

Project of Protecting and Salvaging Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage



Oral Histories of
Chinese Folk Arts and Crafts

CHINESE

NEW YEAR PAINTING

Narrated by Tai Liping ♦ Translated by T-WIN Translation Service ♦ Compiled by Wang Wenzhang



Central Compilation & Translation Press

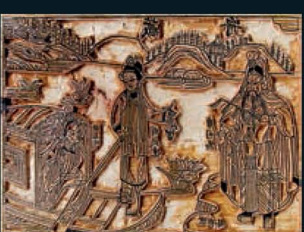


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China Classics International

THE NEW YEAR PAINTING





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Narrated by Tai Liping

Collated by Wang Haixia

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Publisher: He Yan

Translator: T-WIN Translation Service

Editor: Huo Xingchen

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©**Central Compilation & Translation Press**

No. 36 Xixiejie Xidan

Beijing, China

©**CPG-International-Sydney**

Suite 23,301 Castlereagh Street

Sydney NSW 2000 Australia

First edition 2011

ISBN 978-7-5117-1308-7

ISBN 978-1-921678-74-5

Printed in China

Work Team for the *Oral Histories of Chinese Folk Arts and Crafts Series*

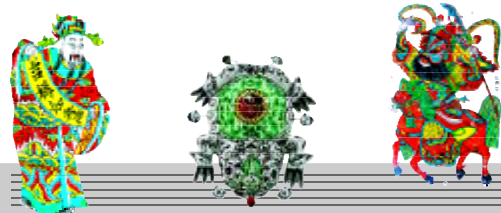
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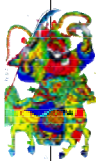
Preface

Twenty years ago I chose New Year paintings, the most important branch of Chinese folk art, as the subject of my master's degree thesis. At that time, my tutor Mr. Wang Shucun told me, "Among all Chinese folk art, New Year paintings are the richest, most artistically expressive and visually appealing. In New Year paintings, stories are told, plots are designed, characters are depicted, painting strokes are used, composition and color matching are stressed, and 'rhymes' are adopted for portraying the characters, describing sceneries, colors and meanings." Since then my personal interest and my research in New Year paintings has continued to grow.

In this volume of the Series of Oral History on Chinese Folk Art, Tai Liping, "the Guardian of New Year paintings in Northwest China", was selected as the oral narrator of the history of Chinese New Year paintings. Our selection is based on the following considerations:

First, Shaanxi Province is considered the cradle of the culture of the Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE - 1100 BCE) and the Zhou Dynasties (770 BCE - 221 BCE). The cultural relics found in the Central Shaanxi Plain are also particularly rich. This region holds an important position in Chinese cultural history. Located along the vital communication line of the Central Shaanxi Plain, Fengxiang is a renowned cultural town with a long history, and it is also the cradle of the culture of Zhou Dynasties (770BCE - 221BCE) and Qin Dynasty (221BCE - 206BCE). Life here has a strong flavor of traditional Chinese culture. So do the New Year paintings here, which first





appeared 500 years ago during the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644). These paintings were preserved even throughout the tumultuous years of Cultural Revolution, and are the only New Year paintings that still remain in Northwest China. Research on Fengxiang New Year paintings necessitates the study of the origin of the Chinese culture, which is the cultural source of the ancient, mysterious and classic traits of these paintings.

Fengxiang New Year paintings are a very unique local branch of New Year paintings in North China. With the adoption of the themes and topics peculiar to the location, they are unique in terms of their subject matter, typically representative of the folk New Year paintings in North China. They represent a peasant art with the ethos of literati, which cannot be found in the New Year paintings of other places.

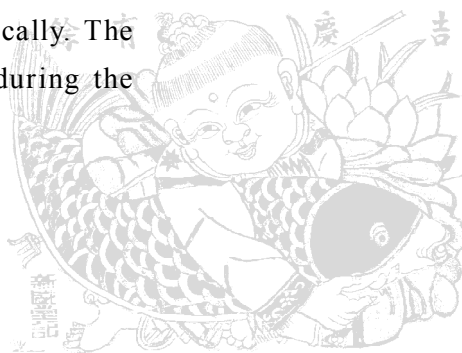
Secondly, the production of New Year paintings is divided into four separate stages: draft making, engraving, printing and mounting. Seldom can a single person undertake all this work. However, Tai Liping is an exception. Rated as a “Craft and Art Master of China”, he is an outstanding figure, mastering each technique of the production process. He is also one of the most authoritative folk artists in describing the production processes and the development of these technical skills.

