

Unfolding the Mysteries of Chinese Folk Art

It never ceases to amaze me that people from all walks of life, but particularly scientists, have been drawn at one point in their lives to paperfolding. I know many who are biologists and mathematicians and recently I even learned about a woman who divides her interests between her professional career in atmospheric sciences and the study of paperfolding from the historical point of view.

by Laura Rozenberg

Pictures courtesy of PaDoRe

(Paperfolding Documentation and Research Library, Weimar, Germany)

Her name is Xiaoxian Huang, she is a creator of beautiful origami models. Also, she and Joan Sallas, a leading origami historian and founder of PaDoRe (the Paperfolding Documentation and Research library based in Weimar, Germany), are trying to discover the secrets of the zhen xian bao, an ancient form of paper construction originating in China. To that purpose, they traveled extensively around that country collecting specimens and stories about these intriguing and beautifully decorated objects. They have lectured on their findings at conventions and workshops in Holland, Germany, Spain, and England, and they are compiling a book on the subject. So now that Xiaoxian is becoming a regular at those highly regarded international meetings (and one is certain that sooner or later we'll have the fortune to meet her in person), it seemed timely to get to know her better. Fueled by curiosity, I sent Xiaoxian an email and the result is the following interview. (Also see Xiaoxian's Gift Box model on pages 26-27).

According to Ruth Smith and Gina Corrigan, who wrote a book about this

subject, a zhen xian bao is a type of multi-layered container that is used in China for storing embroidery threads, packets of needles and even photos or memorabilia. You and Joan Sallas have also been collecting specimens of this sort, so tell us what you found.*

These zhen xian bao were first considered a tradition practiced by the Miao, Dong and Yi ethnic groups of Southern China. However, we also got samples made by the Han in the Shānxī y Shāndōng provinces from Northern China. They may even exist all over China. They are designed for different purposes. Some were used to hold paper, money, or writing tools for businessmen in ancient times. We have collected a wonderful example that was used to store spare parts of shadow theater figurines.

The typical zhen xian bao has been described as a group of collapsible paper-folded boxes of different sizes, layered and glued so that they become an object that can rest folded like a notebook.

But again, you found variations of this format as well.

Yes. We got some that have “drawers”. The number of compartments may change, too. Many have 16 units or 4 units on top, but could have as few as one or as many as 64 in the upper layer.



Xiaoxian Huang holding her Heart with Swans during a workshop last year in Weimar, Germany.



Item acquired in Shanxi Province, northern China. Folded in the form of a twisted box. A woman and two children wearing the clothes in the style of Qing Dynasty [AD1644-1911] were painted inside. (PaDoRe ID4490)

Your understanding of the language and knowledge of ancient cultures have been key to unveiling some of the mysteries about these objects. But looking back, how did you develop your interest in paper folding, which is the basic matter of these objects?

When I was a child, my grandfather, who was a school teacher, taught me the basic fine art techniques for children, including drawing, cutting, folding, and other handworks. I liked them very much. I even acted as a leader of a handwork group at school and taught my classmates folding techniques from a paperfolding book before I was 10 years old. I also went to an extracurricular class to learn sketching for about half year at that time. But soon as the study tasks became heavy, I had very little time for hobbies. I could only enjoy them in the fine art class in school and did a little drawing on summer or winter holidays. When I was in the university, I did a little graphic design and computer graphics. In January 2011, I went back to the folding book which my grandfather had taught me from. I also

found a series of three folding books and bought the one by Román Díaz and translated it into Chinese. The models were complicated and beautiful, quite different from the simple models which I folded in my childhood. I started to search and fold complicated models since that time and created my first model with box pleating techniques in August 2012. But soon I stopped again because of my studies. I did very little folding during the following three years until November 2015 when I started creating again with color-change techniques.

What part of China were you born in and where do you live now?

I was born and grew up in Nanjing, eastern China. I obtained my doctorate in Atmospheric Sciences in Nanjing University. I taught meteorology in Huazhong Agricultural University in Wuhan, central China. I'm planning to move to Europe this summer.

I was told you know several languages. How did you learn them?

I can speak Chinese, English, and Japanese. And I'm also learning Catalan and Korean. As a Chinese student, I had to study hard but I liked fine arts, ancient Chinese history, geography, chemistry, and so on. I especially enjoy ancient Chinese poems and lyrics. They not only sound beautiful but also give readers the capability to imagine beautiful scenes. I have created several models according to the poems.

Tell us a bit about paperfolding in China. Why is it that we know so little about the craft in a land that invented paper?

We collected some books since the late Qing Dynasty. The reason needs to be analyzed. However, we've been having some wonderful achievements lately. First, we are sorting out the models in the books published during the last century. So far, we have sorted out about 300 models. They not only include traditional Chinese models, such as the Chinese Chess table, but also have recorded models spreading from the Western world, such as Red Cross and Holy Cup. Second, besides the paperfolding books, we canvas the literature. We found a letter folding model called "fāng



This container was acquired in France and contained a letter dated in 1866. It was written in Chinese and French by a man named Laurent Sui to a French woman called Mame Burgot. (Image courtesy of PaDoRe, ID 4038).

“Now when I compare scientific research and paperfolding, I find both need creative ideas, one must do research on to improve, publish results, and communicate with peers”.

shèng” or “tóngxīn fāng shèng” recorded in about 30 ancient Chinese love stories, some of which go back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD). It is a model shaped as two overlapped diamonds, called Two Diamonds Sharing the Same Heart (Chinese people are very literal), folded from decorated letter paper and used to spread love messages between lovers. Lastly, by comparing the Chinese Junk model recorded in some old Chinese paperfolding books from the early 20th Century with some European books from the 19th Century, we found it has something to do with yuánbào (an ancient currency), a model that was used in funeral rituals.

