

# STRINGING PAST WITH FUTURE

They come in all shapes, sizes and colors, and they had all gathered for an exhibition in Beijing. Liu Xiangrui marvels at the kite makers and their devotion to a traditional craft.

It was all there — from a huge dragon kite 100 meters long to tiny ones about the size of a name card. There were classic swallow-tailed kites to luminous modern inventions made from carbon fiber. And, they were all set to fly, each and every one a masterpiece.

The recent exhibition jointly organized by the Beijing Folk Literature and Art Association, Beijing Kites Association, and the Solana Lifestyle Shopping Park in Beijing was a real treat for the passionate followings that gathered.

They were proof that kite making and flying, with a long history and rich culture, have never faded from the Chinese people's life. Kites still claim a unique hold on many as a popular outdoor hobby.

China has pushed hard to preserve its traditional, cultural heritage and the kites, past and present, have been included as part of the nation's intangible cultural heritage, according to Yu Zhihai, the deputy chairman of the Beijing Folk Literature and Art Association.

"Society's demand for traditional arts is increasing, which has helped their preservation," Yu says. "We need folk arts which bear unique national traits to keep our balance in an increasingly globalized world."

Kites were first used as military signals in China about 2,800 years ago and became an outdoor hobby in the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Classic kites use bamboo for spars and paper for sails. They developed into many different shapes and forms, which often convey specific messages



Kite designer Hao Deli (left), and his works: the huge Beijing-style dragon kite and all types of traditional kites (cover photos and below).

related to happiness, longevity and good luck.

They also gained distinctive features in different parts of China.

Beijing, which has six centuries of history in the art, is regarded as one of China's four major kite-production centers, renowned for its graceful and exquisite kites.

Hao Deli, who demonstrated his craft before a crowd of kite lovers at the exhibition, is noted for his Beijing-style dragon kites which are often huge, always elegant and vividly painted.

Unlike many craftsmen whose skills were passed down through generations, Hao is self-taught.

"But I have my own advantages," says the 68-year-old retiree. "I have a good sense of

three-dimensional space, and so I already have the kite in my mind before it's there."

The long-time designer of machine tools says his "occupational habit of going for accuracy was a plus for the meticulous work."

Hao makes all types of traditional kites, but favors dragons. "The dragon is a Chinese totem," he says. "Getting huge dragon kites to fly is a sensational feat for both the player and his audience."

In the past, dragon kites were the exclusive toys of the imperial family, and commoners were relegated to centipede-shaped kites.

Hao spent days studying the only Beijing-style dragon kite, which was kept in the Palace Museum, and carefully noted its complicated traditional



PHOTOS BY LIU XIANGRUI OR PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

mechanics and design before he finally produced his copies.

His creations have won numerous awards and his favorite pastime was to amaze crowds gathered at Tiananmen Square with his huge dragon kites.

Open fields are best for kite flying, he says, but the urban sprawl has reduced the number of suitable spaces. There are just too many skyscrapers and cars around.

While Hao strives to revive and improve traditional techniques, Ha Yiqi, another celebrated Beijing-based kite artist, represents the new as he introduces modern technology into an old craft.

Kites produced by Ha's family have a history of 160 years and are known for their delicate art and exquisite moldings.

The kites are eagerly sought after by collectors.

Ha, now 58, started learning from his father when he was 10. He still remembers his early attempts at innovation.

His father had chided him for using a square frame when it should be round, and he had replied: "I want to be different." "Of course we can't abandon the traditional techniques. But if we dwell on past achievements instead of keeping up with modern tastes and trends, Ha's kites may die in my hands."

After he saw a geometric kite bigger than a room on an overseas trip, Ha was impressed enough to attempt one when he returned home.

He also started using his training in Western art and made bold updates with tradi-

tional kite painting techniques. He introduced geometrical patterns, gradient shades, blue-and-white porcelain paintings, batiks and many Western artistic elements into his kites.

He was also the first to use glass frames for his kites.

All his experiments have made him well-known both at home and abroad. Besides collecting international awards regularly, he also holds exhibitions of his kites.

Eager to share his knowledge and actively exchanges ideas with fellow kite makers, and his apprentices, Ha has published a book on his craft. The Ha family kites were listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2003.

Contact the writer at [liuxiangrui@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:liuxiangrui@chinadaily.com.cn).

## TIMELINE

Legend has it that about 2,500 years ago, a famous philosopher, Mozi, who lived in Weifang, spent three years making a wooden bird that could fly. That was the earliest kite in history, way before Leonardo da Vinci made a similar experiment in 1485.

