



Kites and Their Shapes



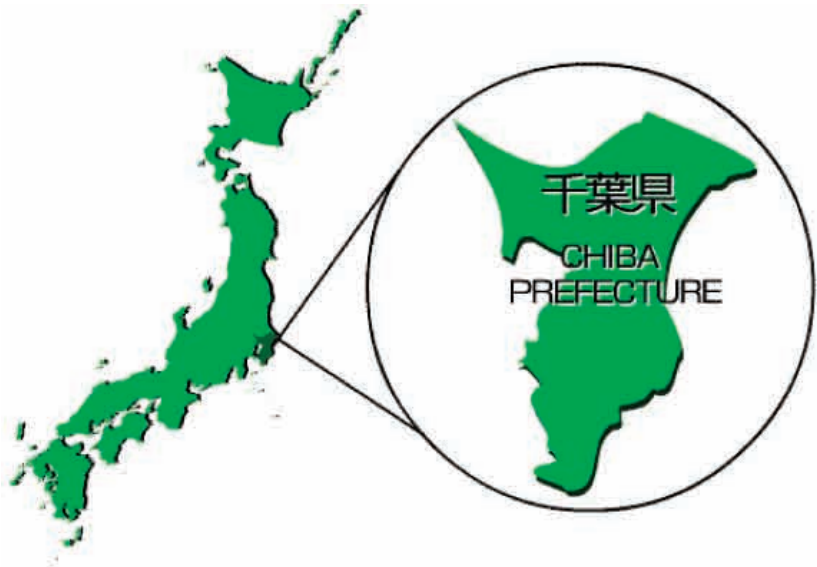
Sode by Mikio Toki

Cathy Palmer

Think of a kite. What shape do you see? Children who live in Europe or North America may see a diamond. Children who live in East Asia may see a rectangle. Who sees a shape like a kimono?

Some children in Japan may think of a *sode* kite. *Sode* means

“sleeve.” This kite shape looks like the back of a woman’s kimono, with the sleeves stuck out. A sode kite can be very big. Some are as tall as ten feet and as wide as eight feet. *Sode* kites come from Chiba, a state in Japan east of Tokyo. Each city or region in Japan has a kite with a different shape that is special to that place.





The *sode-dako* (*dako* means “kite” in Japanese) is one of the oldest types of kites in Japan. Why has it lasted so long? It is easy to make, and it flies well, for a flat kite. In strong wind you can add tail pieces to the bottom of the kite. Tails will help the kite fly more stably. The wide sleeves

of the *sode-dako* also give the kite maker a big space to decorate. Japanese people admire kites with beautiful paintings on the sail. A common decoration is a family crest, or *mon*.



Scott Skinner

Ali Fujino

Some Western kite artists like to use the *sode* shape. Its right angles suit their geometric designs. One of the artists is Scott Skinner. He has used Western patchwork that you might see in a quilt with this *sode* shape

from Japan. He says, “I like this kite shape because it is really just three squares. With three squares you can make interesting and surprising patterns.”

What other Japanese kites have a similar shape, like a T? The *tobi* or hawk kite is shaped like a bird with its wings outstretched. The boy in this Japanese print is flying a *tobi* kite to celebrate the New Year. His haircut shows that he is five or six years old. Bird kites are common in cultures all around the world.



Another T-shaped kite is special to Japan. It is called a *yakko* kite. The *yakko* was the lowest servant of a samurai warrior. He bowed before his master, so this kite bends when it flies. Japanese children still fly *yakko* kites at the New Year. Sometimes the *yakko* shape is

decorated as a workman, a bricklayer or a fireman.



Can you see these shapes in a picture of toy kites from almost two hundred years ago? A shopkeeper might have passed out this sheet to young customers. They could make toy kites by cutting out the shapes and bending the tabs.

*Images of sode kites from The Drachen Foundation. White sode with birds by Scott Skinner.
Images of Japanese kite prints from Japanese Kite Prints: Selections from the Skinner Collection by John Stevenson (2004).*

First posted December 2006
©2006 Drachen Foundation