

Project of Protecting and Salvaging Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage



Oral Histories of
Chinese Folk Arts and Crafts

THE HAS' KITES

Narrated by He Ziqi ♦ Translated by Tao Junlin, Li Xin ♦ Compiled by Wang Wenzhang



Central Compilation & Translation Press

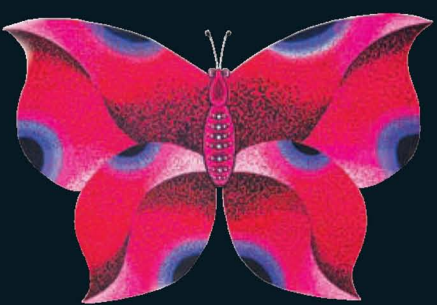


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Narrated by Ha Yiqi

Collated by Ren Xiaoshu

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THE HAS' KITES

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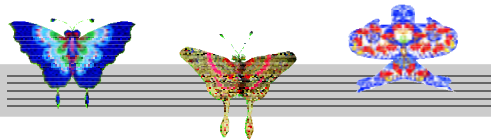
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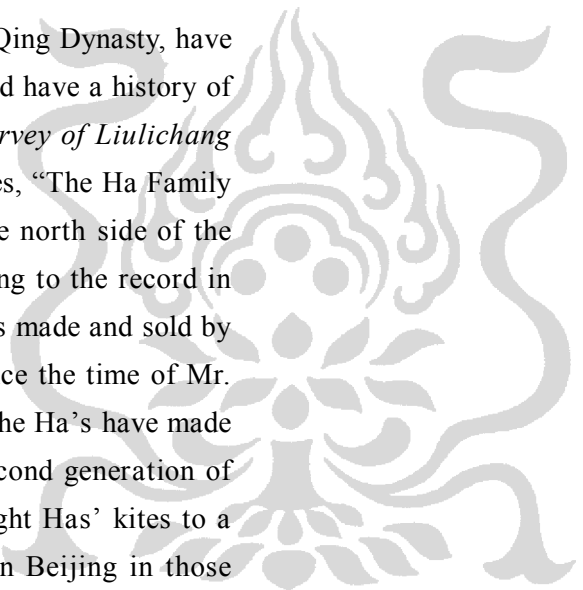
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Brief introduction to the narrators

This is an oral record given by Mr. Ha Yiqi, a fourth generation kite maker in Beijing, on the origin, heritage, characteristics, cultural significance, and the future development of Ha Family kites. For the purpose of recording objectively and respecting the viewpoint and the memory of the narrators, the author has tried as hard as possible to represent every aspect of the Has' kites, and restore the development and heritage of Has' kites as a representative of tradition folk art in Beijing.

Ha Yiqi, male, Hui nationality, was born in Beijing in 1954, into a family of kite makers. He is a folk art research fellow at the China Arts Research Institute; a councilman for the China Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art; vice-chairman of the Beijing Folk Artists Association; assistant secretary general of Beijing Kite Association; and Grand Master of folk art and craft in Beijing.

The Has' kites originated from the late Qing Dynasty, have been handed down for four generations, and have a history of over one hundred and sixty years. In *A Survey of Liulichang* by Sun Dianqi, published in 1963, he writes, "The Ha Family kite shop stands at Renwei Temple on the north side of the road in the middle of Liulichang, according to the record in existence: in the past dozen years, the kites made and sold by the Has have been the most famous." Since the time of Mr. Ha Yiqi's great grandfather, Ha Guolian, the Ha's have made a living making and selling kites. The second generation of the Ha kite makers, Ha Changying, brought Has' kites to a great height of development. The kites in Beijing in those





years were divided into two schools, north and south. The Has' kites became the representative of the northern school. The third generation, Ha Kuiming, inherited and carried on the workmanship of the Has' kites and classified Has' kites into eight categories, as well as perfected the method of kite making into a six step process.

Mr. Ha Yiqi was born into an old family of kite makers. Unconsciously influenced by what he constantly heard and saw from his childhood, he exhibited his remarkable gift upon making his first kite. Mr. Ha Yiqi has been working on the craft of kite making for over thirty years. On the one hand, he has inherited the traditional characteristics of his family, exploring deeply the cultural influence of Has' kites. From 1998, he started to draw the illustrated scripts of the Has' kites, and up to now he has completed over eighty copies.

