

## THE PRIVATE LIFE OF A CHINESE MIG PILOT

*Old Enemies – and Friends*



**By Bob Bergin**

I wrote this piece after visiting Shanghai in February 2011. I went there to see Han Decai, a former Chinese MiG pilot and an old friend. Han was an ace during the Korean War, became a national hero, and went on to senior air force commands. I interviewed him some years ago, and was going to interview him again. But the story that follows came about because of my interview with Han's wife, Madame Zhu Rongfen, a medical doctor and a Chinese air force colonel. It had struck me that as a young national hero, Han must have been a communist version of a rock star - and he was courting Zhu at that time. In February, after my interviewing with Han, Zhu told me about her life, how she met a young pilot, and what the times were like. It was a unique experience: American writers

don't often get a chance to talk with Chinese pilots about their combat careers. It is even more uncommon to discuss their private lives with a MiG pilot's wife.

It was much simpler back during the Cold War. It was communists and anti-communists - and we were the good guys.

I often wondered what the other guys were like, the Soviets – their very name had a kind of evil sound – and the Chinese Communists. They must have been very different from us.

The Cold War was long over when I first met Han Decai. It was 1996, in Shanghai, and Han was hosting lunch for the famous American Volunteer Group (AVG) Flying Tigers. Also in the group was a guy named Hal Fischer, a Korean War-era F-86 pilot and one of America's leading aces in that war. Fischer had another distinction: He had been shot down by Han - over Manchuria, which is part of China - and spent two years as a special guest of the Chinese. I was included in the group because of some work I had done with the AVG's history.

Han was a retired Lieutenant General of the People's Liberation Army Air Force.

Fischer presented him with a model of the F-86 he had been flying on the day Han had shot him down. The Maotai flowed, and everyone toasted hopes for growing friendship between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

In the years that followed, I met Han at events honoring groups of World War II airmen visiting China. In 2000, in the city of Kunming, I joined a reunion of Hump pilots, the Americans who had flown the dangerous air-route over the Himalayas between India and China. It was called the "Aluminum Trail," because it was so littered with crashed airplanes. Han was among the many Chinese who attended, along with his wife, Madame Zhu Rongfen, a medical doctor and a colonel in the Chinese air force. We talked briefly, and Han passed me his card.

The reunion over, I got on a Thai Airways flight for Bangkok, where I would spend a few days. Sitting next to me was a young Chinese engineer. He had reasonably good English, and we started to talk. What had I been doing in Kunming?

I tried to explain my interests in historic aviation, but for some reason he had difficulty understanding. I handed him name cards that Chinese at the reunion had given me. All were involved with aviation, and I thought their job titles might help. I just happened to glance back at him to see his eyes grew big. He waved one of the cards at me.

"Do you know who this man is?"

"No," I said. All I could see were the Chinese characters.

"This is one of the most famous men in China!"

I took the card, turned it over. *Han Decai* was written in English.

"This man is a great hero!" the engineer said.

"How do you know that?" I asked. The guy didn't strike me as an aviation buff.

"I read about him when I was a child. He is in the history books that all Chinese children read."

"Oh..." We talked some more. Han was a hero of the Korean War. With his name in children's history books, he was known all over China.

I reflected on that during the next days in Bangkok.

As soon as I got back home, I sent an e-mail to a friend in Beijing, Professor Renjie Hoa, president of the Beijing Aviator's Association. It had not been done by an American before, but I asked Professor Hoa if he could arrange an interview with Han to talk about

his Korean War experiences. It was late September by then, and I thought that the coming spring would be a good time to visit China again.

A week lapsed. I received Renjie's response. "Han is willing," he said "Can you come next week?"

We met in Dalian, in Manchuria. Han had just returned from Dandong on the North Korean border, where he had joined a ceremony hosted by Kim Jong Il to mark the 50th anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War. We planned to talk a couple of hours, then have dinner. We talked on into the night; dinner was forgotten. What I learned was worth a missed meal.

Han was born in 1933 into a peasant family in Anhui province, an impoverished area of China. He worked as farm laborer when he could, was a beggar when he could not. In 1949, when he was 16, the communists liberated his village, and he joined the People's Liberation Army. He had a single year of school.

