K I T E
THE DRACHEN FOUNDATION
J O U R N A L

Ben Ruhe

A Family of Beijing Kitemakers

In a country where kitemaking runs in families, the Kongs of Beijing are preeminent. Kong Xing Ze at age 84 is the patriarch. His son Ling Min and grandson Bing Zhang are great masters too. As direct descendants of the Chinese sage Confucius, Xing Ze being 75th generation, the Kongs adhere to the Confucian tradition of duty and respect for others. Although very well known and widely regarded, they continue to live modestly. Several decades ago, life was very hard for Kong Xing Ze because he ran afoul of the young Red Guards during his country's Cultural Revolution. Kong now forgives all from that chaotic time. In a resurgent China, he and his family flourish. *Page 3.*

All China Issue

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The Journal Staff


Ben Ruhe

Scott Skinner, president of the Drachen Foundation, is a former pilot instructor at the U.S. Air Force Academy. He has been a kite enthusiast for two decades–designing, making, flying, collecting, and teaching about kites.

Ali Fujino is the director of Drachen. A museum specialist since age 19 when she began work at the Smithsonian Institution, she has long been fascinated with anything that could become airborne. Fujino is a member of the prestigious Explorers Club of New York City in recognition of her 25 years of cultural work in Third World countries.


Ben Ruhe


Eve Hanney

This all-China issue was written and photographed by Drachen Journal editor Ben Ruhe, here pictured at the Chinese national kite festival in Guiyang, Guizhou Province. He and escort are just about to go onstage in a trooping of national colors at the festival's grand opening. Ruhe's six-week trip took him from Beijing to Weifang and Chingdao on the east coast, to Guiyang and Kunming in the far southwest, to Lijiang in the Tibetan lowlands, to Xian in the west, and back to Beijing. He interviewed festival fliers, expert kitemakers, government officials, festival sponsors, and kite collectors. Kiteflying is alive and well in China, he found.

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Kite Archives, Science and Culture

The Drachen Foundation is devoted to the increase and diffusion of knowledge about kites worldwide. A 501(c)(3) private nonprofit corporation, Drachen views kites from the standpoint of art, culture, science and history. It uses an integrated program of exhibitions, education, research, collections management, and publications to promote learning about kites. The archive it maintains is freely open to the public for research.

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The Kong Family of Beijing: Three Generations of Kitemakers

By Ben Ruhe

As one of China's leading kitemakers as well as being a direct descendant of the philosopher Confucius (551-479 B.C.), Kong Xiang Ze was a marked man during the Cultural Revolution which swept his country in l966-76. Mao had instructed the young Red Guards to destroy the "old"-----traditions, objects, human exemplars of Chinese culture. Kong thus became the perfect target. "I was beaten up seven times by Red Guards," the 84-year-old says. "My property was trashed."

He reports this now in a remarkably matter of fact manner. He even smiles. He is at peace with the world, the evil days long gone. "I've become objective," Kong says. If all is not forgotten, the past is apparently forgiven. Kong is living out the twilight of his life in the noble spirit of a superb creator and dedicated Confucian.

Kong lives with son, Kong Ling Min, 58, and grandson, Kong Bing Zhang, a 23-year-old university student, in the isolated farming village of Shang Zhuang, 30 miles northwest of Beijing. They retain a small property in Beijing. (Ling Min is of course a 76th generation descendant of Confucious, Bing Zhang a 77th; family records are precise in China.) Their village is an ex-commune, windswept and austere. Fields have rude wicker fences around them to curb the wind. Chickens wander the streets. Not far to the north are high mountains and beyond, the Gobi Desert.

The Kongs occupy a one-story compound of brick buildings surrounding a courtyard planted with vegetables. They share one large room as workshop, dining area, and study. There is a bookcase, kite books, some framed photos and other artwork, tools, odds and ends, plain tables, well used furniture.

An adjacent room is devoted to kites. Kong the elder no longer makes them, except for doing some of the painting of the sails to keep his hand in, but his son and grandson carry on very well. Ling Min confides, however, he is becoming less able to continue the craft he began as a 5-year-old child. His eyesight is failing, he says, caused by an accident with fireworks many years ago. That now puts the burden on Bing Zhang, a university student. Still, the family workshop as a unit is obviously thriving. The kite room has stacks of beautiful kites and Ling Min is pleased to show off lovely examples to visitors.

The famous Beijing swallow in many of its variations is well represented. Butterflies, crabs, birds, calligraphic symbols, vegetables, fish, frogs, and insects are on view. Some of the kites feature elaborate paintings of mythological figures. One striking kite, circular in shape, represents a spider's web, the spider itself at the center. The kites are of such obvious high quality as to qualify as collector's items, but Ling Min assures that all are good fliers too.