In addition, Mr. Ha Yiqi made significant contributions to the continual development and improvement of Has' kites. As early as the 1980s, he began to integrate foreign technical advancements into the tradition kite design, working out a number of specially shaped, three-dimensional kites. In recent years he has again designed a lot of new kite, incorporating traditional models with contemporary patterns and vice versa. At the same time he has done extensive research on miniature kites. Mr. Ha Yiqi, breaking through the definition framed by the folk-custom tradition, has decorated and mounted his kites as collections of artwork, which achieved favorable visual effect and economic benefit. Mr. Ha Yiqi's new styled, miniature, and uniquely shaped kites have filled the gaps of the Has' kites, making the Has' kites expand and develop into the modern art world.

During his first visit aboard in 1983, Mr. Ha Yiqi began to take part in cultural exchange activities on behalf of the Chinese kite community. Up to this day, this exchange has been going on without any interruption. Mr. Ha Yiqi has shown special exhibits of Has' kites in many counties and his kites are collected and kept by many museums at home and



abroad. He has contributed to the development of folk culture in China and in overseas countries.

The narrator of the family history in Chapter 2 of this book is Ms. Ha Jingyi. She was born in 1923, the only daughter of Mr. Ha Changying, she inherited the tradition of the Ha Family kites along with her brother. She is Mr. Ha Yiqi's aunt and now lives in Chongqing. She experienced the time of the origin and the first display of Has' kites at Liulichang. Her memories from this period of history are rich and detailed, so this period of history is predominantly based on her account.



Chapter One

Introduction to Chinese Kites by Ha Yiqi

Summary

In this chapter Mr. Ha Yiqi tells us about the history of kites, their scientific significance, the four regions of kite making, and the schools of Beijing kites. The contents of this chapter contain both the practical knowledge about kites, and a variety of old folktales he was told by people from his father's generation.

Kites, in Mr. Ha Yiqi's eyes, are not just pieces of folk art with a long history, but also instruments of a science. Kites and their flight principles are widely used in various kinds of fields. Kites originated in China. Since the Song Dynasty, there have been four main locations where kites have developed. They developed with the unique cultural characteristics of the four locations, but there was also diffusion of ideas of kite design and function. Today these regions still maintain their own distinctive styles and models. Beijing kites have a long history with many achievements in artistic and technical design. It is a pity that today there remains only one family of kite makers, the Ha's, who have handed down the craft of kite making for generations.

As interviewer and recorder, the author tried to keep as much as possible of the original language of Mr. Ha Yiqi's accounts. Some notes have been added for clarification on points of dialect or technical terms, as well as some inconsistencies in context that arrive from any unscripted narrative.

This book was compiled through several interviews at



different times. The times were separately: May 9—June 3, 2008; September 7—12, 2008; January 12—February 17, 2009; March 27—April 11, 2009. The interviews took place, in addition to Ms. Ha Jingyi's home in Chongqing, Mr. Ha Yiqi's home in Beijing. Only the interview places and interviewees were indicated in each of the chapters in this book; the date for each interview will not be marked out again.

Interview place: Mr. Ha Yiqi's residence in Xizhimenwai, Beijing

Interviewee: Mr. Ha Yiqi

Interviewer: Ren Xiaozhu



I. History of Chinese Kites

Kites originated in the early period of the Qin Dynasty. This was recorded in *Han Fei Tzu*, saying that Mo Tse spent three years making a wooden kite, which flew for a whole day. There was another saying that the kite was invented by a master craftsman name Luban¹. Both Mo Tse and Luban were people of the State of Lu in the Spring and Autumn Period. So people concluded that kites originated in present-day Shandong.

The initial function of kites is said to have been used for military purposes, which was mentioned in a great many historical references. The great Han Dynasty General Hanxin used to fly a kite in the sky and calculate the distance to Weiyang Palace² according to the length of the kite string. Another story found in history books is that in the year 559 CE, King Wenxuan of the State of Qi ordered some prisoners to fly down on from the Gold Wind Platform, which was of eight *zhang* high (one *zhang* equals 3.3 meters). Anybody who could fly out of the town on a kite would be pardoned from capital punishment. As a result, a convict awaiting execution, called Huang Tou, succeeded in gliding on a kite and safely landing outside the town³.

1. It was recorded in *Letters*: Luban (a master of craftsman from the Spring and Autumn Period) used to make wooden kites; it is said, "Ban Gongshu made a wooden kite to spy on Song Down."

2. Gao Cheng from the Song Dynasty said in *Things Origin VIII: Kites*, "Kites, commonly talked about in times ancient and present, are said to have been made by Hanxin. On Emperor Gao's punitive expedition on Cheng Xi, Xin conceived a plot, so a kite was made and flown, so as to measure distance to Weiyang Palace and then to tunnel into it. This story is widely told, so it might as well be true."

