



BEIJING MASTERS

ENCOUNTERS WITH CHINESE HANDICRAFTS

北京绝活

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Chen Xiaorong was born in Yan'an in Northwest China's Shaanxi Province in 1981. She works a features reporter for China Daily, the country's only national English newspaper. She received her BA in English language and literature from Xi'an International Studies University in 2004 and in 2006 started writing stories about Chinese intangible cultural heritage such as folk arts, festival ceremonies and handicrafts for the newspaper and Beijing Weekend. Her reporting has generated much positive feedback. Her interest in traditional handicrafts inspired her to pursue a master's degree in culture and arts at the China Arts Academy. In 2007, China Daily sent her to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa for a ten-month training program in journalism.

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藏书章

BEIJING MASTERS

ENCOUNTERS WITH CHINESE HANDICRAFTS

As the only national English-language newspaper in the country, China Daily has long been the "Voice of China" and an important window to the outside world. The newspaper has long been famed for its insightful coverage of the dynamic changes taking place at dizzying speed in the country but – maybe less known – it also performs an important mission: Recording and protecting the intangible cultural heritage that is fast fading into oblivion as the country rushes towards modernity. Chen Xiaorong plays an important role in our efforts to be a responsible media organization. By telling stories of these Beijing masters, I hope our readers find that the bloodline of traditional China still runs deep in the transforming metropolis. I'm proud to see that these reports now compiled as a book, which I am sure will help readers better explore and understand the city and its culture in the year of Olympics and the years to come.

—Zhu Ling, *Editor-in-Chief, China Daily Group*

Many Chinese traditional crafts are facing a difficult situation. Their very survival depends on whether they continue to be passed down to new generations of artisans. Even though people are aware of the problem and have made efforts to protect rare arts, traditional handicrafts are rapidly disappearing from our daily lives. Therefore, the author has done a meaningful job in making a record of the fading crafts and craftsmen. Having a concrete reminder of the art forms that were once an indispensable part of our lives will awaken people to the power of traditional Chinese culture.

—Wang Wenzhang, *president of the China Arts*

Academy and director of the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center

I really appreciated the story of these artists passionate with their creations. It was very instructive to read about the materials used, the way they are used and the different steps necessary to achieve these masterpieces. Traditional handcraftsmanship plays an important role in highlighting and keeping alive China Cultural Heritage. The interest of this book is twofold: for Chinese it will help to remember their traditional heritage and keep alive this know how through collectors, shows on important occasions, special events and through museums exhibits; for foreigners it gives them the opportunity to learn more about this millenary and rich culture.

—Marie-Paule Martinelli *wife of the Ambassador of Switzerland to China*

This book successfully outlines the historical and cultural inheritance of a great nation as viewed through the eyes of the traditional craftsmen in the Beijing area. The author faithfully records the Chinese national spirit with sensitivity, dedication and lively words. I am deeply pleased with her work.

—Tian Qing, *vice-director of the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center and a researcher at the China Arts Academy*

Chen's book is like a pigeon carrying lively messages from the ancient Orient. It will help people to better understand China and appreciate the beauty of a culturally diversified world. I felt very moved when I first saw this comprehensive collection of reports on

traditional handicrafts and was very impressed by the author's enthusiasm for these antiquated skills.

—*Hua Jueming*, a researcher at the Institute for the History of Natural Science and Chinese Academy of Sciences and chairman of the Chinese Traditional Crafts Research Society

Chen has used her experiences as a young reporter at China Daily to write a timely book on Beijing's traditional handicrafts, which constitute a brilliant part of China's art history. She has done a significant job in protecting China's intangible cultural heritage, which is under pressure—even under threat of extinction—from all sides. In 2008, when athletes, journalists and tourists from different countries and regions gather in Beijing, they will be amazed to see the city's modern buildings and traditional handicrafts, which are vividly described in Chen's book.