The next year, Chairman Mao called for a strong air force; Han volunteered to become a pilot. He went into flight training, became a MiG-15 pilot. With less than 100 hours in the air, he was sent to the Korean border - to fly against the Americans, the hottest fighter pilots in the world. Han shot down five American aircraft - including Hal Fischer. A leading American ace, Fischer was a particular prize.

Because of his feats in Korea, Han became one of the best known airmen in China. Despite humble beginnings, he rose in the air force. Eventually he was promoted to lieutenant general and appointed vice-commander of the Nanjing Air Command, one of the most important posts in the Chinese air force.

Han Decai was obviously one of those Cold War Chinese we Americans had good reason to worry about. Smart, tough and determined - just as I suspected.

And there was more to Han than that. After his retirement, he started devoting himself to calligraphy. He studied the famous Chinese practitioners of the art, and began to wield the brushes himself. His wife, Dr. Zhu, was already an artist, a painter, and they collaborated: Dr. Zhu created the paintings; Han added calligraphy. In time, their work was displayed in exhibitions; both built reputations as artists.

Han continued his interest in aviation - historic, this time. He was elected president of the Nanjing Aviator's Association, and worked to create a park in Nanjing that would commemorate foreign aviators - including the Americans - who died defending China during World War II. He regularly hosted events for visiting American veterans.

The Cold War was long over. My interviews with Chinese Cold War pilots gave me a good sense of what these guys were like in the cockpit. I often wondered what their other lives were like.

In the years that followed my interview of Han in Dalian, I worked with Hal Fischer to bring Han and Fischer together in the U.S. Fischer had visited China again, and he and Han had become friends. Our plan was to arrange a dog fight in the sky over Nevada or California, using training aircraft. The two former enemy aces could relive their aerial glory - and perhaps produce some good film footage. But it was not to be. Hal Fischer died in 2010.

In early 2011, I returned to China to interview Han again, on his career after the Korean War this time. He was living in a house in Shanghai, and invited me over.

The house was part office, part artist's studio. Han once told me that he worked on the first floor, and Dr. Zhu on the floor above – each devoting much time to perfecting the techniques their art required.

Han and I, and my interpreter, Zhou Gang from Yunnan University, did the interview out on an enclosed sun porch. Han told me of his post-Korean War adventures. He flew MiG-17s, first to chase U-2s, and later the low-flying intruders from Taiwan. Fascinating stuff.

Madame Zhu welcomed us when we arrived, and went off to work in her studio upstairs. As our interview was ending, she came by to ask if Zhao and I would stay for dinner.

“Well....” I hesitated; I did not want to make work for anyone.

“You must stay,” Madame Zhu said. “I will make dumplings.”

Dumplings! We stayed for dinner.

The dumplings were worth the trip to Shanghai. There were many other dishes, and Han broke out a bottle of Maotai. So here I am, eating Colonel Dr. Zhu's dumplings, knocking down Lt. Gen. Han's Maotai – in their dining room - and discussing Chinese art. This was not what the Cold War had prepared me for. I had an idea.



“Madame Zhu,” I said. “I would like to interview you - about your career, and how you came to marry General Han. Han must have been like a rock star when you first met him.”

We talked about that. In the end, Madame Zhu agreed to an interview. We met the next morning in her studio. Zhu gave us a tour of the art that she and Han created together. Then, over tea, she talked about her life and how she came to meet a young MiG pilot. She had graduated from primary school in 1949, the year the People's Republic of China was founded. "Our family was big," she said. "There were too many children and we lived in poverty. My mother was illiterate and did sewing at home. My father was the only educated person in the family. He had high hopes for his children."

Madame Zhu witnessed the People's Liberation Army cross the Yangtze river in an area dominated by the Kuomintang. "That inspired me to join the PLA, but I was too young. Instead I joined in social programs established by the Chinese Communist Party, things like propaganda work."