Are there models that you know have been originated in China?

Yes. For example, the above mentioned yuánbào, Pagoda, Official Hat, Awning Boat, and Flower Box.

China is such a large country. What part of the country has been most productive in paperfolding?

Suggested websites

Zhen Xian Bao, by Paula Versnick: www.orihouse.com/zhenxianbao/zhenxianbao-paulaversnick.pdf

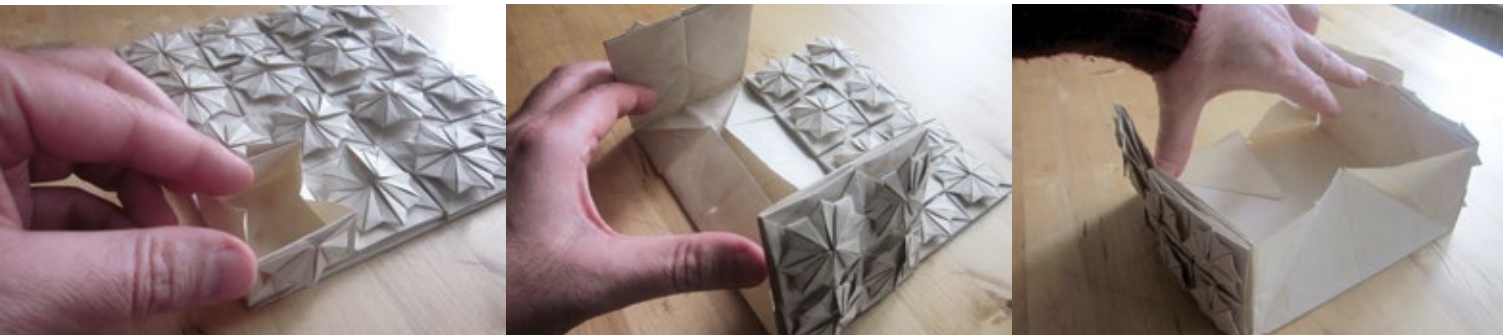
A Little Known Chinese Folk Art, by Ruth Smith (originally published in the BOS Magazine): www.foldingdidactics.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/zhen_xian_beyo.pdf

Pictures of a workshop in Rotterdam (2016): www.foldingdidactics.com/the-1000-faces-of-zhen-xian-bao-28-december-2016/

Article by Marieke de Hoop: <https://www.papiermakerijdehoop.nl/>

Xiaoxiang Huang talking about her designs (2016): www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjRuoRLVudg

Zhen Xian Bao tutorial: www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2bNuhB8Ogs



ABOVE. Folding beauty box acquired by PaDoRe in the Shandong Province, Northern China. Each compartment is made out of cigarette boxes with images of girls dressed up in the 1920-1930's style. The artist is a famous Chinese commercial painter named Hang Zhiying (1900-1947). (Courtesy of PaDoRe. Archive #ID4492).



ABOVE. Joan Sallas introducing a workshop on Chinese folding at EMOZ (Escuela Museo Origami Zaragoza) in February, 2017.

LEFT. From left to right: Marieke de Hoop, Ruth's husband, Xiaoxian Huang, and Ruth Smith during a meeting at Ms. Smith's home in Southampton (UK). Ruth is the author, along with Gina Corrigan, of the book titled "A little Known Chinese Folk Art", about the zhen xian bao Chinese paper-folded containers. (Courtesy of Xiaoxiang Huang and Joan Sallas).

Because China is so large, the Internet has made it convenient for us to communicate via online forums with other folders all over China. I often post photos of my folding works on two forums: Zhe Zhi Ba (which means Paperfolding Bar) and Zhe Zhi Xue Yuan (Paperfolding Academy). As far as I know, there are some folding groups such as GYOU, SAOC, and local groups in some cities.

What about books? Are there Chinese authors who are famous in your country, or do you rely on books from Japan, Europe, etc? What about books from the early 20th century? Were there many? What authors?
We collected many books, but the books need to be analyzed. Not every folder publishes a book. And not every author of a book is famous. Some famous folders were reported on newspaper or TV. In the online forums, there are many excellent artists who create complicated models. But many have no time to draw diagrams which limits the spreading of the art. There are many educational books, but few

with complicated models. And there are translated origami books. We collected nearly 40 books from the early 20th century, and there are about 60 more books that we know exist but we don't have them in our collection. Of those books that we have, most are traditional models. In most situations, the authors just recorded the models for educational purposes, so these are not their own creations.

How do you balance your academic life with paperfolding?
I haven't had the ability to find a solution to this problem. I nearly stopped folding when I was studying for my doctorate. Now when I compare scientific research and paperfolding, I find something interlinked through these fields. Both need creative ideas, one must do research on to improve, publish results, and communicate with peers.

You also started a fascinating journey on the history of paperfolding in your country. When did you start and what

triggered your interest in this matter?
It all started when I learned about the Chinese traditional folding zhen xian bao. And because few people do research on any kind of paperfolding history, let alone Chinese paperfolding history, I felt responsible to do that.

You recently traveled around China to find old samples of zhen xian bao and the like. How did you manage to get in touch with the people who kept them, and were they willing to tell you the story behind these objects?
First, I asked some friends for help. It's a pity that we can't get the story of each object. We only got a little information from a few samples. Most owners don't know what the object exactly is about. But the information is piling up, and we are writing a very long article, which we hope to publish in the near future. 📖

**A Little Known Chinese Folk Art: Zhen Xian Bao, by Ruth Smith and Gina Corrigan (Occidor Ltd., 2012 ISBN 978-0952880448)*