

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



Buteo Huang

A Seashell Flies in Taiwan

After three prototypes, five years, and a lot of deep thought, Buteo Huang sends his aerodynamically challenging Nautilus to the sky, where it flies beautifully. Buteo, of Taipai, is a new bright star on the world kite scene. Combining Eastern tradition with a Western viewpoint, he is defining a new vision of what kites are all about. Page 3.

Flying My Kite

*A single simple thread connects me to
the sky, the clouds, and the moving air.*

*Sometimes on absolutely great days,
testing balance and design, I let*

*the line all the way out watching
my colored wedge become a mere
quarter inch dot a 'way up there,
----thermaling with the birds.*

Anon.

The Journal Staff



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.



Editor of the Drachen Journal, well traveled **Ben Ruhe** regularly contributes articles to special interest publications on subjects as diverse as boomerangs, tribal art and flint-knapping.

Note to readers: Articles in this issue of the Drachen Foundation Journal not bylined were written by editor Ben Ruhe.

How to Find This Journal

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The Drachen Foundation:

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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‘Genius Beyond Genius’

Avant-Garde Taiwanese Kitemaker Is Aiming at a Global Reputation

In a part of the world, Asia, where tradition still rules, Taiwanese kitemaker Buteo Huang is a brilliant exception. Having crafted the whole array of traditional Chinese kites as a kind of warmup, Buteo is now turning out avant-garde creations----many obvious masterpieces---that are winning him fame in the global kite world.



Buteo Huang

Buteo comes to kites with an unusual background. Trained as an architect in both East and West techniques and ideas, some very much opposed to one another, he launched a successful career as an interior designer. But after some years he became irked when his best ideas proved too advanced for his less imaginative customers, and he turned to kites full time so he could be in charge of his life. His work is now being promoted by the cultural exchange section of his government as evidence of a new, prosperous, trend-setting Taiwan. This is intended, and undoubtedly taken, as a thumb to the nose by mainland China, which considers Taiwan its own. Taiwan of course sees it very differently.

By now, Huang, 41, who started making kites in boyhood and never really stopped despite his schooling and interior decorating work, has a large, varied body of traditional Chinese work. It ranges from flat kites with images of birds, insects, and warriors to large centipede trains with elaborate dragon heads. Then through the Western canon-----a Bell tetrahedral (with an odd, crinkly black paper skin), a Wright brothers Flyer, a tri-wing Richthoven Red Baron. All of these with noteworthy artistry. His construction is intricate and ingenious, workmanship superb. Some of his elaborate kites come apart with the removal of a few bamboo pegs.

So far so good. Huang at this point qualified as a first-rate Taiwanese kitemaker, but one among many.

Then his Western thought processes took hold and he began conceiving and building kites to his own vision. Ambitious, intelligent, an obsessive worker, Huang reached for the stars.

He built a kite of crumpled, black garbage bags wrapped with twine and with holes in it so air could enter and generate lift. He calls this kite “The E-Generation.” According to Huang, “it’s a conceptual piece designed to convey the dark side of the Internet, with its numerous traps and temptations hidden in an intricate network.”

A Boxkite titled “Truth” is covered with pieces of torn, varnished newspaper. “People believe things they see with their own eyes,” says Huang, “but do they really see the truth? Is the information we get from newspapers real or true?”

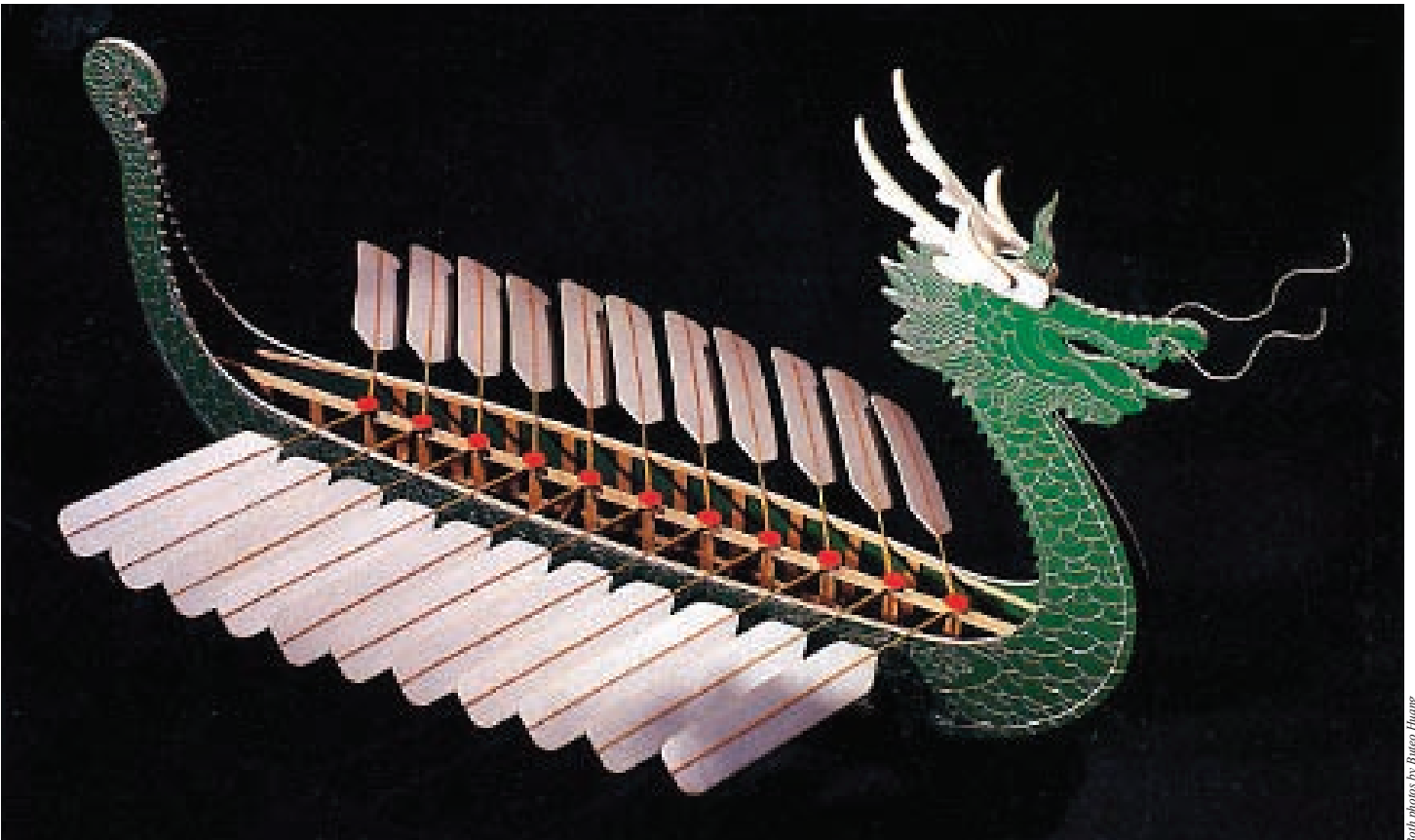
A cube kite with crisscrossing support bars he has mordantly titled “The Capital of Poisoned Animals.” His point here is that the cube is the shape of buildings man lives in, “it is the shape made by humans to imprison themselves.”