3. See *North History, Volume 19, King Wenxuan VI Commentary*



4. *New Tang Document, Tian Yue Commentary* recorded again, in the Second Year of the Jianzhong Period in the Tang Dynasty (781 CE), General of Tang, Zhang Pi was besieged in Linming by a rebel army led by Tian Yue. The situation was very critical and Zhang Yue “made a paper kite in haste” with the message, “No out of siege in three days, being in Linming, prey of Tian Yue”. Then the kite was flown with a line that was “hundred *zhang* (unit of length) long, so it passed over Yue camps”, Tian Yue ordered an archer to shoot it down, but it was out of reach. Thus message for relief troops was delivered and Zhang and his men were rescued from the siege.

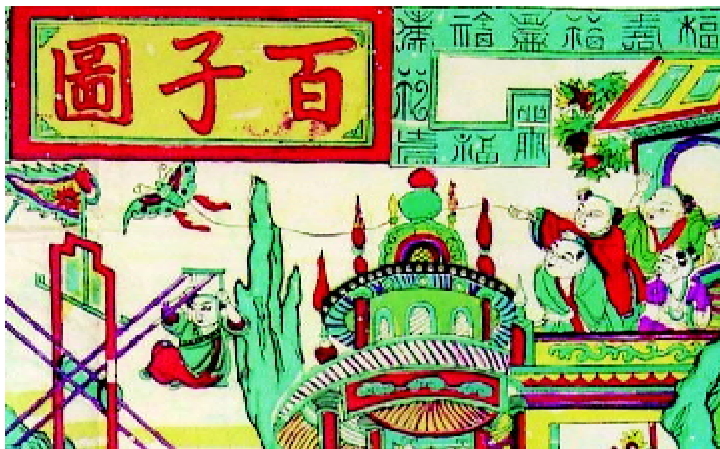
5. Poet Yuan Zhen from the middle of the Tang Dynasty (779-831CE) wrote in his eulogy on nature *Birds Chapter 20, kites* “Birds, birds swarm like kites, flying in the wind, in children’s hands a string is tied”.

6. Scenes of kite flying can be found in the *Riverside Scene at the Pure Moon Festival* drawn by Zhang Zheduan, (resident in Zhucheng Weifang), from the North Song Dynasty, and in *Hundreds of Civilians* drawn by Su Hancheng from the Song Dynasty.

According to this legend, it can be inferred that the kites before the Tang Dynasty may have been quite different from the ones we see today⁴. The size might have been large enough to carry human beings. The primary flight principle of kites is the same today as it was when kites were first created. Stories of the use of kites in military activities indicated how early kite flying techniques were fully developed. Another story from the Tang Dynasty tells of a town under siege using a kite to send a message for help. Later the function of kites turned from military application towards entertainment. When the process of paper production became faster, large numbers of kites began to be made of paper instead of silk cloth. The cost of kites made from paper was much lower, making them affordable to ordinary people. This way, kites became available to the masses and became a popular recreational activity. In those days, flying kites was a very popular activity. Scene of kite flying have been mentioned in many poems⁵.

Kites in the Song Dynasty were even more popular, because Emperor Song Huizong liked flying kites very much. Apart from the fact that he often flew kites within his palace, he is also said to have commissioned the compiling of the book, *Xuanhe Kite Records*. Influenced by the emperor, many painters then incorporated scenes of kite flying in their pictures⁶.

In both the Ming and the Qing Dynasties, the development of kites reached a golden age. Many records of kites from



A New Year picture Hundred Kids printed in Taohuawu (Peach-blossom Castle) Suzhou Jiangsu province; patterns of kids flying kites are printed in it.



that period can still be found today. In one chapter in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Jia Baoyu was depicted as flying kites with others in the Grand View Garden. The description was done in great detail⁷. Also kite flying scenes can be seen in numerous New Year paintings. By this time kites had improved and diversified in many aspects such as in size, style, trussing techniques, decoration and flying techniques. Kites started to merge various other folk arts and crafts. For instance, some New Year painting workshops printed papers for kites with the same technique of woodblock printed pictures. This reduced the cost of kites and they became even more affordable to ordinary people. Therefore, kites secured a permanent position in the lives of ordinary people. The popularity of kites, besides the function of entertainment, was also good for physical exercise, especially even more so for children. A person, called Fucha Dunchong during the Qing Dynasty said in an article that kite flying could make the eye clear, and could also dispose of “internal heat”⁸. It was also written in the *Sequel Records of Natural Science*, “Skyward along the line, looking up with the mouths open rids kids of internal heat”. Here we have seen the records about kite flying being helpful for people’s physical health.

This is quite reasonable. You need to run in order to fly a kite – if there is no wind or just a slight wind, a person needs to run faster to fly a kite up. In comparatively open spaces, people can see very far. Today we all know looking in the distance is a very good way to relax the eye.