—*Yu Wentao*, an official with the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad

Chen was part of my class, so I know her well. Among the dozens of the craftsmen she has interviewed, many are very old and the only inheritors of the skills that define their respective fields. Chen takes a unique angle in presenting these wonderful crafts to the modern world and makes us appreciate the charm and vitality of Chinese culture.

—*Zhao Xinge*, PhD in literature and class manager of China's first master's program in Intangible Cultural Heritage

This book is an important exploration of contemporary Beijing's ties to its traditional past through its craft

traditions. As the Olympics of summer 2008 approach, the world is full of reports of the rapid and dynamic changes overtaking the city. One is left with the impression of a people surging forward with little knowledge of, and less regard for, their past. But anyone who has lived in Beijing will know of the affection many residents have for "old Beijing"—the city of narrow alleys, courtyard houses, and temple fairs, which sometimes seem to be gone forever. Xiaorong Chen has unearthed the old Beijing that lies at the heart of the new Beijing—master craftsmen and their families who keep old folk art and craft traditions alive in odd corners of the city.

—*Kate A. Lingley*, Assistant Professor of Art History, University of Hawaii at Mānoa

Chen's book makes an important contribution to safeguard China's intangible cultural heritage. Her stories document the passion, skill, and persistence of the nation's finest artisans, and highlight the diversity of traditional craftsmanship practiced today. I hope that this book will raise awareness of the cultural heritage in Beijing, and support the continued transmission of important knowledge and skills. Chen's careful observation and expertise as both journalist and storyteller is invaluable for the educational community to learn about China's living heritage.

—*Lisa R. Kaufman*, International & Arts Education Specialist, M.Ed. Harvard Graduate School of Education, and East West Center Alumni



preface



If I have free time, how will I choose to spend it? Enjoying a cup of coffee with friends at a fancy bar, listening to contemporary music? Or perhaps by sipping tea with an old craftsman in his shabby workshop, listening to tales of tradition? I will choose the latter every time. When I started my career as a features writer, I never expected a report on Yang Fuxi, the sole inheritor of the many skills required of makers of imperial bows and arrows, would land me on a new beat—traditional Chinese handicrafts. I recall the sight of his smooth hand covered with a special kind of glue. I remember the gallant stance he assumed as he drew back the bow's string. I remember him carving a buffalo in a small corner of a yard so as not to disturb his neighbors.

That interview broadened my knowledge of ancient Chinese weapons, the kind I had previously only seen in films. The interview made me understand the craftsman's enthusiasm for passing on his unique skills to the next generation. I began to think seriously about why some people would endure hardship to make ancient crafts for which there is little demand. Yang's words impressed me: "You know, I only want young people to see genuine bows of



traditional design and function passed on from their ancestors." Each of the 200 steps involved in the process of making a simple bow is laden with ancient Chinese wisdom and understanding of human beings and nature. When a craftsman reveals such secrets, one cannot help but feel proud to be Chinese. In the days following the publication of that first story, I received calls from foreign ambassadors who were eager to buy one of these bows, from foreign travelers who wanted to visit his workshop and from foreign news agencies looking to shoot video of the bow-making process. Famous film producers even wanted to hire Yang to make props. I came to see the magnificent bows, which had received the honor of being included on the official "Beijing Intangible Culture Heritage List (2006)," as a manifestation of China's rich culture and a reminder of ancient ways of living. As UNESCO defines it, "Intangible cultural heritage is all living forms of expression: dance and theatre, musical and oral literary forms, languages, customs, festivals, craft techniques and forms of knowledge." It is humanity's cultural treasure. Such artifacts are the living record of daily necessity and pleasure, as seen through the prism of

local conditions. Traditional craftsmanship is an essential part of China's cultural heritage. More than that, Chinese crafts not only show Chinese people's sense of aesthetics, but also the development of human civilization.