The traditional Chinese centipede with dragon head evolves in Huang’s hands into a skeleton head of decidedly odd, spiky construction with body covered by transparent plastic. When flying, “The Dragon Fossil” shows only its framework and appears to be an apparition in the sky.

Continued on Page 8



With body covered by transparent material, Buteo Huang's Dragon Fossil flies the sky in abstract, skeletal form.



Huang modeled this elegant dragon boat kite on vessels made by Taiwan's Tao aboriginal people.

Both photos by Buteo Huang

Buteo Huang's kites range from flying fish to insects, from multicolored carp to cranes. Included are unlikely if colorful shield forms.

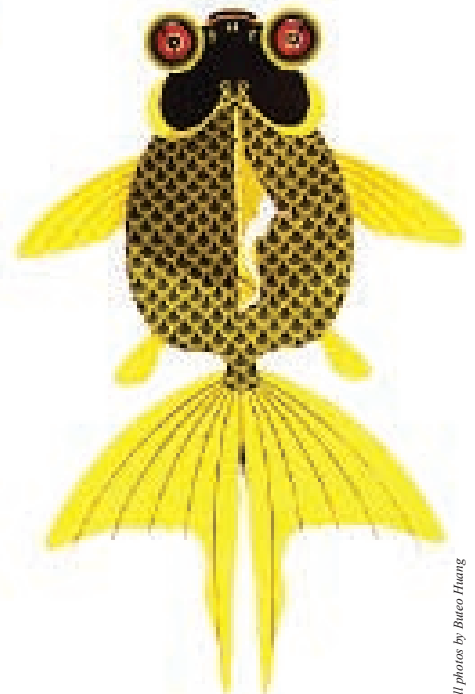




The Blue Dragon designed by Huang took five people six months to build. A traditional Chinese kite, it measures 270 feet in length.



Miro's Cat (left) is modeled on a painting by Surrealist painter Joan Miro, of Spain. Other Buteo kites range from fish to gourd, bird to mythological god.



One of Huang's masterpieces is his Nautilus, modeled on the beautiful seashell of that name. It took him three prototypes and five years of thought to figure out how to construct the shape so it would fly successfully. Either because of a language problem or because of reticence, Huang does not divulge the secret he hit upon. It appears to an observer that perhaps the key element is a long vertical interior fin, to provide necessary stability.

Huang has made a series of elaborate small kites modeled on a multi-oared canoe used by the Tao Aborigines of Taiwan. The cantilevered oars provide the lift, the tall prow and stern the stability. As with many of his ideas, it has evolved and expanded. The latest canoe is 12-feet long, took two months to design, and four months to build.

Far, far bigger is his Blue Dragon----a train kite which he designed but had built for him by five people, working six months. Huang estimates his materials cost was \$17,000.

Making kites to this scale raises the question of finance and the kitemaker reveals he works mainly to commissions, both private and public. He has been sufficiently successful that he has been able to almost entirely drop his interior decorating business and concentrate on kites.

Huang's biggest project he considers a failure. "Too ambitious," he says. Born in the town of Sanxia, a suburb of Taipei, where he still lives with wife and two young sons, Huang as a child observed eagles flying above nearby Kite Mountain and was inspired by them. His kites as a boy were always bird kites.