After the Revolution of 1911, the development of Chinese civilization has advanced and developed in many ways, but for a variety of reasons, kite flying is a growing and widely popular activity. Kite flying has become widespread sport recreational pastime. The holding of various competitions is also a promotion of kites. More and more people have begun participating in this sport.

Kites have a variety of names because of different the regions and different time periods. I have listed the following

7.This interesting scene was depicted in which Baoyu, Daiyu, where a group of maids are flying kites in the Grand View Garden in Chapter 70 in *The Dream of Red Chamber*. The dozens of varieties of kites mentioned include colored butterflies, bats, large fish, phoenixes, crabs, beautiful ladies, and rustling swallows. Some tools for kite flying were mentioned in the book such as scissors strands. In Chapter 22 the author, Cao Xueqin wrote a kite riddle through Tanchun, “Downstairs with faces up standing kids, Adornments at Qingming looking attractive best, string being broken powerless faint, no complaint of wind farewell bid.” The season for kite flying, characters, and the scene after kite string being broken are described very clearly.

8.In *Yanjing Notes of Years* written by Fucha Dunchong in the late Qing Dynasty, it read, “Kids play well with season related. After October in capital, kites and shuttlecocks etc. come in sight. Kites, also paper birds, with bamboo tied to make the frame, paper pasted on, made into cranes, peacocks, rustling swallows, flying tigers and so on; paintings delicate, flying in the sky with string in kids’ hands below, their eyes beneficial. Kites made with organs and gongs and drums are even melodiously audible.” In *Natural Science Sequel* with the words written, “upward the string, kids sight up with mouths open, and internal heat released.” Records about sound device on kites and their benefit to people’s health were recorded then.



11 kinds:

- (1) Air scarf like a flying shawl
- (2) Paper kites the term used in the north — kite is a kind of bird in the north
- (3) Phoenix kite a bird similar to a phoenix
- (4) Wind fowl also a kind of bird
- (5) Sparrow hawk called this in Shandong
- (6) Spring gentleman symbolizing a man in the spring
- (7) Paper owl shaped like an owl made of paper
- (8) Bright sight
- (9) Wind tile like the tiles on roof of a house
- (10) Kite a sonant one
- (11) Octagonal paper

II. Kites: predecessors of airplanes

Kites can fly with the help of wind. Kite flying is not only a healthy activity and a fun recreational activity, but is also useful device used in science. Why do I say so? That is because kites were used for many years in experiments for studying the natural sciences. In about the 12th century, kites were brought to the Western world. From that time on, Westerners began to do experiments with kites. These experiments were very helpful to the development of modern science. I have read a lot of reports and materials about this. Each time after reading, I would sort out and record the sources of these materials. I thought these things were helpful to the accumulation of my knowledge.

For example, as early as in 1749, in order to measure high atmospheric temperature, an English astronomer, Alexander Wilson, attached several thermometers to six kites and flew these six kites, or rather the “kite train”, on a 1,000 meter long line. The kites carried the thermometers into the sky and got different temperatures at different altitudes. In this way, Wilson collected the data on the differences in temperature in the atmosphere, which helped the study of



meteorology greatly. There were a great many scientific experiments like this. For instance, an Italian scientist, Guglielmo Marconi, set up radio communications between Newfoundland and England in 1901. He used a kite with a pulling line made of wire to support the over 1,200 meter long antenna for the radio. In addition, when building the first suspension bridge across the Niagara River in 1847, kites were used to carry construction materials across to the other side of the river. I also heard of another interesting story. In the year 1828, an English teacher named George Pocock used two large kites to pull a cart. With a strong wind, the cart was able to reach a speed of 35 kilometers per hour. This kite-towed cart even beat a horse and stagecoach in a race.

Kites played an important part in international aircraft history as well. I discovered in my research that most of the people designing and studying gliders and airplanes in history had experiences in making kites. Their inspiration all came from kites. Because some large kites were able to carry people directly, they used kites to do their experiments.

There are a lot of examples of this kind. For example, “In the years between 1799 and 1809, George Cree in England studied aviation principle with kites and established aerodynamics. In 1804, in Castle Yorkshire he invented the first glider in the world. In 1903, the Wright Brothers from Ohio, U.S.A. developed the first airplane and conducted the first test flight test in North Carolina. They also made a glider according to the takeoff principle of kites with the help of wind force. Later they devised an engine to increase the flight distance and which led to the created of high-flying passenger planes.”

A kite is a kind of aircraft with fixed wings. I think these words are quite right. Gliders were gradually developed based on the flight principle of kites. The prototype for a glider was the same as a kite. The only differences were the scale of a glider was several times larger and the wings were doubled. From here we can see, to a very great extent, it is because of