After the interview with Yang, I was seized by a strong compulsion to explore the culture of Beijing, a veritable laboratory of craftsmanship, where the arts has flourished for hundreds of years. I decided not to confine myself to the fine arts and crafts made exclusively for the Imperial Palace, as the city's folk handicrafts were every bit as fascinating, from the shining royal blades, delicate palace embroideries, splendid jade ware and intricate filigree inlay ornaments to the fascinating shadow puppets, colorful opera masks and clay sculptures. Since then, I have gone out of my way to track down the city's finest craftsmen. About a quarter of the artists mentioned in this book have been recognized as the leading practitioners in their fields. Some of them are the sole inheritors of arts that have been passed down through their families. Others have mastered their arts by dint of their passion. With each interview, I was moved by the craftsmen's enthusiasm for traditional arts and culture.



Most of them live simple and even impoverished lives, but that does not distract them from their work, even if those around them, even their own children, pay little attention to their efforts. These interviews also gave me a chance to see a wide range of wonderful handicrafts up close and to hear interesting stories about both the work and the people who do it. To my surprise, much of the material that used to make the crafts included in this book is natural. For example, natural substances from lacquer trees are used in lacquer ware carving, and kite frames are made from straw. Each craftsman has a unique way of communicating with his tools and material. He devotes himself to creating the art, and each piece has its own soul reflecting its maker's unique outlook on life and art. As a result, most of these crafts cannot be duplicated in large quantities as mass-produced souvenirs for tourists.

As a journalist, I had to prepare a long list of questions about the crafts' histories, origins, materials, production processes and, when necessary, their relations to family lineages, as well as the craftsmen's personal experiences. To answer these questions, each craftsman would take time from his work to talk with me. I deeply enjoyed these conversations, which increased my knowledge of old Beijingers' beliefs, life philosophies and customs. I was delighted that the paper's readers could share these wonderful interview experiences with me. They also provided much warm feedback to encourage me. Colleagues covering fashion news often asked me, "Why are you so fascinated by this outdated stuff?" My answer was simple: The experience has been rewarding. I see the spirit of China reflected in the faces of these old craftsmen.

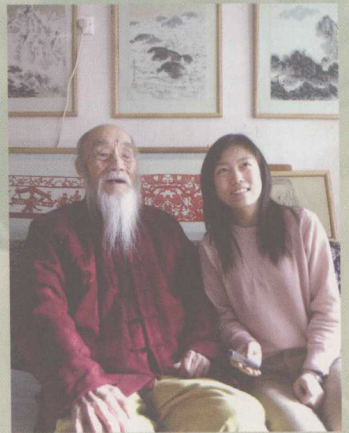
The regret of the cloisonné master was tangible when he described the fake goods that can be bought at many markets. I could feel the genuine happiness of the pin-wheel maker when he recalled his experience teaching foreign kids to make crafts. I could sense the great satisfaction of the villager who had succeeded in reproducing ancient Chinese picture slide shows in front of both Chinese and foreign audiences.

Industrialization has pushed much of China's intangible cultural heritage to the verge of extinction. So many precious objects and materials of historical and cultural worth have been lost and neglected. Nearly all of the craftsmen I met were worried about not having apprentices to whom they could pass on their skills. The instructor of the Chinese intangible cultural heritage protection course I took at the China Art Academy once said: "People today run so quickly on their way toward material success that they are losing many of the precious things in their pockets that had been handed down by their ancestors. Eventually they will realize that they are standing there naked." I believe these handicrafts, which reflect a people's intangible cultural heritage, demonstrate the charm of the Chinese culture and reflect the nation's character and morals. I might enjoy a cup of coffee or spend time at a Western-style bar, but documenting culture has taught me that my spiritual home is in Chinese tradition.