After the founding of the People's Republic, Madame Zhu's father was transferred to Beijing. "I wanted to go there," she said, "where I could be closer to Chairman Mao. I entered a junior middle school in Beijing, and felt very lucky when I was part of the marching band that was reviewed by Chairman Mao and the other state leaders."

Sometimes on the weekends, her father took her to tourist sites like the great wall, and to museums to see China's cultural treasures. "This gave me an understanding of our history, and made me very proud of Chinese culture and wisdom."

She worked hard in her studies, and was politically active. "I wrote letters to the heroes of the Korean War – our own Chinese soldiers, and those of the Soviet Union. I had learned a little bit of the Russian language at school."

On graduation from junior middle school, Zhu wanted to become a teacher, but her father was against it. The life of a teacher held too little promise; her young siblings would need financial support. Zhu did not go on to senior middle school, but entered a nursing school in Beijing. She learned the names of Florence Nightingale and Norman Bethune and started to love what she was doing. After graduation, she became a nurse in the Beijing children's hospital.

"I was elected the head nurse of my department. I also did volunteer work in a clinic, and joined the Communist youth league. I was selected to study pediatrics in a medical school for six months. Afterwards, I practiced in clinics, and acted as a visiting physician to treat patients in their homes. I was very dedicated."

Madame Zhu also worked with the Russian experts who became advisors to the hospital. She learned a lot from them. "I learned to read their prescriptions and to speak a lingua franca of Russian, English, and Chinese medical terms, and to write them in English and Russian. My western handwriting became quite good. I also learned romantic songs from the Russians."

Zhu was still in nursing school when she first heard about the pilot Han Decai. "He was a war hero, and I read stories about him in the newspapers. He came from a very poor family, had almost no education, but went on to outstanding success. It was an amazing story. I greatly admired him.

"It was just after the Korean War. Han was an idol of the young people. He was very popular with them, not just because of his role in the war, but because of the kind of person he was. He was very strong, but approachable. He had great patience, particularly with young people. He spoke of his experiences - over and over again when he had to - and always welcomed all the questions they had."

Zhu was touched by Han's stories. "In one of my compositions at school, I wrote about Han and how his experiences inspired us. And when Han met with the young people, and finished his story telling, he played an accordion. He invited the girls to sing along with him. Many of those songs were the romantic Russian songs that we had learned. This made Han very popular. Just after the Korean war had ended, Premier Zhou Enlai asked Han if he was considering marriage. Han said he was too young.

The girls at school sent letters to Han, the kind signed by many girls; Zhu's name among them. In 1953, she joined students who went to visit him. "It was the first time I met Han. We talked, and I must have made an impression. Later he told someone: "I liked Zhu because she is more active and more open-minded than the other girls."

"While I was still in nursing school, Han wrote to me twice. When I did not reply, he asked why. Did I have some problem with him? I was too young to understand his intention. At that time I was about to join the communist party. I told him that I had to concentrate on my nursing studies and my political work, and that I was really too busy. "I was 16 then, and I had a very strong will. I was too young to fall in love: I wanted to accomplish something first. There were boys who had a crush on me while I was still a junior middle school student, but I ignored them. Han had made a big impression on me – but I never thought I would fall in love with him. Some of my classmates – like many Chinese girls at the time – were very interested in him. I thought one of them would probably become involved with him.

"After I graduated from nursing school Han started to visit me at the children's hospital where I worked. He came often, and looked for excuses to talk with me. The other nurses and I often played practical jokes on him. He was very good-natured, so we took advantage of that and used him for our experiments. We practiced all kinds of therapy on him, things like cupping and acupuncture.

"He picked me up at the clinic where I worked. We were together almost every day. People saw a family resemblance and thought he was my brother. Han got to know me very well. He saw how I worked with the patients. I think he liked me because I treated everyone fairly. Later, I learned that he had secretly had my background checked.

"Han asked me to be his teacher, and we spent even more time together. He was very poorly educated and did not know much about Chinese characters. He was almost illiterate. My father knew about my friendship with Han. Much later it would strike me that as the only educated person in my family, my father may not have thought very highly of Han – particularly as a possible son-in-law.