After systematically studying birds in a scholarly way, Huang came to the conclusion there are just 40 to 50 basic body shapes, and 50 to 60 basic wing shapes, for the 8,000 species of birds in the world. He reasoned: construct all of the body and all of the wing shapes and mix and match to create any one of the 8,000 species. Then he set to work drawing the shapes and having them manufactured, the wings from long fiber paper that would adapt to various wind speeds, wing ribs of high rigidity for strength, and silhouette bodies of fiberglass. To assemble, the wing slotted into the body. Flying line was attached to a tiny bridle point drilled into the body. Good thinking, yes? Actually, no.

In practice, it proved impossible to keep retailers supplied with all of the components. And the kites, while beautiful, didn't fly as well as they might. So the project on which Huang spent years of effort, literally, crashed. Huang remains patient and optimistic. He believes his birds will one day fly in their legions.

Huang's international reputation is building slowly. He won first place in a major kite exhibition in The Hague, Holland. Sponsored by the Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Service, he staged a large one-man show of his work in the Calatrava-designed Science Museum in Valencia, Spain. He has exhibited to great effect in Taiwan. And a world tour is in the works with government backing. Huang is apparently seen not only as a national treasure but a good advertisement for Taiwan's turn to the ultra modern and the chic in the 21st century.

Reproduction of his kites is in the offing, for sale globally by a Texas kite dealer. One project involves the Miro's Cat kite he made after seeing a painting in a book on the renowned Spanish Surrealist artist. When Jackie Matisse, granddaughter of the painter Henri, another major 20th century artist with Miro, saw Huang's kite on a visit to the island, she suggested reproductions of the kite be sold when the Museum of Modern Art in Paris stages a large Miro retrospective in the not too distant future. As it turns out, Jackie Matisse owns the original cat painting herself.

"Even after 30 years doing it, making kites is a chancy business," sums up Huang. "Most of my kites fly well but there is the occasional failure. Experience reduces the percentage of failures but never completely. Yet taking risks is part of the fun, isn't it?"



As Buteo arranges them, even stock food items on a shelf (left) produce a visual impact in the kitemaker's Taipei apartment. Hard to believe, but the door is made of actual bricks. At right, Buteo shows off kites. Note the ingenious sliding door display area for large flat models.



Both photos by Ben Rube

Continues the kitemaker: "When I see an object that really interests me, the first thought that crosses my mind is 'Can I make a kite in that shape that will fly?' The game I play now involves much larger stakes than when I started. And it's a game without end. What I like best about kitemaking is that it permits you to do something original. It's a way of defying common perceptions of objects."

An appraisal of Buteo Huang's work was offered by Ali Fujino, director of the Drachen Foundation, on the occasion of a visit to Taiwan: "While part of his interest in kites goes back to his childhood, this interest has been fuelled by his skill as a graphics illustrator. He has an ability to translate his drawings into three dimensions. His engineering ability leads to kite creativity. Many kitemakers are visionaries but don't have the ability to translate their ideas into kite forms. Buteo does. He also has incredible tenacity; maybe this is to some extent because he's Asian. His concentration makes him unique. The viewer sees Buteo's work as somehow beyond human scale. He combines amazing productivity with a high level of quality. He's genius beyond genius."

Eve Hanney: ‘The Kiteflying Granny’



Eve Hanney

Eve Hanney, of Weymouth, England, is a darling of Chinese kiting, often photographed, filmed, and interviewed. “The Kiteflying Granny,” she is called. After eight trips to China, she knows her way around politically. “I’m aiming for a front row seat with the top officials at the 2008 yachting Olympics in Chingdao,” she says. “That’s my goal. I’m not looking beyond ’08, when I’ll be 74.”

Having grown up on the Dorset coast where there is usually a good wind, Eve flew kites as a girl. But she really discovered them on her first trip to China in 1988, taken as the culmination of a life-long dream, when she saw classical beauties for sale and bought some. “I never do things by half,” she says. “I do things over the top. The wind is free, so I thought to myself, ‘Let’s start flying them.’” And fly them she did.

She became interested enough to go to a kite fly in Bristol, near her home, and buy a Japanese Sugura at auction. After sparring it, she launched it, “and to my amazement it flew. It was really quite beautiful. It generated excitement in me.”

She heard about the famous fly at nearby Dieppe, and went there the following week. At Dieppe, Eve became friendly with Dutch fliers headed to Weifang, China, and she went along. “No organized tours for me. I want freedom.”

She recalls flying in the Yangtze River basin and making friends with Liu Yu Kiu, the Weifang organizer (who thought she was Dutch). She has been coming back to China by invitation ever since to fly. “My white hair is important to my being noticed and honored. People come up to touch it.”

Eve saw Weifang expand until it became too big and unwieldy: There were 1,400 fliers in 2000. Liu dropped out as organizer in ’02 and the SARS scare put a serious crimp in the festival in 2003. But Eve was back last year (2004). “I’ve built good relationships with Chinese people,” she says.

After Weifang, Chingdao, Guiyang and other festivals, Eve makes it a point to travel far and wide in China. She has been to Yunnan in the south and as far north as the North Korean border. “I do try to cover as much ground as I can.”

Over the years she has collected 70 Chinese kites, but has now quit. “There is a limit after all,” she says. “Anyway, I’m at the long end of life for wanting things.”

An excellent, cogent public speaker, Eve has given many speeches in China and opened several festivals.

Eve has been happily married 50 years and has children, grandchildren, and even a great-grandchild. “My husband prefers to go skiing, I come to China. We’re not joined at the hip after all.” Her husband is a retired fish wholesaler, she herself earns money for her travels by making wedding cakes and decorating them with elaborate sugar

flowers. “But I’ve passed my personal ‘sell by date,’ now I mostly teach the skill in adult education courses.”