Later, a renowned carpenter, Lu Ban, introduced bamboo frames to make the contraptions lighter and easier to fly up in the air.

With the invention of paper in the Eastern Han (AD 25-220) period, much lighter kites became possible.

At first, kites were used to gather and send military intelligence and were also used as communication and meteorological tools.

During the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), flying kites became a recreation and people began tying bamboo whistles to kites. Flying in the wind, the bamboo whistle was imagined to be singing like a *zheng*, a stringed instrument similar to a zither, giving kites the name *feng zheng* (whistle in the wind).

Soon Chinese kites traveled out of the country and by the end of the 13th century, Italian traveler Marco Polo introduced stories about Chinese kites to Europe.

Flying kites is a favorite pastime in today's China, a popular form of exercise, especially in spring. It is also a way of giving free rein to one's wishes and hopes for the future. The images and writing on kites are meant to usher in blessings, happiness and longevity.

## KITE STYLES

**Bunch:** It is made up of several kites that are connected to each other by strings. The dragon-headed centipede kite is a typical example.



**Hard-winged:** The wing-shaped frame is formed by two horizontally placed bamboo strips, leaving a part in the middle for wind to pass through. Often the image is an illustration of a scene or figure from mythology or history.

**Soft-winged:** The frame, made of thin, malleable bamboo strips, is soft — suitable for making bird- or insect-shaped kites.

**Plank-shaped:** This is a flat-framed structure. A long tassel is usually attached to the lower part of the kite for balance. Since it is easier to make and fly, the plank-shaped kite is most common.

**Barrel-shaped:** Also called a three-dimensional kite, the "barrel" frame is typically used to form a lantern or flower vase.

**Free-style:** It features different types of frame structures, usually made using newer materials and techniques, such as the 108 heroes kites inspired by the classical work *The Water Margin*, and the luminous kite.

WANG QIAN



ZHANG CHI / FOR CHINA DAILY

A traditional hero kite is prepared at the 2012 Weifang Kite Festival.

# Kites: Americans brought stunts, ballet to festival

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This being the Year of the Dragon, according to the Chinese zodiac, the mythical beast was a hands-down favorite at the festival, in which 110 teams from 67 countries participated.

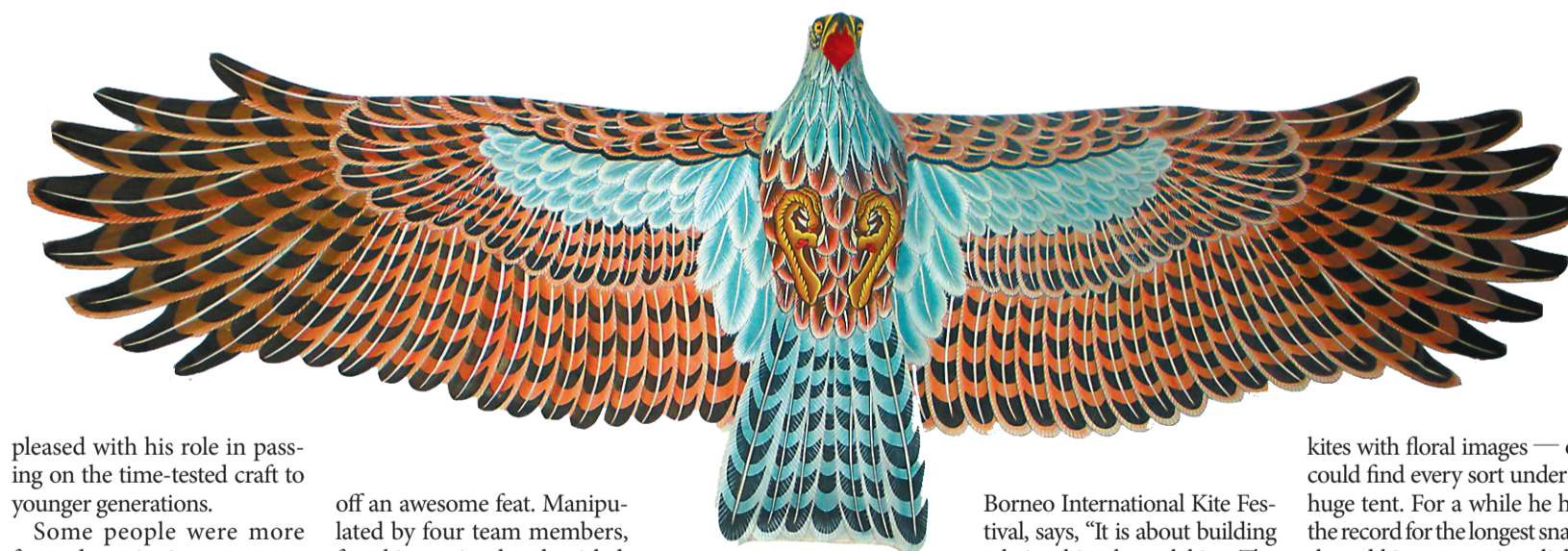
They brought kites of every size — from 20 to 600 meters. While most were designed after the traditional centipede dragon model — which is generic to Weifang — there was at least one that did not show the dragon at all, but suggested its presence.