"In late 1957, Han became ill with malaria. He was in a hospital at the airbase in Wuxi. I went there to take care of him. I expected to stay only a few days, until he felt better. Instead, I married Han. .

"I still regarded Han as my elder brother then, but the senior air force officers at Wuxi believed that Han and I had been in love for years. They thought they were helping our great romance. They talked me into marrying him.

"I found out then that I had passed all the background checks Han had initiated – without my knowing it - and that the air force had already authorized our marriage. Han had talked with my father. My father was concerned that Han led a dangerous life and would leave me a young widow. That was not something that concerned me. I had seen a lot of death.

“So it seemed that everything was ready - and I had no reason to decline. The senior air force officers said we should get married immediately, and we did. We did not even stop to get a marriage certificate.

“The ceremony was held in the dining hall at the air base. All the expenses – for food, for candies - were covered by the air force. I had little money myself – the salary I made as a nurse I sent home. The clothes I wore at the wedding were made by my mother. I did have a sweater I had bought myself.

“I returned to my post one week after we got married. Han and I lived apart for a long time and wrote letters. I first became involved with the air force in 1961, after my first son was born. I was not an officer then, just staff attached to the air force. But I was happy, because Han and I could be together. I joined the air force formally in 1965. Our second child, a daughter was born in 1962; our youngest son in 1965.”

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So there it was – what Han was doing when he wasn’t flying MiGs. Han had it all: Poor Chinese communist kid becomes ace fighter pilot and national hero, a commander of air-divisions. At home he has a loving wife and children, embarks on a new career to create art. How do you put a cold war life like that in a context an American can appreciate? I thought about that on my flight back from China.

One thing had stayed with me. Han’s first words to me on this visit were about his friend, Hal Fischer, the American ace he shot down. Fischer had died some months earlier. I had sent an email telling Han. Han told me how saddened he was.

Fischer had called me the night before going into surgery – nothing serious he said, just wanted me to know that he would be out of circulation for few days. Had I heard from

Han? I had not. I added that I was sorry to report that our most recent attempt to get him together with Han in the sky over California did not seem to be working.

“Ah, well,” Fischer said. “That’s really too bad.” He was quiet for a moment, thinking about it maybe, then: “There’s one thing you want to keep in mind. Getting Han here would be really great. But the important thing is not if it happens or not – but that we tried.” Hal Fischer died after coming out of surgery.

A guy with all the right stuff, Fischer had spent almost two years as a prisoner of the Chinese after Han shot him down. He actually escaped from the POW compound once – found himself in the bleak landscape of Manchuria - in winter - the only non-Chinese for hundreds of miles around. He played a Russian, tried to bluff his way on to a Chinese airbase to steal an airplane. It didn’t work; he walked away. But it was Manchuria, and he couldn’t stay out of jail long.

Madame Zhu talked about Fischer. She liked him. Fischer spoke Russian, and a lot of Zhu’s forgotten Russian language came back as she talked with him. He knew some of the Russian songs too - the romantic ones that Zhu learned from the Russian doctors, and that Han played on his accordion. She thought that Fischer and Han got along well. It pleased her. It struck me that fighter pilots who faced each other as enemies had a lot in common.

Han was a good guy, Fisher told me. An enemy once, but not now. All of that was over. The world had changed, and we can live together.

“In Korea, we were forced to fight,” Han had told me once. “China had just finished its civil war. It was not a time for us to have more war, but the war in Korea was coming too close to our country. We had to fight.”

Over fifty years later, what were Han’s feelings? “It’s best we don’t have any more war. Wars bring heavy loss – to both sides.”

When I first interviewed Han years before in Dalian, he had spoken about how he had encountered Fischer’s aircraft, 50 kilometers inside China. “During his last combat, Fischer was after a Soviet fighter when he suddenly saw a Chinese aircraft in front of him. This was an opportunity, a short one, but he reacted immediately. He fired and hit the MiG’s engine.” Han admired Fischer’s ability: “He was much better than the Chinese pilots.”

On this visit, we talked about Fischer. Han summed up his feelings simply:

“Fischer was my friend.”