Ling Min also shows off kite paraphernalia of ingenious construction. One is a line climbing open-winged butterfly that flies up the line and hits a stop, closing the wings and allowing it to slide down the line. Another device flown as an adjunct to a kite is a noisy, wind-activated gong and drums.

Back in the study with conversation continuing apace, Kong the elder contributes heartily. Green tea is graciously served by a girl apprentice. She also feeds the cats, runs errands, paints kite skins. She smiles nonstop.


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Kong kites:
1. Display area;
2. a papier mache head for a kite;
3. homemade tools for working bamboo;
4. Kong Ling Min shows off a line climber;
5. a mythological figure rides a carp;
6. the ubiquitous Beijing swallow; 7. painting a kite sail; 8. a brilliant warrior kite.


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All photos by Ben Ruhe

'The First Family Under Heaven'

Confucius was born and lived in the town of Qufu, in Shandong Province, southeast of Beijing. Sheltered for 20 centuries by imperial fiat, the sage's descendants----'The First Family Under Heaven,' as they have been called----ramified beyond belief. Today more than 100,000 inhabitants of the surrounding county bear his name. (Missionaries latinized Kong Fuzi, "Revered Master Kong," to Confucius in the 16th century.) Qufu has a separate telephone book devoted to names starting with the letter "k."

At the peak of their power, the Kong clan owned 160,000 acres of land worked by hundreds of thousands of tenant farmers. At the turn of the last century, the family mansion had 500 servants. The Yancheng dukes, as the sage's direct descendants were called, managed to fend off the industrialization that spoiled the symmetries of most of urban China. But their imperial stipend ended in 1911 and vast properties slipped from their grasp through neglect. Anti-Confucian sentiment swept China. The last Yancheng duke fled with the Nationalists to Taiwan upon the victory of the Communists after World War 11. The clan mansion and archives were saved from destruction by Red Guards only when it was successfully argued they served as "evidence" of the "criminal atrocities" committed by the Kongs.

Confucianism with its comprehensive dogma of public ethics, private morality, and family value has had a comeback in China and Qufu now swarms with Chinese tourists. The vast Temple of Confucius, the family mansion with its 400 rooms, and the clan's cemetery where every Kong from the last 25 centuries is buried are among the sights.

Ling Min is pleased to bring out a handsome book the family has published just weeks before. It is all about Kong kites and how to construct them and is printed on handmade paper. The 142-page volume has hundreds of color illustrations and is elaborately handbound. It retails, Ling Min reveals, for an amazing $12.

The title is *Cao Yue Qin's Kite Book: A Tribute*. A rather complex explanation is in order here.

Although his father was a military officer, Kong the elder opted for art and became a sculptor and painter. (One of his teachers was Qi Baishi, perhaps China's most noted 20th century painter.) Kong was able to avoid military service in the l930s and '40s because of illness. This was when China was under attack from Japan. From l937 on, China's East Coast, including Beijing, was occupied.

At some point Kong acquired a Japanese man as a primary arts teacher. This teacher introduced him in 1943 to a Japanese woman who had in her possession an unpublished old Chinese manuscript, perhaps seized as war loot, covering weaving, making *papier mache* images, dyeing cloth, making seals (or chops), doing traditional gardening, creating artworks from bamboo, cooking classic Chinese food, and----making and flying kites. Kong was given the last section of the book to evaluate. Other chapters were parceled out for evaluation. The Japanese woman was apparently seeking to learn just how valuable the manuscript was.

Kong was thrilled with his assignment. Realizing both the value and vulnerability of the document, Kong made a copy of the 100 pages of illustrated text. Because kites so impressed----even obsessed----him, he dropped his other artistic endeavors and took up full time kitemaking from then on.

Now as to the title. Cao Yue Qin is China's Shakespeare, author of its most famous and beloved literary classic, *A Dream of the Red Chamber*. (The book has been published with several other titles.) Written and published in the 18th century, the very long volume remains widely available. There are at least four English-language versions

All photos by Ben Ruhe

Top right is a bust of Cao Yue Qin, 18th century author of China's most loved novel A Dream of the Red Chamber. The three documents are copies of a now vanished Cao manuscript on kites made by Kong Xiang Ze. They are all that survived the destruction of Kong's property by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution of l966-76.

in print, including a five-volume Penguin version. For a variety of reasons, Kong and many literary specialists are absolutely convinced Cao is the author of the unpublished manuscript. This, however, has never been absolutely proven. Much about Cao remains speculative, even now.