For companionship on her jaunts, Eve finds a woman by advertising in the newspaper. “One year I got six responses. After a newspaper article on me, the phone started ringing a half hour later. I keep a list of names for the future. After all, there are only a few women allowed by their husbands to go to China. I won’t come on my own. There are so many silly things that happen you want to share them with someone.”

An expert teller of anecdotes, Eve recalls being robbed of a few pennies on a visit to the Summer Palace in Beijing, riding on a train that hit and killed a pedestrian, and being struck on the nose by a descending firework at a ceremony. “I sent a postcard to my family that read: “Robbed in the Summer Palace, killed an old lady on the train, nearly blinded by a rocket in Weifang. Having a lovely time. Wish you were here.”



Police at the Weifang kite festival in China were as interested in stadium events as any of the fliers or spectators. Here an officer (top) at the back of the huge arena gets a better view of the stage by stacking rickety stools. His reaction to being photographed is not gracious. In Chingdao (right) where admission was charged at a large festival featuring kiteflying a local decided not to pay. His solution was to use his bicycle to obtain a good view of the celebration.



Both photos by Ben Rube

Plain Talk From Down Under

Editor's note: The author of the following essays is a noted kite designer and international exhibition flier. He lives in Ashburton, New Zealand.

By Peter Lynn

Machinery Therapy

I decided to try a dose of machinery therapy (the male version of retail therapy)----a forklift truck. It's not exactly a new one, but it is six years younger than I am, so it's not so old either. Nothing to do with kites? Well, it is actually. It's an essential part of any good kite kit, as you will see.

Taking advantage of a reliable easterly here, I was testing some new kites down the back. Excellent conditions. I tested 20 or more modifications in six or seven hours, didn't even pull in at nightfall, reasoning that they would just have to be laid out again for the next day's testing anyway.

Unfortunately by next morning one of them was stuck in the top of the tallest tree on the block. A 22-meter pole was still short, but standing on a pallet in said forklift at full reach did the trick, except that the pole's hook straightened before the kite came free. So, tying the kite's line to the forklift, I just closed my eyes and drove away. Result: kite retrieved. Forklift 1, tree 0. And the branch that broke missed me by some meters.

Monster Kite

To those who guessed that the new big kite is a Kuwaiti flag, you were right. I lied.

Prior to the first public flights, Faris al Farsi and companion came out from summery Kuwait to wintry New Zealand for a week's flying practice. I suspect the 50C to 0C climate was mild compared to the culture shock. We were impressed with the traditional Kuwaiti meal Faris and Kahlid cooked for us, and particularly by the real time supervisory cell phone linkage back to mum Al Farsi that enabled them to get the finer points correct.

After we all became too impatient to wait for an intended Kuwait launch, we were successful in getting the kite to England in time and into the air at Portsmouth and Bristol. It flew for four hours at Portsmouth. We will be meeting Guinness Book of World Records criteria for citation as world's largest kite.

A forklift and pole permit Peter Lynn to defeat a kite-eating tree.



The Al Farsi family is interested in taking their green, red, white, black kite to selected international events and can be contacted via Meg Albers at meg@kitehistory.com.

Some statistics: Flat area, 25 by 42 meters. Weight: 200 kilograms (with Spectra flying, side, and safety lines). Internal air mass: 4,500 cubic meters. Fabric: ripstop nylon with polyurethane and silicon coating. Hours to make: 750. Wind range: 3 kilometers per hour up to, I expect, 40 kph. Cost (with different graphics): U.S.\$50,000.

Kiteboarding Website

When our last guest workers leave for the year on their long migratory flights back to the northern hemisphere, we're down to just the nuclear family, that is, the cats Tory and Chia, and their staff (that's wife Elwyn and me).

For our enthusiastic kitesurfing readers, there is now a newsletter from the Peter Lynn Kiteboarding Team, at the following link: www.peterlynnkiteboarding.com

More Fun Than Playing in Sand

In his recent book *The Wrong Stuff: Attempts at Flight Before (and After) the Wright Brothers*, published by the Smithsonian Institution, author Phil Scott cites the Rogallo Wing as a case in point.

His succinct text reads: "The Russians landed their crewed space capsules on land, and the Americans landed theirs in the ocean. The American way was more expensive (it required a U.S. Navy ship and a few helicopters and frogmen, etc.) so an engineer for NASA named Francis Rogallo came up with a solution. Known as the Rogallo Wing, it would unfold on a Gemini spacecraft after it reentered the atmosphere and would act as a parachute and allow the crew to land on U.S. soil. The 31-foot Wing was simpler than a cardboard box. It consisted of four parts: three lightweight tubes, one running down the middle dissecting a broad V-shape made from the outer two. Its cover consisted of a loose, lightweight nylon cloth that ballooned outward as the wing flew, creating lift similar to a modern sport parachute. With the capsule attached somewhere near the middle, the simple device would allow the capsule to glide down and land presumably under the crew's control. It never caught on with NASA, however, but in the late '60s it spawned a movement that still exists today. That's right: hang gliding. As time flew by such gliders became more complex, with ribs and two-surface wings more swept than delta. And today Francis Rogallo is revered by glider fliers everywhere as the father of, yes, hang gliders."

In an aside, the author notes that a Rogallo Foundation was established in 1992 and is constructing a museum close to the Wright Brothers Memorial on North Carolina's Outer Banks. Dedicated to Francis Rogallo and wife Gertrude, the museum will preserve their papers, research, and artifacts.

