

The History of Kites in Japan and Other Parts of the World

Historians think that kites have been around for at least two thousand years, possibly longer, and we are still fascinated by them. Why do we retain such an interest in kites? Is it because of our interest in air and space travel? Kites give us a way to directly feel the energy of the wind as a force of nature. Perhaps kites are an ecologically sensitive way to enjoy nature during a peaceful afternoon.

Whatever the reasons, most kite flyers would agree that flying a kite can be a wonderful "high." We can escape for a moment from our fast-paced world and enjoy the relaxation of feeling our kite ride the wind and watching it decorate the sky.

Earliest Tales

Kite flying predates some of our earliest written histories, and much of the earliest information about kites is found in folklore. One of these early stories is about a famous Chinese general, Han Hsin. In approximately 200 B.C., he was the commander of a rebel army attempting to overthrow a tyrannical Emperor. Because his troops were a small group and because they were not well armed, he planned a surprise attack.

Han ordered his men to build a kite and to fly it directly over the Emperor's palace. When the kite was over the palace, the string was marked. Later, Han measured the string in order to determine just how long a tunnel would be needed to bring the rebel forces within the walls of the palace. The story tells us that the rebels dug by night until they finally crept into the undefended courtyard. Their plan brought victory, and the evil Emperor was overthrown. A new Emperor took the throne, and this new rule marked the beginning of the Western Han Dynasty that would rule the Chinese empire for the next two hundred years.

Several versions of this story exist. A favorite with children is one that tells of Han Hsin's unusually small size. In this version, Han Hsin asked his men to tie him to a kite and fly him over the enemy camp at night. The soldiers below saw the frightening object over their heads and heard a loud voice commanding them to return to their families. The voice told them they were needed at home, and they would surely die if they stayed inside the palace walls. The next day, many of the soldiers fled and Han Hsin and his troops easily defeated the few who remained.

Historians theorize that kites came to Japan during the sixth to the eighth century from China and Korea. Early Japanese kites probably were flown for religious purposes. Here the basic rectangle of the Chinese kite took on many new forms. Cranes, dragons, fish, and turtles appeared. These new representations symbolized prosperity, good luck, or fertility. Some brought good fortune and others frightened away evil spirits.

Japan, like China, has many stories about kites being used to carry or lift humans either for military purposes or for personal gain. One favorite story is about a samurai warrior who broke the law of the Emperor. He was punished by being exiled with his son to a small island. Because he did not want his son to spend his life on a deserted island, the

warrior built a large kite. He tied his son to the kite and then lifted him from the island to the mainland.

A more recent story, from the early sixteenth century, tells of a famous robber Kakinoki Kinsuke who, while being lifted on a kite, tried to steal scales from golden dolphins on top of the towers of a castle. Although he seems to have been successful in dislodging a few of the scales and landing safely, he was later arrested and punished for his thievery by being boiled in oil with the rest of his family.

Much of our understanding of the earliest Japanese kites is at best guesswork. We can piece together clues from folktale and legends, but the only fact we are truly sure about is that there is no known documentation of exactly when kites were first used by the Japanese. The Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that "they have been in use among Asian peoples from time immemorial."

Festivals and Celebrations in Japan

The word for "kite" first appeared in a Japanese book--a dictionary compiled in A.D. 981. At that time kites were called "paper hawks." Historians think that kites may have been a part of religious festivals introduced to Japan by Buddhist priests from China and Korea. As late as the seventeenth century, kites were still associated primarily with religious purposes and secondarily with secular activities.

We learn more about kites in Japan beginning with the eighteenth century. They were often flown in hopes of ensuring a good harvest. Buddhists also believed that the flight of a kite could predict the success or failure of crops, and kites were flown in the fall as thanksgiving for a plentiful harvest. In some areas, stalks of rice might be tied to a kite as a symbol of thanks. Some religious groups sold kites at temples or shrines for use as charms against illness or bad luck. Kites were sometimes given to congratulate parents of firstborn sons. Today, New Year kites are flown to symbolically offer thanks for the past years' successes and in hope of a good new year. They have served this purpose in Japan since before recorded history.

During the past two to three hundred years much of the religious significance of kite flying has been replaced by more secular pleasures. Today, only the very oldest Japanese people might accept the direction in which a kite has fallen as a prediction of the success or failure of the year's rice crop, but kites are still a part of festivals and religious holidays. A New Year kite means much the same to a Japanese child as a birthday or Christmas present means to a Western child.

Until recently, a Boys' Festival was celebrated in many parts of Japan on May 5, the fifth day of the fifth month. If a male child was born during the past year, a large kite was flown in celebration, and all households with boy children flew brightly colored windsocks. The carp is the traditional representation on these windsocks because it is an especially hardy fish known to battle against incredible odds in order to move upstream to its spawning grounds. The carp symbolizes courage, strength, and the struggles each

boy must encounter and overcome in order to experience success in his own life. Today the festival includes girls, and it is now called Children's Day (Kodomo-no hi).

Fighting Kites

Another activity grew out of festivals of kite flying - kite fighting. It seems to have been well established in China and Korea, but it was not taken up as quickly by the Japanese. However, in those communities where kite fighting caught on, the participants were exceptionally enthusiastic. Perhaps it offered a welcome escape from the formality of society and harsh living conditions in rural areas.

A fighter kite is usually small and highly maneuverable. Its string is partly coated with powdered glass, sharp sand, ground pottery, or even knife blades. The kite flyer attempts to bring down his opponent's kite by cutting its line. It takes skillful maneuvering to cross other kite lines to cut them. In Japan today, the Nagasaki fighters are the best known participants in this type of competition.

Kites in Europe

Several forms of kites and windsocks appear in writings and drawings as far back as A.D. 105 when the Romans used a windsock as a military banner.

In the fifteenth century Leonardo da Vinci developed a method for spanning a gorge or river with the help of a kite. Later, in the 1850s, his method was used at Niagara Falls to make possible the construction of one of the first large suspension bridges. Experimenting with kites, da Vinci became interested in flight and he drew many designs for flying machines. His interest in kites may have led him to study clouds and air currents which inspired him to invent a parachute and draw diagrams for a helicopter. While his ideas impress scientists and engineers today, da Vinci seems to have viewed them as minor accomplishments since they had grown out of ideas based on a child's toy.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries kites became commonplace and quite popular, but they probably were seen as a diversion for children. The first use of kites for scientific purposes was in 1749. In Scotland, Alexander Wilson conducted experiments to measure temperatures at different altitudes. In order to do this, he raised several kites in train (several kites attached to the same line so that they fly at varying heights). He attached thermometers to each kite and was thereby able to measure the temperature at each altitude.

Kites in the United States As a child, Benjamin Franklin enjoyed experimenting with kites. Writing about one of his experiments, he tells how his kite pulled him across his favorite swimming hole in "a most favorable manner." In June 1752, he flew a kite in a rainstorm in order to prove that lightning had the same properties as the electricity being generated in laboratories. With a key attached to the line with silk ribbon, he stood in a doorway so he could keep the ribbon dry. When lightning struck the drenched kite, fiery streaks sparked around the key. The dry silk ribbon was the only thing between Ben and

the electrical jolt traveling from the sky!

Early pioneers in aerodynamics conducted an amazing variety of experiments as they attempted to produce structures that would enable people to fly. Many of these experiments involved the use of kite-like constructions. Kite technology enabled scientists and engineers to develop an understanding of aerodynamic principles that eventually led to the sophisticated types of air travel available to us today.

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