Next, and also the most important, is that there is a clear line of inheritance in such a family of traditional New Year paintings as Tai’s family. In his family, these creative techniques have been passed down from one generation to another, establishing the family workshop style and the intangible cultural traits formed in the inheritance of this crafts. These characteristics were a thread running through Tai’s life while he was growing up. The years when he devoted himself to New Year paintings witnessed the sufferings inflicted upon traditional Chinese culture. Never had the craft of New Year paintings experienced such a quick change from prosperity, destruction, revival to being reduced to a legacy



as the short period which coincided with the better part of Tai's life: from the Anti-Rightist Struggle and the Anti-Feudalism Movement in the 1950s, to the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, to the Reform and Opening-Up period beginning in 1978 and the subsequent social transformation. Tai's strenuous efforts, sense of mission, resignation to his fate, contentment with things as they are and unruffled attitude all originate from his devotion to New Year paintings. He was predestined to inherit the art of New Year paintings. The story of a family of New Year painting craftsman like Tai's family also constitutes a part of the inheritance history of Chinese folk arts.

I have known Mr. Tai Liping for over ten years, because we are both members of the Professional Folk Crafts and Arts Association, an organization under the China National Art and Crafts Society. We can meet in every annual conference. I learned about his New Year paintings for the first time through the arts shows of my tutor, Mr. Wang Shucun. In those shows I saw many paintings by Tai's grandfather and father. I began to interview Tai in August, 2006. To prepare this book, I interviewed him on August 3rd, September 4th, 2006, October 2nd, 2007, in early October, 2008, and March, 2009, twice at his house in the city of Baoji and twice in his hometown, Fengxiang. During this period he was also often in Beijing on business trips. We took these opportunities to talk in details about many things, sometimes at my house and sometimes at the place where he stayed. For readers' convenience, I have sorted out what was talked in these interviews and organized the materials into a few subject areas. All these records are now displayed chronologically. The details about the interview times and places during the preparation of each chapter are not specified.



Chapter One

My Hometown, Fengxiang

The *Book of Odes* says: “Long long ago the Tai region was inhabited. Tai region refers to the present Fufeng and Xianyang region. The dozens of ancient ruins found and unearthed today in Baoji region, including the Zhou, Jiangrong, and Shan ruins and the many tombs with Zhengjiapo as the representative, is evidence that the Zhou people communicated with the Jiang and other tribes in Baoji from early the Shang Dynasty to the early Zhou Dynasty. Fengxiang’s history, we know, dates back to the Shang and Zhou Dynasty period. The Tai family is as old as that and, together with the ancient steps of people of Zhou and Qin Dynasty period, has lasted until present day. At present there are still many people surnamed Zhou in Fengxiang and they are all relatives to some degree. This blood succession indicates an ancient and profound culture and brands everything in this region, including the New Year paintings here, with deep historical significance. Fang Xiang and Fang Bi, the two figures of the *Door God* paintings, are a good example.

New Year paintings are products of customs and culture. New Year paintings are decorative, but how these paintings are used is very important and is often neglected. In this chapter Tai Liping tells about the customs related to Fengxiang New Year paintings, which is very helpful to our understanding of them.

In ancient times, the techniques of Chinese folk arts and crafts were passed down within families, either from fathers to sons or from masters to apprentices, but it is hard to explain



to a child brought up in a craftsmanship family how to learn the craft, because the craft has been part of his life for so long that it has become part of his blood. It is natural and independent inheriting. Tai Liping's learning was this kind of natural process.