Kiteflying in the Skies of Old Texas

Editor's note: Following is an essay by the president of Drachen Foundation. He is a devoted collector of kites and kite memorabilia.

By Scott Skinner

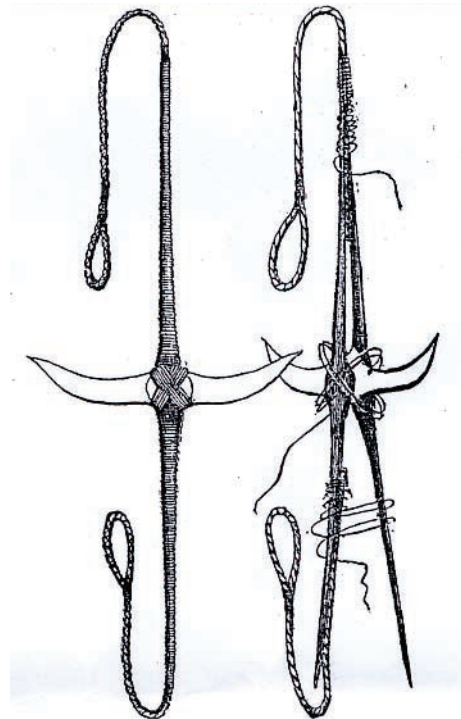
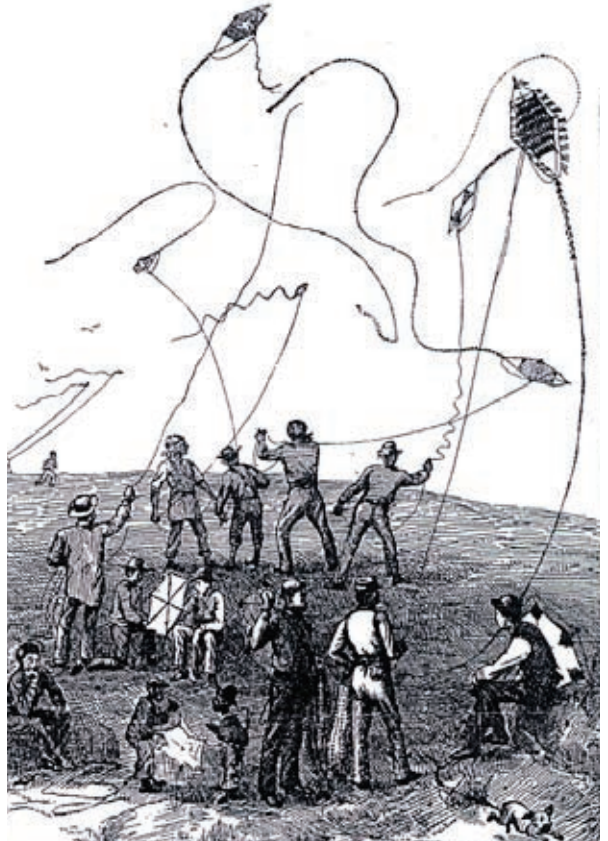
The thrill of collecting results often not from the item found so much as the information contained in the item. So it is with a recently discovered article *The Game of Kite Cutting* from an 1880s periodical. The author, F.D. Clarke, recalls his childhood many years before in San Antonio, Texas, where kite flying meant----kite cutting!

On his first trip to the small hill near San Pedro Creek, where many kites were already airborne, Clark described the question posed by a fellow flier: "*Tiene usted navajas?*" ("Have you any knives?") Thinking the Mexican boy wanted to borrow his pocket knife, Clarke answered "Yes" and went digging for the knife, while watching his kite soar above all the rest.

He soon saw one of the other hexagonally shaped kites cross his line, drag its tail across his, and cut his flying line. Chasing his kite and gathering his string, the author still thought an innocent mistake had caused the mishap, until another friend explained "*Tiene usted navajas?*" means, "Do you have any cutters on your kite line?" Cutters were glass shards or knives tied into the tails of the local kites. Any kite with cutters was fair game for others, while any without was safe.

Clarke accurately describes the kites and tactics used by the San Antonio locals and he also describes in detail a sophisticated cutter used by local Cuban boys called the Cuban Knife. It was apparently used with Cuban kites which he does not describe, so I'd guess them to be hexagonal as well.

The Cuban Knife (at right) is made of two pieces of shaped and sharpened whalebone lashed together, with a knife blade or a clock spring fashioned into an arc and attached halfway up the whalebone and bound firmly in place with fine brass or copper wire. The whole is then bound together with wire or silk. A yard of tail is tied to the bottom of the knife in order to keep the knife from entangling its own tail above the knife.



When Kiteflying Takes a Surreal Turn

Ines Elvira Uribe, of Medellin, Colombia, not only holds an annual international kite festival in her city but attends the occasional festival elsewhere around the world. Although some countries in South America have booming kite industries (Brazil's beaches teem with fliers), few South American kites other than Uribe, an educator by profession, move outside their continent to demonstrate their considerable art.

Uribe can tell stories that few organizers can match, as she did when interviewed during a junket to Chinese kite festivals. Her first competition in 1993 produced a lulu. As Uribe tells it, two of the visiting fliers, Derek Kuhn and Don Eccleston, of England, were scheduled to give a school workshop as part of the festival's outreach program.