Although scholars in recent years journeyed to Japan and tried to trace the original manuscript, as well as the two Japanese involved with the kite portion of the volume----Kong's teacher and the woman owner of the document----they eventually reached a dead end. The former was dead, the latter had a name so common it was untraceable. The volume may be destroyed, or hidden in a museum archive. Kong Xiang Ze steadfastly believes the manuscript was by Cao (with the exception of the cooking chapter, he notes, which is in another handwriting). Thus the new Kong book pays Cao tribute.

Chapter 70 in Cao's *A Dream of the Red Chamber,* by the way, has a wonderful kite-flying sequence in it. A group of young people, following New Year's tradition, fly their kites as high as they can, and then allow them to sail away in freedom. Bad events and bad luck of the past year are in this manner carried away forever.

In a preface to the lengthy manuscript, Cao wrote that he meant the volume as a means "to help the disabled make a living, by teaching them some practical skills." Rather than cash in on his fame, Kong the elder has devoted himself to the same goal. He himself has always given lessons in kitemaking to the needy, just as he has devoted himself to other good works.

Because the Red Guard years ago not only bodily abused him but destroyed most of his property, Kong lost most of his copy of the Cao manuscript. He retains several pages only. They have been viewed by only a few Chinese, and, according to Ling Min, only one foreigner----this writer.

After his suffering during the Cultural Revolution, Kong the elder finally saw the political climate shift radically in the late l970s. He was again able to make kites full time and sell them, and thus make a modest living. His personal comeback had its apogee when he was given an exhibition of his work at the Summer Palace in Beijing. With devoted family, fast friends, and widespread recognition of his skill, life has been good for him ever since.

King of the Microminis

With the microminiature kites Leng Shi Xiang, of Beijing, makes, seeing is believing. Some are half the size of a housefly.

The kites are so tiny a viewer without Leng's amazing eyesight needs to use a loup to really see and appreciate their detail. Made of bamboo and silk, they take him days to make, he says, and a half day just to bridle. "The hardest thing is to saturate the silk," he says. Flying line is a single fiber extracted from a nylon cloth. All of his creations fly, he says.

He hasn't made many and the few that he has sold over the years repose in museums and collections around the globe. He recently turned down $1,000 for one of his creations from a British admirer, he reports.

Why does he make them? "I like to do challenging things, unusual work," he says. "And I don't like to repeat myself."

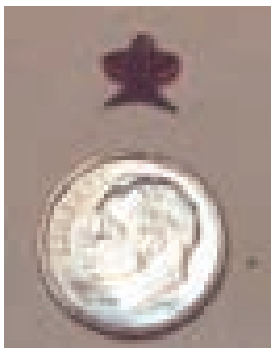
Leng has a low-ceilinged workshop exactly 13-by-13 feet, with a small skylight furnishing the only illumination. It's more solitary confinement prison cell than workshop. But Leng is happy there and has it packed with tools and kites. The ancient building of which it is a part was long ago condemned to be razed for yet another Beijing high rise, but nothing has happened yet. Leng has his fingers crossed. Meanwhile, he makes kites. But now there is only the occasional micromini. At 54, his astonishing closeup eyesight is giving way to middle age.

Employed as a hospital administrator, divorced, with no children, Leng devotes himself to kites at night and over the weekend. In addition to the miniatures and a variety of classical kites, Leng turns out innovations painted with poster colors for brightness, such as an asymmetrical swallow, a Boxkite in the unlikely shape of a frog, and a kite with five segments----eyes, nose, mouth, and forehead dot----that conveys a human face. It's an unusual, arresting image, somehow Buddha-like. Leng's inspiration for this kite may well have come from a pilgrimage he made to the Dunhuang caves in western China which are filled with ancient Buddhist murals.