Thanks to China Daily for giving me the chance to do a series of reports on the traditional handicrafts to be found in Beijing. Without the paper's support, I might never have made my humble contribution to the preservation and promotion of Beijing's culture. I must also express my gratitude to China Daily's editors, Ji Tao, Li Shuo, Peter Espina, and to photographers Lu Zhongqiu and Zhang Wei, whose devoted efforts came to fruition in this book. Also, I must thank the scholars and officials from the China Art Academy whose help and guidance inspired me and enriched the project. Moreover, I am grateful for my beloved parents and sincere friends who took care of me during the reporting and editing of the material in this book.

Note: Some of the elderly craftspeople whose stories are included in this book passed away during the editing process. This book is respectfully dedicated to them and to the success to their crafts.

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LUXURY GOODS, IMPERIAL STYLE

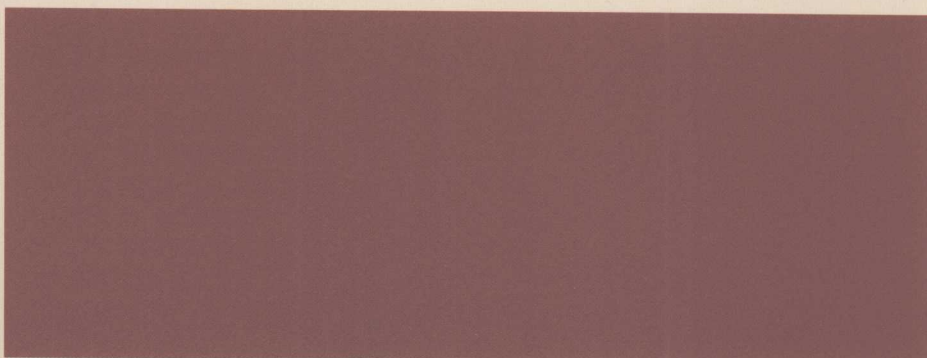
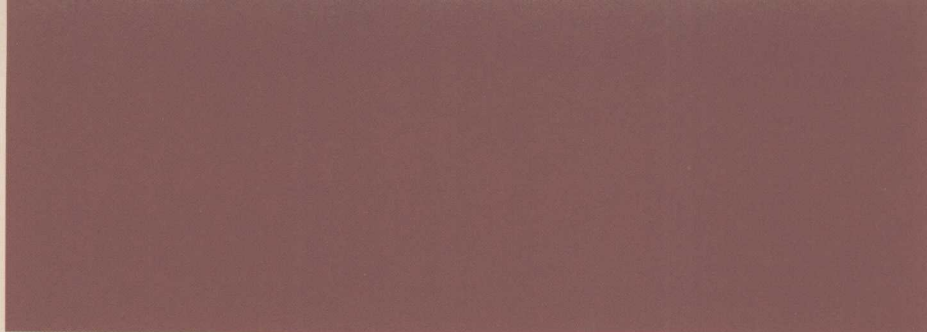
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HANDICRAFTS OF BEIJING

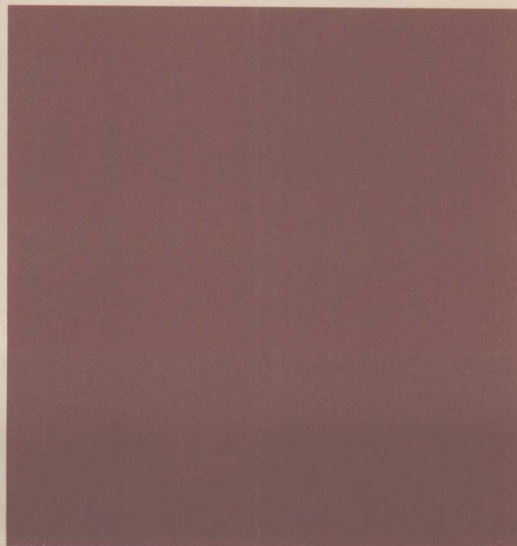
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FINE TUNES, FINELY APPOINTED ROOMS