The two were unable to find a taxi to take them to the school because of a neighborhood ruckus and so they adjourned in frustration to the hotel's parking lot and flew kites instead. What they didn't know was that they were right at the scene of one of the most dramatic events in Colombian history. Pablo Escobar, the country's kingpin drug dealer, had just been tracked down by police and military using electronic directional finding equipment and shot dead attempting to escape arrest.

An army general later told Uribe that from his circling helicopter he spotted the two Brits flying kites at the nearby hotel and assumed they were Escobar lieutenants sending signals to cohorts elsewhere. He said in the wild excitement of the moment he was on the verge of ordering that the two foreigners be gunned down to stop their signaling, but thought better of it. It was a close call for the all-unaware Brits.

Holder of a master's degree from the University of Arizona, Uribe says she got her start in kites early----very early. When she was eight months old, her father, a kite fancier, made a rig for his kite and put her up into the air, she was told by her family. "It wasn't high up, but it was definitely off the ground," she says. "My father was a playful person." Small smile.

Uribe's kite association is called Yaripa and has been in existence since 1985. It includes teachers, reporters, doctors and, as a social bridge, lots of disadvantaged young people. The organization recently won a city-wide contest on putting a small, wasteland hill in the middle of Medellin to good use. Yaripa cleaned up the site, planted trees, and plans a series of community projects for the space, including of course kiteflying.

Why Yaripa as a name? Uribe explains yaripa is a light, strong wood used to make Colombian kites, often the traditional, brightly colored Colombian Hexagon. It grows wild and is similar to sugar cane in appearance. The wood is widely used for roofing.

Ever the teacher, Uribe notes "the Latin name for yaripa is graminium." She adds: "For kites, in addition to yaripa we use paper, glue, and natural line, cabuya, similar to the material used in coffee sacks." On her foreign festival forays, these Colombia Hexagons are widely appreciated as being interesting, unique, and beautiful.



Ines Elvira Uribe

Ben Rühle

Mechanical Wizardry in Xian

Dragon Head Has Eight Moves

Xian, China, home of the famous underground ceramic army, is also home to the three best makers of mechanical kites in the country, if not the world.

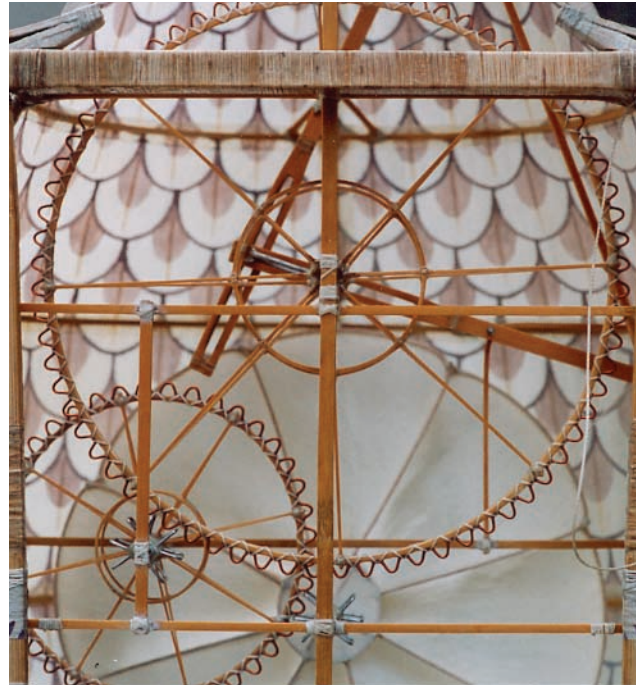
Pride of place go to Zhang Tian Wei and his former student and now colleague Li Xiao Hu. Zhang's kites are quite something. Using bamboo and a bit of metal for his workings, he constructs dragon heads for his long centipede kites that have eight wind-activated movements. When flying or when activated by a fan, a fearsome dragon opens and closes its mouth, rolls its eyes, raises and lowers its eyebrow lids, tilts its lashes, quivers its nose hairs, moves its tongue in and out, flaps its ears, and lashes its long whiskers.

The head would be wonderful in an exhibition of kites. Put a fan in front to get the gears and levers, cams and rods, shafts and pivots working and a mirror in the back so viewers can see the mechanical elements in complex action. Delightful and absorbing.

Zhang sold one of these creations to a German collector for \$7,000. Considering the skill involved and the time it took to make, the head and its accompanying bamboo and silk centipede sails was probably cheap at the price.

Not content with movement, Zhang adds noise to some of his kites. He has a large crane that squawks when it flies. It achieves this via a cardboard accordion that fills with air.

On a visit to Zhang's comfortable two-level apartment in Xian, a reporter encounters Zhang's wife, daughter, friends, and a leading city folk culture official. The kitemaker himself is out of town, working. All sing his praises. The official, Wang Zhi, says: "He's the king of kites, he's No. 1. He's friendly, a good researcher, a hard worker." Ma Xiao Shi, a factory worker and friend, said: "We fly together. I learn a lot from him. He's patient. Ask him a question and he'll give a detailed answer." Daughter Zhang Yan, as she helps her mother display kites for viewing and photography, says of her father: "He makes really good kites and he's a good person. Do I make kites myself?"



The complex, ingenious working of Xian mechanical kites

Both photos by Ben Kille

No, it's too hard." Wang Xian Li, a close pal, says: "He's kindly, answers all questions. When he needs someone to help him fly a big kite, I'm his ground crew."