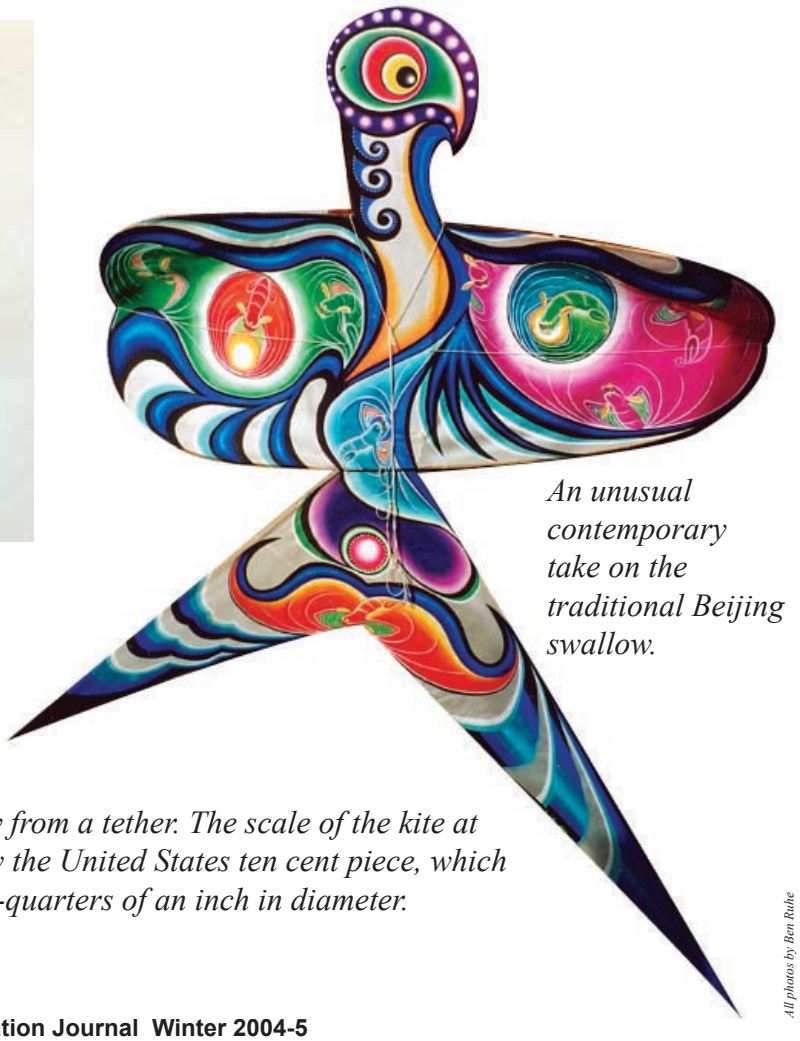
A kitemaker off and on since he was a teenager, despite a nine years spent in far off Yunnan Province at a time that just happens to coincide with the Cultural Revolution which exiled many "revisionists" to China's west, Leng now likes to make the occasional painting and to travel, but he says he will never stop creating kites. "I am always seeking the new, making new designs. My spirit lives in my kites."

Original kites by Leng Shi Xiang. The frog is actually a Boxkite.

Both photos by Ben Ruhe



Leng Shi Xian in his tiny workshop in Beijing. He is renowned for his miniature kites, which are not only beautifully detailed when examined under a glass but also fly from a tether. The scale of the kite at bottom left is revealed by the United States ten cent piece, which measures less than three-quarters of an inch in diameter.



An unusual contemporary take on the traditional Beijing swallow.

All photos by Ben Ruke

Distaff Side of the Sport

Fair Sex Play Key Role in China Kiting

In a sport which in the West seems often to be largely dominated by men, kiting in China presents another face: A majority of men, yes, but lots of women too----in participant, administrative, and support roles. Here's a look at some of the fair sex in action during a spate of kite festivals and celebrations in China in the spring of 2004.

Hostesses

A village in Shandong Province called Jangjiabu devotes itself almost exclusively to kitemaking. Here a greeter at the town's kite museum uses a centipede kite to fetching effect in showing off her coiled hair. The kite's dragon head perches atop her head. At a stadium event in Guiyang celebrating the opening of the national championship, greeters were easily identified by their bared-shoulder gowns.

Kitemaker

Assembly line kite production by a line of women goes on year around in Jangjiabu village. Organized into repetitious steps, the work is carried out with expertise and speed.

All photos by Ben Ruhe

Participant

Eve Hanney, of Weymouth, England, is called "The Kiteflying Granny" by the Chinese media. Having made eight kite trips to China, she has been the subject of many newspaper and television interviews. By now something of a political power, she is aiming for good official seats at the yachting Olympics in Chingdao in 2008.

Translators

Because Mandarin, with its tonal complications, is so difficult, Westerners are lost without guide-translators in China. Here are some who did excellent service: a team of university teachers and students at Guiyang, an ethnic student (bottom left) at Guiyang, and Wang Haili, an ethnic Dai, at Kunming.

All photos by Ben Ruhe

Administrators

A former government sports official, Xu Rong Zhen in retirement maintains her connection with the sport of kiting. She serves as a competitition judge at kite festivals nationally and also serves as secretary-general of the large Beijing Kite Association. The energetic Huang Kun Fen (far right) served as coordinator for international fliers at the Guiyang kite festival, China's national championship. In years past, Huang ("Go Go" as she is nicknamed because of her energy) was instrumental in organizing the city's excellent kite museum.