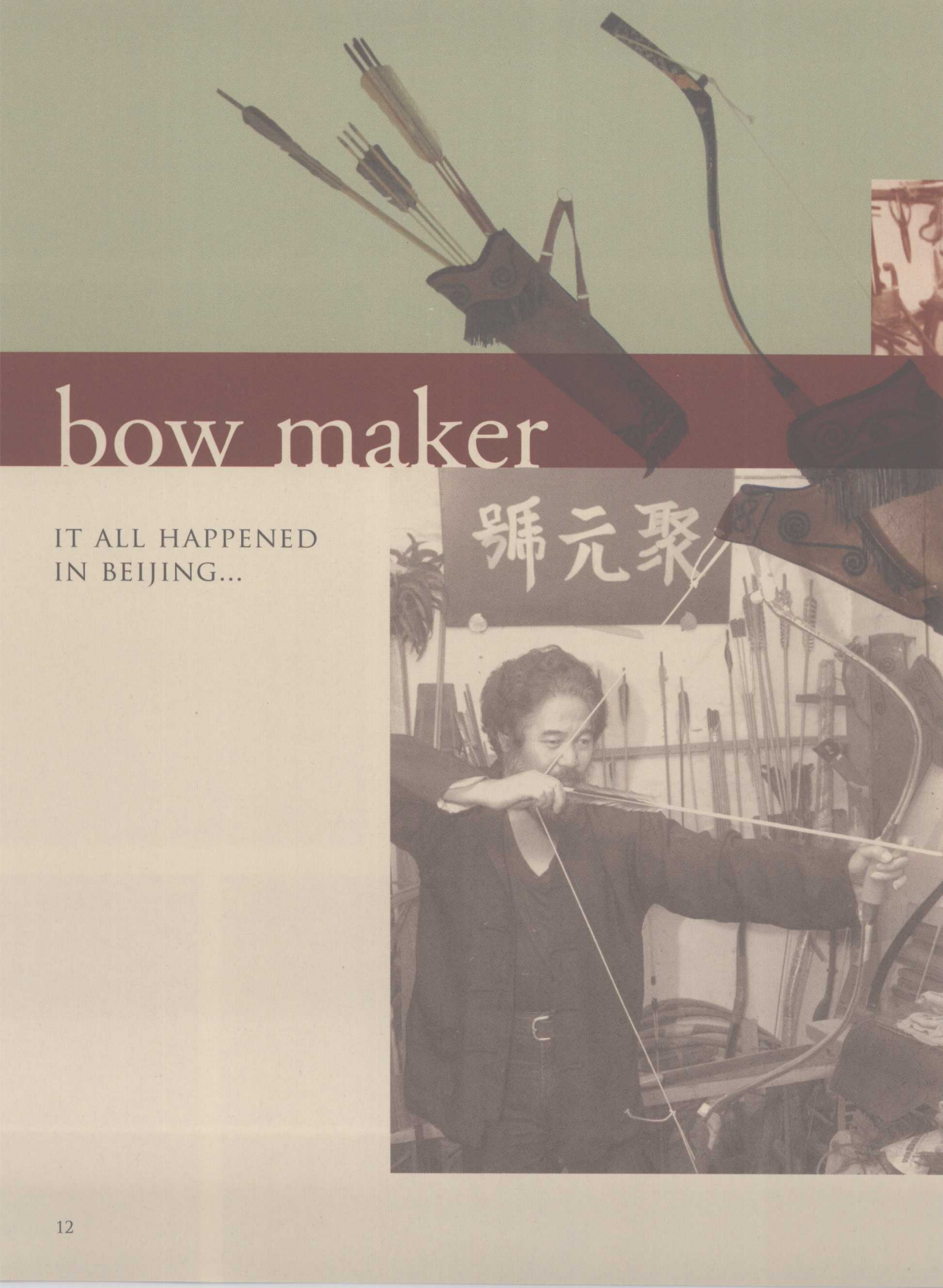
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IT ALL HAPPENED IN
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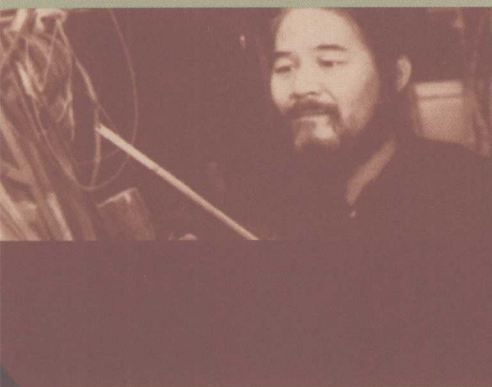




