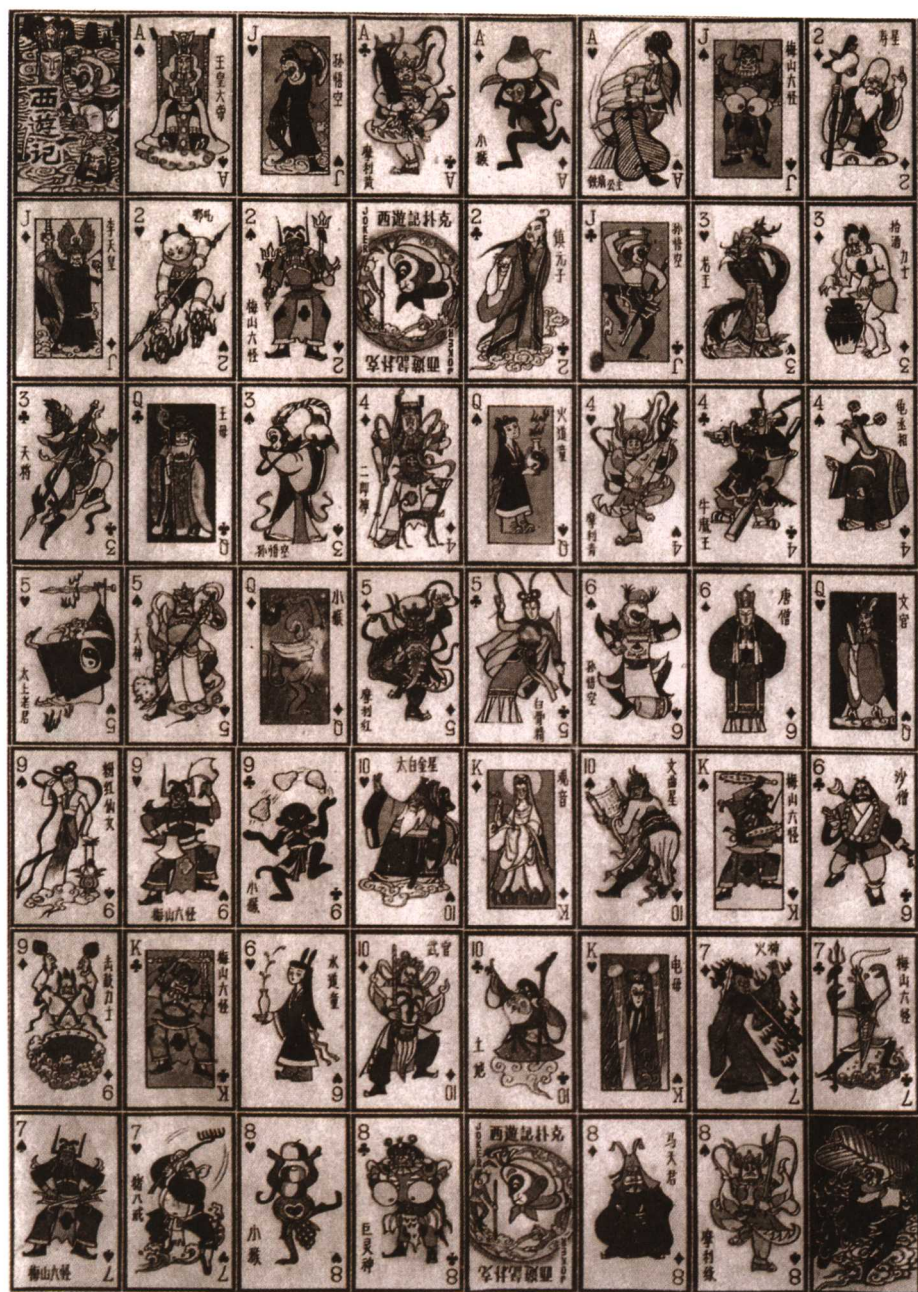
At one time Beijing's *hutongs* (traditional residential alleyways) made up at least a half of the city's area. The Emperor and his family, politicians, the great and the good, those who shaped and molded history —— all these have experienced the life of the *hutongs*. History was often made in these endless, maze-like alleyways. But, most important of all, ordinary, salt of the earth Beijingers have been living in the *hutongs* generation after generation —— the *hutongs* were part and parcel of their lives. From childhood to old age, from the day they were born until the day they died, the *hutongs* were silent witnesses to their laughter and tears, to joyful reunions and bitter partings.

Every *hutong* has its own history and its own stories, for this reason real Beijingers can never forget these streets of their youth in whose very walls their life stories, happy or sad, are inscribed in stone and brick. And some of the deepest of these memories are, of course, the earliest and the happiest —— the laughter of childhood games.

Yanghua

"Whoever wants to play *yanghua*, follow me; if you don't it's because you don't have any!" This old children's rhyme was an invitation to playmates to join in the game of *yanghua* (slapping the card). This was long before today's sophisticated, modern toys such as "the Transformers" or radio-controlled cars. In those simpler days toys were cheap, basic and easy to get. A typical example is *yanghua* or "Slapping the Card". It was easy to make and cost very little. The game was a favorite of Beijing children and was often played on hot summer afternoons or in the evening. The players were divided into groups of between three and five, and as the *yanghua* cards turned over one after another, the sound of slapping hands, and cheerful shouts from happy faces could be heard all around!

Today, it's almost impossible to see children playing *yanghua* in the streets. However, older local Beijingers still have special feelings for the game; some of them even have *yanghua* collections at home. These childhood toys are now a treasured memory. Over the years they have become much too important to think of throwing away; they have become



a valuable reminder and symbol of a happy childhood.

So, what is *yanghua*? How is it played?

When the technique of color printing first came to China, these colorful little cards — a little thicker than a normal playing card — started to appear on the market. The reason they were called "*yanghua*" is because at first the pictures printed on them were of foreign people, foreign ships and even foreign weapons! Since goods or customs from outside China were described as "*yang* (foreign) something", they were called "*yanghua*"

—— "foreign pictures".

As time went on, the pictures on the cards changed and became more varied, and also more Chinese.

The cards came in sets, as an A4 sized piece of hard cardboard from which the individual cards were cut out. Some of them might be characters from the traditional story "Journey to the West", others heroes from the story The "Romance of the Three Kingdoms". In later times more modern cartoons and characters were added. Of course they were most popular with children. And they had an educational element — chil-





dren could learn about the world or the past from them. But of course the best fun was that they could play a game with them —— "slapping the card"!

The rules of the game are simple enough. Children gather together, place their *yanghua* on the ground and mix them around. One after another, using either their hand or one of their own *yanghua*, they slap the ground beside the *yanghua* they want to win —— without touching it. If the rush of air causes it to turn over, it becomes theirs!

But don't think that this is a game that requires only power; it would be completely wrong to think that the stronger you slap, the more you win! The game requires finesse and technique, otherwise your treasured *yanghua* may soon be lost! This simple game could keep children amused for a whole day without feeling tired. At the end of the day "the general who never loses" (i.e. the champion player) would walk through the *hutongs* with a thick deck of *yanghua* in his hand and his head held