Xu Rong Zhen

Huang Kun Fen

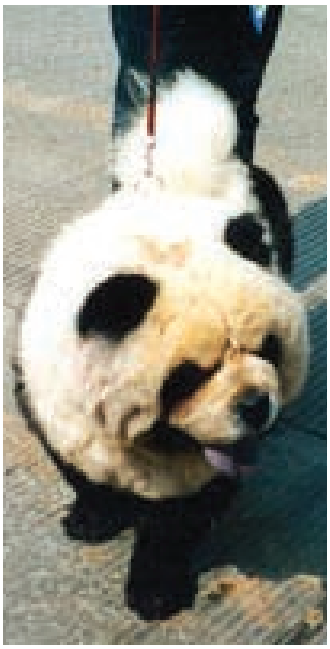
'Miss Kite' Competitors

In its wisdom, the large kite festival at Weifang instituted a Miss Kite of the World beauty contest to promote the city's image and foster foreign investment. The event drew 137 competitors from around the world. Here a line of beauty queens heads off to lunch. Entrants included two Beijing models, including flirtatious Dong Yue (middle), who won third place. Almost all of the competitors wore radically pointed shoes. Commented one male Weifang veteran, "Other years, at night we used to drink beer and talk kites. This year, we drank beer and talked girls."

All photos by Ben Ruhe

Performers

A worldly 9-year-old dancer performed for the international kiteflier contingent at the May Day parade in Guiyang. Just ahead of her and leading the parade was Lingling, the panda on a leash. Hold on! That's actually a look-alike panda dog. At the Chingdao festival, organizers took the international fliers to a remote beach to fly. Villagers turning out to entertain them included this batch of gaudily dressed stilt dancers.



All photos by Ben Ruhe

The Little Swallow

How to paint the little swallow?
Like a chubby baby it should go:
Limbs should be short,
With head big and broad;
Tail is small, with fine feathers
Shaped like scissors;
Its pupils are clear as autumn waters.
And cheeks blushing like lotus flowers;
Eyes radiate smiles and warmth,
Murmuring gently through its yellow mouth;
Its heart is innocent and pure.
Its conscience is open and clear;
Building its nest with deep love and care.
Other than that, there is nothing to worry about;
Learn to walk in late spring among flowers,
Practice flying around fences when summer dances often with colorful butterflies.
Occasionally darts through vegetable trellises with sparrows;
Catching worms and the "thief insects," to patrol the field and protect crops.

Attributed to Cao Xue Qin, author of A Dream of the Red Chamber

Mr. Ha's Succession Problem

Ha Yi Qi of Beijing has a peculiarly Chinese dilemma.

A fourth generation kitemaker, Ha (profiled in Journal issue No. 12) by tradition is expected to pass on his flourishing gift-item factory business to a direct descendent. But because of the one-child rule in modern day China, and because his one child is a daughter, and because women by tradition don't run big businesses like Ha's works which employs 100 people, he has a dilemma.

He says he has three choices: Train his daughter Ha Yi (Yi pronounced "Eee" and meaning No. 1), age 13, to succeed him, or arrange for her to marry a boy he can train, or recruit an apprentice to teach who he then adopts as his successor.

Ha has already tried the last. "Unfortunately, the boy didn't have sufficient skill," he says. Few would, since Ha at 50 is a great master. "It takes five years to learn the basics of kitemaking," says Ha, "ten years to become an expert." He defines an expert as one who profoundly understands Chinese culture, has all-around kitemaking skills including a knowledge of aerodynamics, is able to produce high quality art, and commits himself to kiting as a lifetime vocation.

When he can take time off from managing his business and his extensive global travel seeking ideas for his factory which, in addition to kites, turns out art works, paintings, and modern gifts for the Chinese middle class market, he works on paintings of traditional Ha family kites, to be issued as a successor book to the volume, *Chinese Artistic Kites,* he and his late father, Ha Kui Ming, published some years ago. Translated into English, this book made the Ha family famous around the world in kiting circles. Ha has made 70 images so far, estimates he needs at least double that number to make a rounded book. "Publishers are already vying for the right to issue the work," he says.

Obviously affluent because he owns two apartments, one new and smashing where he greets a foreign guest, Ha shows off a few of the famous Ha swallow kites but declines to show any of the seven kites from the family collection that escaped destruction during the Cultural Revolution. He says his father reproduced some of the many destroyed kites from memory after things calmed down in China.

Ha shows some of his own youthful artistic endeavors, including a charming pencil rendering of his mother. There are rather garish Western style landscapes, as well as a cloying oil of a Christian martyr. "My father wouldn't speak to me for three days when I did this one," he says. "I dropped my rebellious ways and took up kites from then on."

Ha Yi Qi

Ha Yi

Both photos by Ben Ruhe

Ha says he has a repertoire of several hundred kites, but only makes a few yearly, all of which go to collectors and museums. Under his careful eye, his factory turns out 15,000 kites by factory craftsmen annually, at an average price of $12.

