A Little Known Chinese Folk Art: Zhen Xian Bao
Ruth Smith

The subject of this article has until recent times been hidden from wider attention even in China, its place of origin. It features a minority folk art tradition, that of making ingenious paper-folded containers for storing embroidery threads, packets of needles, paper patterns, often a precious family photograph and personal memorabilia. The reason for their little known history is partly due to the fact that ‘zhen xian bao’, as they are called in Mandarin Chinese, are utilitarian, made for use in the home, and being made of paper wear out with use. Such paper containers form part of the traditional needlework equipment used by minority groups such as the Miao, Dong and Yao, to produce their elaborate festival dress and are ingeniously crafted and decorated in distinct local styles. They first came to the attention of visitors to the remote farming communities in the mountainous Province of Guizhou, southwest China in the 1990’s. Since then, tourism has developed and international interest grown among collectors. Sadly, today, the skills of making zhen xian bao are known only by a few older people and the tradition is dying, along with the decline in traditional textile techniques. It has therefore been important to record what we have discovered before the evidence disappears.

It can be seen from the photograph above that a basic zhen xian bao resembles a handy sized book with an indigo dyed cotton cloth cover. Inside, instead of pages, there are fifteen or more linked compartments which open up to reveal the contents. The locally produced paper, made from mulberry and other bark fibres, is ideal for making these as it withstands repeated folding. The four twist fold pockets on the top layer are made differently and have to be closed individually before the books can be closed. The decoration, found on this top layer, consists of colourful woodblock prints or lively hand-painted designs. Floral, insect and animal motifs predominate as well as auspicious symbols, grid patterns and geometric borders. Zhen xian bao make very attractive containers which are practical, inexpensive and portable.
Many paper *zhen xian bao* are made from the two basic elements shown above; collapsible boxes (l) and twist fold pockets (r). They just vary in size and the order in which they are layered together. A *zhen xian bao* with fifteen compartments, like the one shown in the diagram above, has eleven collapsible boxes and four twist fold pockets. Each element is made separately and then layered and glued together so that the upper ones lift and open those beneath.

The twist fold pocket construction will be well known to many readers as it is not unique to China. In Japan, for example, similar paper pockets are sold as coin purses, and in Morocco they are made from leather for the same purpose. They may also be known in Korea, once part of the Chinese Empire. However, as far as we are aware it is only in China that they are used in combination with collapsible boxes for the principal purpose of storing threads.

The basic format shown on this page varies according to geographic area and minority group. It is distinguished by size, construction, materials and decorative style.
Star Fold Pockets and ‘Zhe Zhi’

The *zhen xian bao* tradition is much more widespread than was first thought. In 2009 Chris Hall, well known in the textile world for his extensive collection of Chinese Imperial pieces and unusual items, extended our area of research by alerting us to a style of *zhen xian bao* said to come from northern China. The three Han Chinese examples in his collection were similar in construction to those found in Guizhou Province, but the top pockets were quite different. I call these ‘star fold’ pockets, because of the distinctive pattern produced.

I discovered by trial and error that such pockets were made entirely by folding. There was no cutting and sticking involved as with the twist fold form. Paper folding such as this is called ‘Zhe Zhi’ in Chinese and thought by some to be a precursor of origami.

The few examples of this style which we have found to study range from the purely utilitarian, such as the one on this page, to an exquisite example of paper folding in miniature. The first was made in the 1950’s by the owner’s great uncle in true folk art tradition with recycled materials; the cover from fragments of printed cotton cloth and the paper sections from a flour sack.

The second star fold *zhen xian bao* from northern China, far from having a practical use, is a superb demonstration of paper folding skill. Measuring just 21 x 10.5 cm when closed it has an unbelievable one hundred and eleven opening compartments. Apart from its tiny scale, the most obvious difference between this *zhen xian bao* and other examples is that the folded compartments form the cover; it is an inside out version. The cover has to be opened out to access all the compartments. The photograph above shows the colourfully painted star fold pockets, the overall effect reminiscent of a mosaic or a miniature quilt. As the one pound coin indicates, each star fold pocket measures only 2.5cm square; there are sixty four altogether, each folded from a single rectangle of paper and coloured to accentuate the pattern.

Little is known about this star fold *zhen xian bao* as it was bought by Chris Hall from a textile dealer. Its miniature nature begs the question, ‘What was it designed for?’ Previous examples have clearly had a utilitarian purpose, but this one is quite impractical by comparison. The fact that it is in perfect condition suggests that it has not been used for threads even if that were the intention. Perhaps it was made by a skilled paper folder experimenting with the *zhen xian bao* form? Whoever made it was not only a skilful exponent of paper folding, but someone who understood perfectly the nature of the paper required to work in miniature and also someone who had access to a quality paper which is much finer and smoother than that used for the *zhen xian bao* made in the villages of Guizhou.

*british origami* 30
Quite recently, I managed to find a copy of ‘The Art of Chinese Paper Folding’ by Maying Soong. Published in China in 1948, it was translated first for the American market and later in 1964, printed in the UK. The author, from a wealthy banking family, tells of her pleasure as a little girl in learning how to make folded paper toys. She says “I used to spend many rainy days trying to create new objects that neither my mother nor my grandmother knew how to make. I was so proud of myself!” In turn she taught her own daughter and decided to record patterns which had been handed down from generation to generation. She shows, among other things, how to make party novelties, miniature boats, doll’s house furniture and bookmarks and towards the end there is a series of diagrams showing how to make ‘a flowered candy box’ or as I prefer to call it a ‘star fold pocket’. I was intrigued to compare her method with mine. Although there is no difference in the finished result, the two folding sequences do vary, perhaps because I am new to paper folding and had to work from a completed pocket in a *zhèn xiàn bāo*. Discovering this little book gives an interesting insight into a popular and traditional pastime in Han Chinese households that goes back many years. The box pattern also provides a significant link with the *zhèn xiàn bāo* tradition in northern China.

**New Publication ‘A Little Known Chinese Folk Art’**

As far as we know, ‘A Little Known Chinese Folk Art’, published in December 2012, is the first attempt to tell the story of the paper-folded *zhèn xiàn bāo* tradition and to catalogue and classify the different styles of these unusual and decorative containers. We have considered both the historical background and the geographical location, discussed the materials used, showed types of construction and illustrated the different design styles, patterns and calligraphy used to decorate them. The text is extensively illustrated throughout with Gina Corrigan’s photographs, many taken on her regular visits to remote communities in Guizhou and Yunnan Provinces. I have analysed the construction of *zhèn xiàn bāo* and developed a series of projects extending the basic idea. Instructions for making these are to be found in my four ‘Folded Secrets’ project booklets.

When our enquiries began in 2004 we thought that the *zhèn xiàn bāo* tradition was practised only by the Dong and Miao minorities in the southeast corner of Guizhou Province. Since then we have become aware of Yao and possibly Laohan examples in Guizhou as well as Yi and Zhuang versions from neighbouring Yunnan. It appears that the tradition also existed among the Han in northern China as the most recent examples studied are thought to come from Shanxi and Shandong Provinces. Our research is far from complete and many questions remain unanswered. However, we hope that by raising the profile of the *zhèn xiàn bāo* tradition in China that others will feel inspired to make further enquiries and so add to our investigations before the evidence disappears.

*Ruth Smith*

*Ed. This is an edited version of a larger article with a few more pictures and biographical details. The original article will be available on the website as a downloadable PDF.*