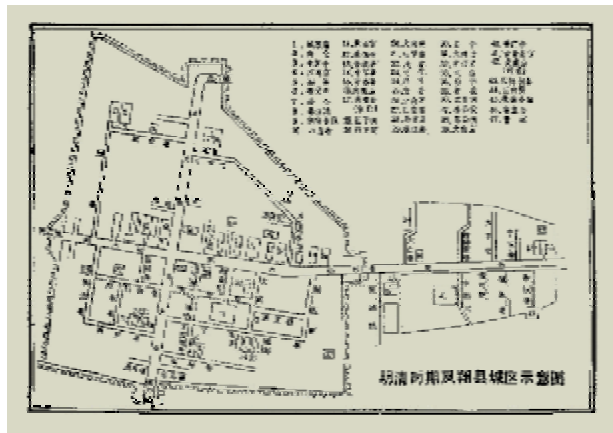
1. Baocheng Railway: the railway from Chengdu to Baoji.



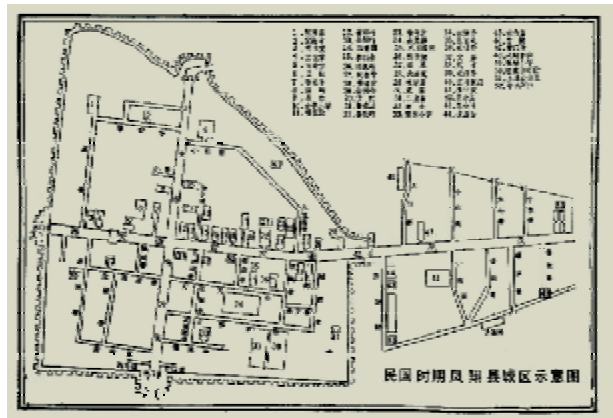
I Profound culture

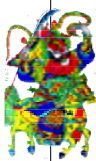
Fengxiang is a county full of history and culture. Before the Baocheng Railway¹ was built in 1956, Fengxiang used to be an important post station leading to the Northwest. People used to go directly to the Northwest from Fengxiang, not passing through Baoji. My hometown Southern Xiaoli village is located just southeast of Fengxiang County, twenty kilometers away. It is under the administration of Tianjiazhuang. During the Period of Spring and Autumn and

Plan of Fengxiang County in Ming and Qing Dynasty.



Plan of Fengxiang County in the period of the Republic of China.



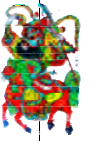


the Warring States, Fengxiang, which was then called Yongcheng, belonged to the State of Qin. Qin Mugong's Tomb¹ now is just in the south suburb of Fengxiang, where lots of ancient cultural relics have been unearthed during the recent years. Fengxiang was a prefecture in Song Dynasty. The literary giant Su Shi was once an assistant to the prefectural Governor of Fengxiang. The East Lake, with a history of over 900 years, was built by dredging the “Yinfeng Pond” and drawing water from the Phoenix Fountain when Su Shi was serving as assistant to the prefectural Governor of Fengxiang. It became a park afterwards, where Wangsu Pavilion and Xiyu Pavilion were built. Some ancient events of prayer for rain were carved on stone monuments that stood in the pavilions. Su Shi's Temple was also built in the park. It used to be the mansion of Su Shi, and became a memorial to Su Shi afterwards, in which there was a portrait of Su Shi and a record of events that happened during Su Shi's tenure of office in Fengxiang. In addition, there are also some other pavilions such as Lingxu Pavilion, Yuanyang Pavilion, Yilan Pavilion, etc. Yilan Pavilion is as tall as a building of several floors. If you climb up step by step, you can command a panoramic view of the East Lake. Fengxiang Middle School is situated just inside the East Lake Park. I used to read in the pavilions and walk in the park during the summer when I was in middle school.

1. Qin Mugong's Tomb: It's a narration mistake. This tomb belongs to Qin Jinggong, whose name is Shi. He is the fourth generation of Qin Mugong and took the throne in 577 BCE and was buried in 537 BCE. As a matter of fact, this region had been the political center throughout Qin Dynasty.

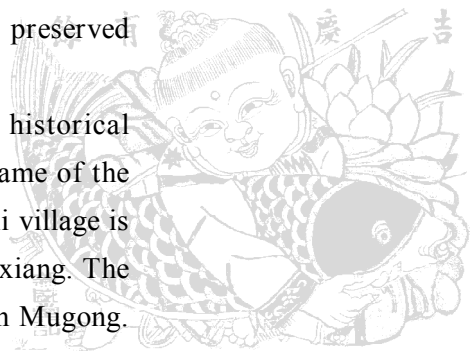


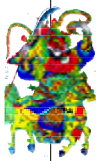
Qin Jinggong's tomb.