Why is he doing the paintings for the projected book, each of which takes him three to five days to complete? "I want to let future generations know about Ha family tradition now spanning more than 160 years," he says. "This

cultural discipline belongs to the world. Eventually I intend to donate the works to the National Museum here in Beijing."

Ha's kites and paintings are exceptionally lovely in their vivid coloring, but he shows off the painting he treasures above all others and it is in black and white. The rendering of a swallow is by his grandfather Ha Chang Ying, born in 1886. "He was poor, that's why the image is black and white. The pigment he used was greasy ashes from a wok. That's all he had to work with then." Despite the humble materials, it is clearly a masterpiece.

Ha is optimistic about kites in China now that the hard years of Cultural Revolution suppression are well and truly gone. "Flying kites is fashionable again," he says. "It is more and more popular. Provided there is wind, kites always will be flown in the blue sky."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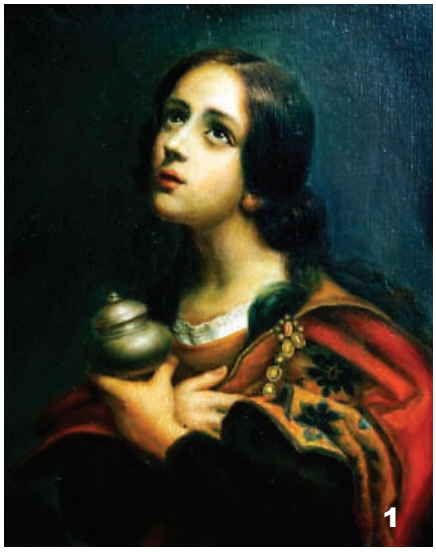
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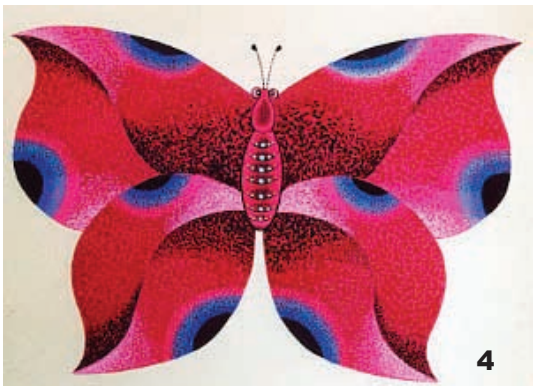
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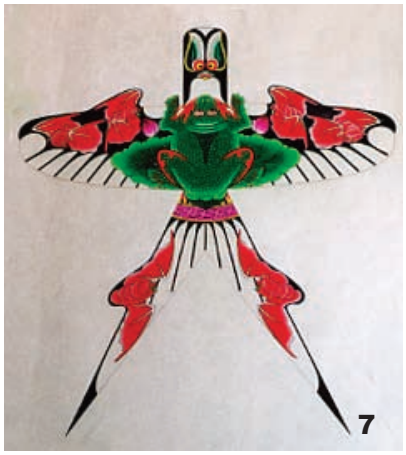
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Art by Ha Yi Qi. 1. and 6. are Ha's youthful experiments with Western art. His kitemaking father shamed him into turning to traditional Chinese art; 2.-4. and 7. are Ha paintings of traditional family kite shapes. He is readying a portfolio for a book; 5. a youthful drawing of his mother.


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All photos by Ben Kuhe

‘Mr Rubbish’: Kite Flier, Art Collector

Chan Fo Kwong, of Hong Kong, has organized several associations of which he is the chairman. They are devoted to chess; the lute; Bor-Yea Buddhism; antique watches and clocks; calligraphy and painting; pot plants and gardening; research on antiques; and, most charmingly, the Hong Kong International Deserving Genius Association. Not a one has a single member other than Chan. “I feel upset whenever I think about it,” he says.

His ninth and last association, set up in opposition to an existing kite group in Hong Kong, is the Hong Kong International Kite Association. It does have members, 80 of them.

Managing director of a retail import store now run by his first and fourth sons, Chan in retirement is curator of what he calls the Chan Fo Kwong Museum, his own apartment stuffed with his personal collection. Imperial decrees, dragon robes, royal calligraphy and paintings, antique watches and clocks, snuff bottles, stamps, banknotes, coins, precious stones, badges, and swords-----these and much more crowd the 12-room apartment. The museum, now 15 years old, can be viewed by appointment.