Based on the theme of Weifang's economic development, the kite, presented by the Weifang Kite Committee, was a giant rose-pink open-ended box, on which blue clouds and waves were painted.

"It's a symbol of the dragon who lives in the seas," says team leader Liu Ziqing. "We would like to see China touch the heights of development, fly up into the skies like a dragon."

Sun Zhanfu, who has been a Weifang kite festival regular since its inception in 1984, brought his own hand-crafted dragon, more than 200 meters long. "Making kites is great fun," he tells us. He has more than 10 apprentices to whom he has been teaching the art of making a traditional Weifang kite.

"Weifang kite-making technique has been listed among the national intangible cultural heritages," he says, visibly



pleased with his role in passing on the time-tested craft to younger generations.

Some people were more focused on winning.

Zhong Jian's dragon lay all taut and sprawled on the ground. He was waiting for a stronger wind to pull it up. "But once it does, I'll easily win the competition," he tells us. "And even if I don't, I'll compete again next year."

Meanwhile, a giant parachute-shaped soft kite in rainbow colors that a crowd of people had been trying to fly for a while, lifted a few meters off the ground only to drop again, sweeping across the ground.

Spectators scurried to get out of its way, not wanting to get caught in the maze of 100 strings attached to it. Those in the fore of the army of 40-odd people trying to hoist it up fell and rolled a few meters out of the way.

A stunt kite team from Taiyuan in Shanxi province pulled

off an awesome feat. Manipulated by four team members, four kites twisted and twirled, rolled and dove into the air, to the tune of lively songs.

The kite runners skipped backwards and bent over, touching the ground almost, as if dancing in sync with the kites they flew.

"I fell in love with kite ballet when I first saw a video on a foreign website about 20 years ago. Few Chinese kite flyers were into the sport at that time," says Niu Yongjun, their leader.

"An American kite team brought stunt kites to the Weifang kite festival in 2009. They helped us buy a set and taught us the basics. When the wind is below 10 kilometer per hour, we select slow movements. It seems you can do anything with your kite. I just love the feeling."

Dan Tonio of San Diego, California, was busy fixing a

four-line stunt kite. He runs what he calls the last American kite manufacturing company. Dan was in Weifang not to compete or pursue business interests, but for the pure joy of "hanging out with friends from all across the world."

But how much longer could this ancient sport possibly hold out against the tide of more modern forms of entertainment and shrinking attention spans?

"You can only hope that events like these might help take the cause forward, but there's no guarantee that might actually happen," says Tonio.

One of Weifang's major lures, we realized, was the prospect of meeting old friends and making new ones. As Muammar Quadafi, a Malaysian who runs the

Borneo International Kite Festival, says, "It is about building relationships through kites. The kite-flying fraternity is like one big happy family, cutting across cultures."

And while Weifang as the host city was the seat of many such reunions, it was also, as participant Wang Jiahua says, "an opportunity to develop local economy and for Weifang culture to go out into the world."

Cui Yongli, a Qingdao native and a Weifang festival veteran who has made winning a habit during the past 20 years, has attended several festivals abroad.

"Weifang is mounted on a far larger scale," he says of the annual April festival. "Here you get to see a lot more in terms of people and kites."

His own offering is a case in point. From enormous geometric tiered kites, to the regulation centipede dragon to traditional

kites with floral images — one could find every sort under his huge tent. For a while he held the record for the longest snake-shaped kite, measuring slightly more than 882 meters.

"The kite is not just an industry in Weifang but a medium that could make the city earn its place in the world," says Liu Ziqing.

Which is not to discount the value of local pride. At 7, Liu Yixuan is already a seasoned festival-goer, having been here in three past seasons. He pointed gleefully to an enormous soft kite with hedgehog spikes and fuchsia colors, switching allegiance the next moment to a slow-rising motorbike-shaped kite that caught his eye.

"I am definitely going to tell my classmates about the flight of these enormous kites at school tomorrow," he says.

Wang Qian contributed to this story. Contact the writers at [sundayed@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:sundayed@chinadaily.com.cn).