There used to be a Kaiyuan Temple, which was also called “Bajiao Temple”. There was also a Tianzhu Temple, which was dismantled during the Cultural Revolution. They were not recorded into the annals of Fengxiang County. During Tang and Song dynasties, a large number of literati and artists visited Fengxiang. It is reported that such great painters, Wu Daozi and Wang Wei of Tang Dynasty, painted fine mural paintings in Fengxiang, and sculptor Yang Huizhi left picturesque clay sculptures in Tianzhu Temple. These won the admiration of the Song Dynasty literary giant, Su Shi, who wrote the famous poem “Eight Sceneries of Fengxiang”. My father painted a series of ink line and hand paint color New Year paintings inspired by the “Eight Sceneries of Fengxiang”, when he resumed his work in the Arts and Crafts Company in 1979. The series adopted a format of characters in the upper part and paintings in the lower part. Later, considering that it was difficult to print, we made the series into a form of paper-cut intaglio, and the characters were printed in a clearer font. The original print still exists. My middle school was located inside the East Lake Park. There was also the Fengxiang Normal School that was in the Wen Temple, which originally had a huge palace called Dacheng Palace. In the Fengxiang Dongguan Elementary School, there is also another historic site called Chunqiu Pavilion. I lived in Fengxiang when I was a child. I used to play in the temples and pavilions. So many historic sites in Fengxiang have been preserved so well because the town has weathered many wars, and is the area is rather blocked out from the outside world. Lots of historic things, like the historic sites and the art works have well been preserved. The ancient city wall of Fengxiang was preserved quite well until the Cultural Revolution.

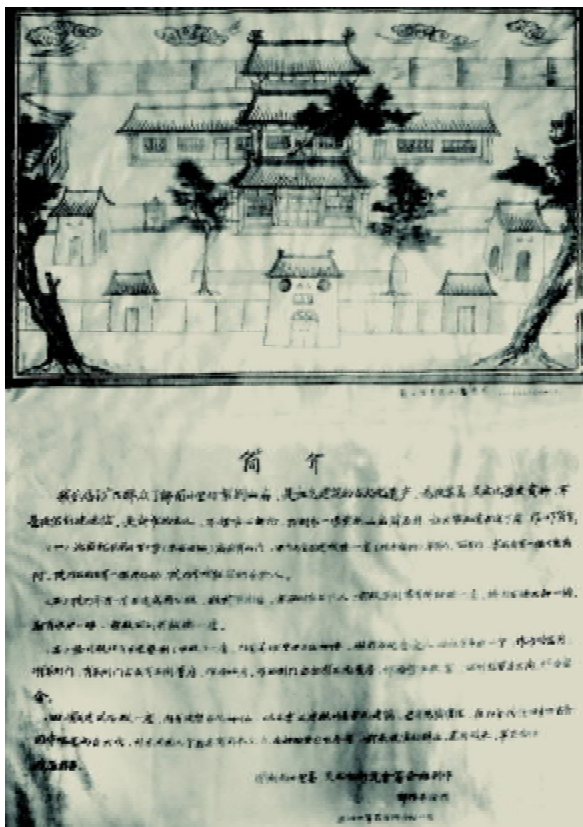
The cultures of many places in Shaanxi have historical origins. Fengxiang is full of historic sites. Each name of the historic sites has its own story. Our Southern Xiaoli village is no exception. Qin Mugong’s Tomb is right in Fengxiang. The name of Fengxiang is related to a legend about Qin Mugong.





It is said that Qin Mugong betrothed his daughter Nong Yu to Xiao Shi, who was good at playing the musical instrument *xiao*, a Chinese traditional instrument similar to the clarinet. Nong Yu learned the skills of playing the *xiao* and it was said he was able to make the sound of a phoenix singing. Qin Mugong ordered that a phoenix pavilion be built for them. Later, Xiao Shi rode a flying dragon, Nong Yu rode a phoenix, and they flew into the sky together. Fengxiang is right in the place where they flew into the sky on the phoenix, which is how Fengxiang got its name. The name of Xiaoli Village came from when Nong Yu played the *xiao* and its spread into the village. Its original name was *Xiaoli*. *Xiao* here means the musical instrument *xiao*. Now it is commonly known as *Xiaoli*, but here *xiao* (小) means small.