Ben Ruhe

Chan Fo Kwong

A collector since he was 17, Chan says he doesn’t know how many objects he owns. Nor does he have provenance on his belongings. He says he often buys from auction galleries, and thus the authenticity of his items is largely assured, he feels. In any event, authenticity does not appear to overly concern him.

Chan lovingly calls his treasures *laap saap*----rubbish----and has thus acquired the nickname “Mr. Rubbish.” Some of his collection, however, is obviously anything but. Chan cites a Ming bracelet made of three pieces of jade twisted around each other, a gold handbag with two blue diamonds, and a Ching ink block in the shape of a sword.

Trim and youthful looking at age 75 because of his dedication to martial arts (Jackie Chan was an uncle) and the outdoor life as exemplified by his kiteflying, Chan wears attention-getting garb at kite festivals he attends in Hong Kong and mainland China. He further attracts notice by handing out posters about himself and his doings. “I give them to everyone I meet, just like a salesman distributing leaflets in the street,” he says. “I want to help more people learn about Chinese culture and history. I won’t give up.”

Collecting Chinese Phone Cards

Have enough kite pins, patches, caps, and festival tee-shirts to last a lifetime?
Well, China has other kite collectibles well worth considering.

New Year's woodblock prints with kite motif are inexpensive and often beautiful. They are a 300-year-old tradition. Kite postage stamps are another option as are low denomination coins with a kite theme. Mass-produced but quite elegant and inexpensive miniature kites are a fourth. Inexpensive and unusual are traditional paper cutouts of kites and people flying them.

But the best by far from the standpoint of price, availability, durability, and esthetic impact are used telephone cards. Cell phones being a huge business in populous China, the choice of phone cards is quite large. Because they

Kites are a popular image on Chinese phone cards. Stamps, paper cutouts, and New Year's woodblock prints often use kiteflying imagery, as do coins----note charming one yuan coin at top left.

All photos by Kiyomi Okawa

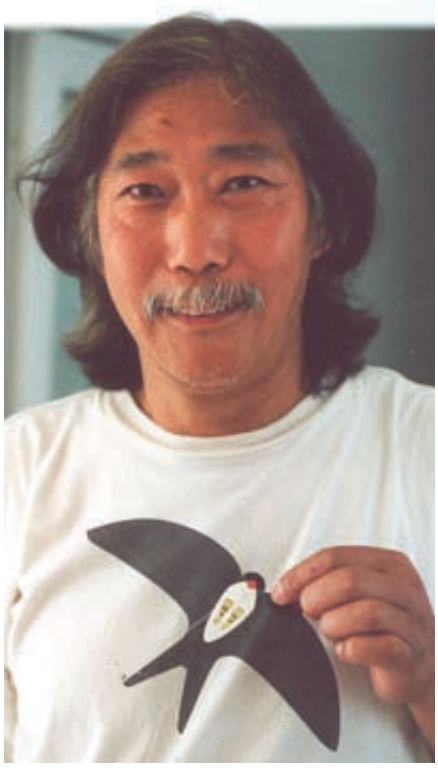
are printed on plastic, images are sharp and colors gorgeous. Dozens, even hundreds of the phone cards showing kites or kites being flown are readily available at specialty shops in large Chinese cities-----shops that sell postage stamps to collectors, and so forth. Many phone cards have a different image on each side: two kites for the price of one, in short.

Depending on who is bargaining and many other factors, the cards sell in the range of 20 yuan each, or about $2.50. They are readily preserved and displayed in booklets sold to hold business cards. Business cards are handed out in China like confetti. These card holders are cheap and readily available in stationery stores. Being small and quite tough, the phone cards are easy to ship as souvenirs.

If you want to give collecting phone cards----or Chinese prints, stamps, coins, cutouts, or miniatures----a go, contact a friend there interested in kites and kiteflying. He or she should be able to oblige. If you don't have a pal in that vast country, just get in touch with one of the swarms of Americans and Europeans who travel to China for festivals in particular and tourism in general and maintain kite web sites. They'll put you on the right track.

One Man's Creative Take on Life

Li Ruo Xin (better known by his nickname Mo Dou Li) is a Beijing kitemaker who lives closer to the Great Wall of China than to the capital. A former technician at the Institute of High Energy Physics in Beijing, he and wife are now retired and living in a new three-story house in Xiang Tang village overlooking a large public park and gorgeous, very close encircling mountains.