Formerly retired, Zhang, an engineer by profession, is back working full time as a consultant at a big kite factory in the south of China on the island of Xiamen, adjacent to Taiwan. The factory is run by Michael Lin, of Houston and Taipei, and is being overseen by Robert Yen, formerly of Dallas; Yen is a well known figure on the international kite circuit.

Married 41 years, the Zhangs have four children. Their son is a researcher, their three daughters all had and lost factory jobs; all get a small compensation. All four are married, with children.

Elegant and personable, Mrs. Zhang---Yan Xiu Zhen---is asked what it's like being married to a kitemaker. "At first I didn't like it. The place was too untidy. But then I got used to the mess. After my husband started becoming famous in the mid-1990s, I liked things a lot more. I'm glad I'm able to help him some. I do some of the simple things."

Mrs. Zhang says her husband's international fame has produced some unexpected results. One of his dragon centipedes appeared on a Canadian postage stamp. "I have no idea how this came about," she says.

Mechanical kites have a long history in China. Dragons have been rolling their eyes and opening and closing their mouths for centuries now. But in the last two decades, the complexity of the mechanicals has taken a quantum leap. What happened?

Chen Zhao Ji, the third major figure in Xian mechanical kitemaking circles, explains that kite competitions in Weifang and elsewhere around the country provoked him and Zhang and later Zhang's protégé Li to move to new levels of complexity. Innovation and modernization were in the air from the mid-'80s on, he says.

Chen says he comes from a Weifang kitemaking dynasty in far away Shandong Province and that he moved to Xian as a teenager to live with an uncle. This was a period of hard times for his clan in particular and China in general. Chen taught art and classical music as a career. A number of other members of his family are artists and musicians, some of them nationally renowned. Interested in kites since boyhood, Chen evolved into a full-time kitemaker as his time as a teacher came to a close. Having begun his exploration of mechanical kites under the tutelage of his uncle, he branched out when he began collaborating with Zhang, a trained engineer.

Of the three Xian wizards, Chen is best known in the West because of visits there (Seattle and Madison, Wisconsin) and sales of his elaborate, expensive, show-stopping kites to collectors in the U.S. and Europe. Chen is also a featured kitemaker in a documentary Marcia Bujold, of Staten Island, New York, is currently making on traditional Chinese kites and the men who make and fly them.



Zhang Tian Wei is a foremost kitemaker in Xian. One of his masterpiece kite heads is this beast which swivels its head, opens and closes its jaws, rolls its eyes, and performs sundry other wind-activated movements.



Because his kites are fairly large and usually complex, Chen makes only 30 or so a year. Many are undoubted masterpieces, combining mechanical ingenuity with great artistic skill.

“Kites are my life,” he says. “I’ve made them all my life, first as a hobby then a profession. Even during the Cultural Revolution I made kites at night. They were character kites----kites with images----because anything innovative would have been too dangerous to make. But I never really stopped. Kites have made my wife and me happy. Kites bring so much happiness to so many people.”



All photos by Ben Rulke

One of the master kitemakers in Xian is Chen Zhao Ji (top), who poses before the massive bicycle lockup in front of his apartment. Another master maker of mechanical kites is Zhang Tian Wei. In her husband Zhang’s absence, wife Yan Xiu Zhen (above) shows off a giant crab under construction. At left, Zhang’s daughter Yan holds another of her father’s eye-rolling monsters.

At Rest Between the Clouds

Editor's note: Following is an essay from a projected book, Measuring the Sky, by a noted American author, artist, and kite fancier.

By Tal Streeter

In the sky. In among the billowing clouds. A kite at rest, still. A child's kite.

On its back, the child.

A kite at rest, still. Something even our fine-feathered friends are incapable of achieving, this child's kite in the sky with its passenger, unmoving. A point of stillness in the vast heavens.

Only a slight ripple on its skin----the wind's breath holding the kite aloft. This kite....any kite....this kite with a child's hand holding its long line of string stretching back down to earth. The child perched there riding on the kite's back, wide-eyed, embracing earth and sky. Astride a kite, kite and child, a still point in the sky.

Its passenger, the child----without age, a child spirit----looks down on a body whose hand shakes the kite flying line, sending messages from earth out into the distant sky.

Answering, the kite leans to the left, dipping; next, to speed across the sky----the child spirit holding on tight---before coming to rest, once again, creating another point of stillness in the ocean sky. The wind, once again, breathing lightly, rippling the kite's skin, holding it aloft ever so gently.

Answering, imagination notwithstanding, the kite follows the path chosen by nature, the path of least resistance across the sky. The frugality of nature, spare, the conservation of energy even in the flight of a child's kite, as in science, as in philosophy, evidence of "Ockham's Razor," the law of parsimony, the path of least resistance. Evidence of stillness governed by the law of inertia.

And the child's law?

Flying a kite in among billowing clouds; skipping through a sunlit meadow; hopping, one foot on the curb, the other in the dingy gutter of a city street; sitting at the breakfast table eating a piece of toast-----seeing everything as if by magic. Not by the laws of man's physics, not by laws at all, but the child's way, the way of nature and kites and a young mind.

A kite at rest between the clouds. Hopping, skipping, and breakfast toast. All magic. Enchantment.

There's the trick.

Letter From Switzerland

‘Allowing Kite Prints to Speak’

Editor's note: Following is a letter from a banker in Castelrotto, Switzerland, who makes and collects kites, related memorabilia, and in particular Japanese kite prints.