Xiaoli Village is comprised of Southern Xiaoli and Northern Xiaoli. Southern Xiaoli and Northern Xiaoli are not very different in general. Northern Xiaoli is closer to the highway, while the cultural atmosphere of Southern Xiaoli is better than



Map of Jiangyuanci before the Cultural Revolution



Plan of Fengxiang County nowadays.



that of Northern Xiaoli. People in Southern Xiaoli speak in a more polite way, humorously but not vulgarly. The most popular family name in Southern Xiaoli is Tai. We worship Holy Mother Jiangyuan, who is said was a member of the Tai family. The elderly people in the village say that the Tai family in Southern Xiaoli village stems from the Jiang family. Their ancestors moved here from Wugong County, Shaanxi Province. They should be descendants of the Zhou family. Now, there is still a temple in the center of our village, in which Holy Mother Jiangyuan¹ is worshipped by the villagers. The temple is the largest and most influential one in our village. Every July 1st of the lunar calendar, we go to the

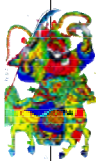
1. Holy Mother Jiang Yuan: Jiang Yuan, born in Wugong District of Shaanxi in ancient times, daughter of Youtai, a descendent of Emperor Yan. In legends after stepping into a giant's footprints she gave birth to Houji (Chinese God of Agriculture) and named him Qi. Houji taught people to plant crops. He was the ancestor of Zhou people and was regarded as God of Agriculture and thus Jiangyuan was regarded as the Holy Mother. Today outside the southern gate of Wugong Town in Wugong District, there is still Holy Mother Jiangyuan's tomb as well as Holy Mother Temple on whose main hall hangs a giant board reading "母仪郅城"(Holy Mother blesses the town).



Tiger—Fengxiang Traditional Clay Sculpture



Frog—Fengxiang Traditional Clay Sculpture



Tiger—Fengxiang Traditional Cloth Art



Waist Pack—Fengxiang Traditional Embroidery

temple and worship the Holy Mother.

The folk art in Fengxiang County is rich. It is the most famous area for folk art in Shaanxi, such as paper-cutting, temple paintings, facial make-up, shadow puppets, embroidery, clay sculptures, straw paintings, etc. Of course, New Year paintings are the most important item among them. The most famous handicraft is liquor making. There is a jingle in Fengxiang, which says that Fengxiang has three incomparable things: “Xifeng liquor, willows in East Lake Park and women’s hands.” Xifeng liquor is nationally famous and is said to be one of the four national famous liquors. The willows in the East Lake Park are the same ones that were planted when the park was built during Su Shi’s governance in Fengxiang. They appear in different configurations, some are straight and tall, some slanting into the water. Willow is a symbolic name of one of the Fengxiang Eight Sights of the “East Lake”. Women’s hands refer to the handicrafts of Fengxiang. Fengxiang women’s hands are pretty artistic. Paper-cutting, straw painting and embroidery are very famous in the neighborhood. No one knows from what time they were created. What is known is that they were already very famous during the Republican period. In Southern Xiaoli village, there lived a famous embroidery craftswoman, Wang Yinfeng, whose embroidery was very famous at that time. She was illiterate. After she married in Fengxiang, she specialized in embroidery and sewing. Before the founding of the PRC, also known as the liberation, she used to do some sewing and embroidery for



Fengxiang's Facial Types

the Christian church in Long County. When the minister left, she sent him the embroidery of the Eight Diagrams. After liberation, her family made embroidered pillows, waistbands and sachets during the slower seasons when there was less farm work. In 1980, Shaanxi Province sent its folk art work to Beijing for exhibition for the first time. Wang Yinfeng's art works were among those sent to Beijing, and were highly acclaimed both domestically and internationally. Later, some domestic artists came to visit her embroidery, which subsequently became very famous and attracted lots of buyers. At that time, one of the reasons people came to our village was to see my family's New Year paintings, and another was to see the embroidery of Wang Yinfeng.

II Fashions and customs of celebrating Chinese New Year

Guanzhong has a long history and an advanced culture. You can find all kinds of unique folk art. The ancient houses in the villages are literally works of art. Coming into any village,