The image is a composite. The top half features a close-up of a traditional Chinese bow and a quiver of arrows against a light green background. The bottom half shows a man in a workshop, holding a bow and arrow, with a banner in the background. The banner has the Chinese characters '聚元號' (Jù Yuán Hào), which translates to 'Juyuan Brand' or 'Juyuan Workshop'.

bow maker

IT ALL HAPPENED
IN BEIJING...



Tucked away in his 15 sq. meter workshop in Chaoyang District, bow-maker Yang Fuxi uses a chisel to shape a piece of buffalo horn that he will eventually attach to the belly of his bow. Yang, the last and only bow-maker from the Ju Yuan Hao workshop, inherited the technique from his Manchu his ancestors. Examples of his handiwork sit in one corner, and three crossbows hang on the right wall. Several quivers of arrows and goose feathers are arranged on a set of shelves according to their different types. Splayed across a rough work bench are carpenter's tools—files, planes and hammers. Pieces of bamboo and buffalo horns are scattered around on the floor. Despite the hard work that goes into crafting a bow, the bow-maker's hands look soft and smooth. "Don't be surprised by my hands," said Yang. "It's indeed rough work to make cores for the bow, to polish buffalo horns and so on. But I use my handmade glue to stick the horn on the bow and the glue also helps protect my hands from the tough process. Of the more

than 200 processes involved in bow-making, gluing is crucial, Yang said. The quality of the bow depends on the quality of the horn that is attached and the way it is done. The glue is made from specially prepared pork skin, it is edible and it makes the skin incredibly smooth. This approach to making the glue, as well as other unique skills, were passed down through the generations from Yang's family, a group of Manchu people who worked for the Ju Yuan Hao workshop. Ju Yuan Hao was one of the 10 most famous imperial bow-making workshops during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). That the royal court commissioned Ju Yuan Hao to provide bows and arrows for the military and archery competitions is perhaps the clearest measure of the quality of its goods. At that time their products were for official use only. The royal government was their sole customer.

The workshop was located in a courtyard that it shared with other businesses in the bow-making trade in Dongsì, which at the time was

*“Yang’s bows are exactly the kind
of Chinese traditional bow that
I have been searching for.”*

already considered a part of downtown Beijing. The courtyard was named after the profession, and is still known as the Courtyard of Bows and Arrows (gongjian dayuan, 弓箭大院). Including Yang’s family, Ju Yuan Hao has changed ownership four times. By the late Qing Dynasty, or about 100 years ago, the seventh generation owners were addicted to opium. With their addiction adding their ability to run a business, they sold it to Yang’s grandfather, Yang Ruilin, a famous bow-making master in his 20s. “When I was young, I watched my grandfather and father busying themselves making bows and arrows all day long to meet orders from Qinghai Province and Outer Mongolia,” Yang recalled. “As early as 12 years old, I began to help my father with woodwork.” Yang said most of the bows he made are in the Manchu-style. They look powerful and are quite

popular. Making a bow can be divided into three stages. First, a core is made from thin bamboo and then a wooden grip and the ears are attached. Then pieces of horn and animal tissue are glued to the core, and finally the bow is decorated with birch bark, drawings and lacquer. Each process takes three years to learn, Yang said. It usually takes him three months to make one bow. Fearing that his craft and technique would die with him, Yang recently began to share his secrets with his 19-year-old son.