Li Ruo Xin, known as Mo Dou Li

Among the creative kitemakers of Beijing, Li takes a backseat to no one. His house shows a creative mind at work----courtyard garden, third-floor greenhouse complete with fish pond, paintings on the wall, self-composed music on the computer, sculptures and kites on shelves. Mo's appreciation for life shines in his relationship with a pet bird, Lailai (Come-on-in). If he whistles a tune, the bird---one floor up----picks up right on the beat where he leaves off. If he gives a particular command, she gives a harsh squawk. "She asks for food when she's hungry, knows how to request a bath, tells me when she wants to go to sleep so I can cover her cage to keep out the light and drafts," he says. "But she doesn't like fireworks on New Year's Eve. They keep her awake. The next day, she goes to sleep earlier than usual to catch up." He says with feeling: "That bird is dear to my heart."

A visitor is inspired by all this bird-man communication to reveal he himself, having been reared in the country, learned to talk with birds and gives an impromptu demonstration of crow-calling. Silence from the parrot. But not from Li. "Don't be teaching my bird that nasty American noise," he says angrily.

Li's sculptures from buffalo horn and tree roots are expressive and the set of precision tools he crafted for his personal use are impressive, but it is as a kitemaker that he has won fame. Having met some European kiters on a train to the kite festival at Weifang and showed them his creations, "which shocked them with their originality," he says, he duly received an invitation to attend the big biennial Dieppe kite festival in France. A hit with his disarming charm, he's been going there since the mid-l990s.

A highly creative man, Mo Dou Li uses tree roots to create sculptures such as this ballerina.

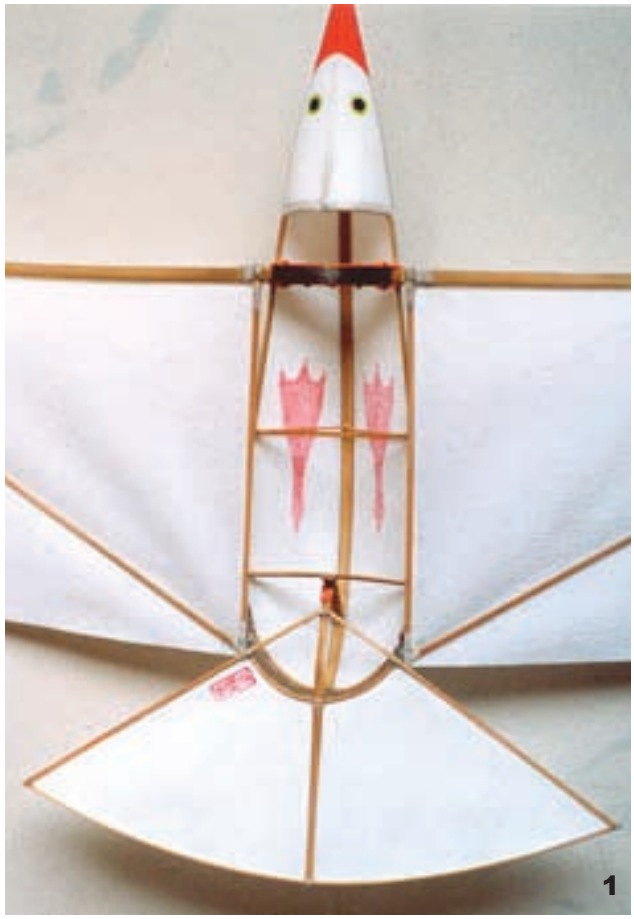
Both photos by Bert Rutke

Besides miniature butterfly kites that fly exceptionally well and attract real ones when given a turn outside, he makes swallows so convincing he has real birds swooping at them. "One swallow entangled himself in the flying line," says Li. But it is the kitemaker's wing-flapping seagull that was his breakthrough and remains his masterpiece. It is not a mechanical kite with wind-activated gears. Instead, the kite apparently flaps its wings because of a tail canted at a sharp angle upward. This angle is adjustable to wind conditions. The sharp angle evidently causes the kite to continually oscillate, making the flapping look realistic.

Li made his first kite, an octopus, in reaction to a request from his daughter Tinn, then 9. His nickname comes from that kite----*mo dou*

is the Chinese word for octopus. He made 14 in the first two years, all different, and has pursued this policy of creating one-of-a-kind kites ever since. “I make fewer and fewer with each passing year, haven’t done a single one recently,” he says. “I’m almost ashamed going to Dieppe without anything new to show my pals.”

Li makes his kites quite as plain and straightforward as possible. He says a China National Art Gallery curator told him they should be more decorative. “I disagree,” he says. “I want to make my kites as absolutely simple as possible. I’m not much interested in selling and not that interested in flying either. I sell a few, but that’s not the point. What I’m really interested in is design. I find conceiving and making kites enjoyable, a continuing challenge.”



Mo Dou Li’s wing-flapping seagull (1. and 5.) is his masterpiece; 2. his third-floor greenhouse includes a fishpond; 3. a butterfly miniature; 4. the head of a phoenix kite.

All photos by Ben Ruhe