By Iqbal Hussain

It was with the awe and wonder of a small child receiving candy that I opened my copy of the recently published book *Japanese Kite Prints: Selections From the Skinner Collection* by John Stevenson. The book was in a way a culmination of not only Scott Skinner's dream, but also mine. I will explain.

I had a passion for kites at a very early age. As a child growing up in Pakistan, I learnt to fly Indian fighter kites as a sort of birthright, and still remember my father who would fly them with friends and family from the rooftops of our house, often betting sums of money on his kite cutting skills against that of his opponents. I loved to fly kites and was out flying them whenever I could, both with friends and foes, so to speak. In 1964, at the tender age of 10, I and my family moved to England and I flew kites only a very few times after that.



Iqbal Hussain

What set off my passion for kites again was my stay as a teacher at the Sacred Heart International School in the heart of Tokyo, starting in 1982. For three years I taught Japanese and Chinese history. By chance I met Takeshi Nishibayashi whilst visiting a local park. He was flying a train of bird kites. I was hooked----how could the kites fly in and out like that, just like real birds? I gathered up my courage and walked over to him to take a closer look and to ask for information.

Since that first encounter, I remained friends with Nishi until his death. I went to his house almost every weekend to learn about kites and became an expert at making light wind kites with plastic nylon and fiberglass. In turn, I introduced Nishi (as he was called by the kite fraternity) to the world of Indian fighter kites. He made hundreds of them out of plastic and fiberglass and gave them as gifts during his visits to Korea and China. Nishi also introduced me to a whole new world of kites----makers, festivals, and, of course, the museum on the fifth floor of the Taimeiken restaurant in Nihonbashi, run by the Modegi family. He once took me to a meeting of the Japanese Kite Association, and it was through him that I met another of my kite teachers, Eiji Ohashi. Nishi would invite me to fly kites with him and Ohashi on the banks of the Edo river.

During this period I came across the world of Japanese woodblock prints with kite images. I had already become interested in Japanese prints and was collecting them. Coming across one with a kite, the first part of a triptych *Pictures of Edo Flowers and Scenic Spots* (on page 152 of Scott's book), I was enthralled by its beauty and magic. I started collecting prints whenever I found them, flipping through hundreds and hundreds in galleries, hoping to come across one with a kite image.

Once a well-known gallery near the school where I taught held an exhibition of Japanese woodblock prints. I went to the exhibition and my heart leapt as there displayed was one with a kite. But unfortunately, the asking price was exorbitant and beyond my means. I asked if the gallery could give me a discount and was told the prints were

owned by an elderly gentleman who was a specialist in the field. When I was told he'd be on hand and I could ask him in person, I eagerly returned at the appropriate time. I asked the gentleman, clearly past 80, for a discount, but he shook his head and said the print was very special. I returned to the gallery nearly every day in between lessons to admire the prints, especially the one with the kite.

Finally, on the last day the old man said he would give me the print at half price. My heart leapt for joy. After paying him he turned over the print safely wrapped as well as a small envelope that he said was for me. I opened it and found a small woodblock print of a boy flying a kite. He explained in his limited English that he had carved it himself for me as a special gift. I was very moved and have always treasured his kindness.

After Tokyo, I moved with my wife to Switzerland and continued to make kites and to collect kite prints. I also began collecting kites, especially Japanese and Chinese ones, as well as kite-related materials, so as to organize local exhibitions to promote kite culture. But Japanese kite prints remain my main passion. It was only last year that I managed to complete the triptych *Pictures of Edo Flowers and Scenic Spots*. I read all the books on the subject I can lay my hands on and I often study my collection so as to understand the prints better, but I was and still am a novice.

Several years ago I was invited to a festival celebrating the opening a kite museum in Demold, Germany. At the hotel bar I found Scott Skinner, who I had met at the Cervia, Italy, kite festival. Scott noticed I had in hand the Roger Keyes book *The Male Journey in Japanese Prints* and we started talking about kite prints and I urged Scott to publish his collection. I remember that the name John Stevenson came up as a possible expert to write the text. Little did I realize that both our wishes would come true in the not too distant future.

I would like to thank the Drachen Foundation and Scott Skinner for all their efforts to promote kites as a bridge across different cultures that enrich this world. The Skinner volume is a pioneering work which not only sheds light on a fascinating but relatively neglected area of Japanese kite culture, but also a specific and important contribution to the world of Japanese woodblock prints. Author John Stevenson's profound scholarship has brought to life the symbols and underlying aspects behind the illustrated prints in a beautifully written manner. For me, the book has finally given voice to my silent passion and allowed the prints to speak to me.

What the Reviewers Had to Say About Skinner Kite Print Book

Editor's note: Following are comments by critics on the 234-page volume Japanese Kite Prints: Selections From the Skinner Collection by John Stevenson. Scott Skinner is the president of the Drachen Foundation.

"Offers up a delightful feast of Japanese wit, art, and culture----all presented in an art form that, until now, has been largely overlooked." (Art Times)

"These prints were known as *ukiyo-e*, which means 'pictures of the floating world,' a pun on a Buddhist concept of the fleeting world of desires that is, coincidentally but poetically, appropriate for a study of kites borne on the wind." (Cultural News)

"Provides a background of Japan's history in the Edo and Meiji periods and describes the history of the use of kites there." (Reference and Research Book News)

"Color plates of superb quality." (Booknews)