



# Meet the Kite Maker

## Nobuhiko Yoshizumi



Nobuhiko Yoshizumi lives in Kyoto, the creative capital of Japan. He once worked as a “salaryman,” selling an assortment of notions and novelty goods to J.C. Penney and Kmart. Making kites was only his hobby at first. He says, “I made a few kites to decorate my bedroom, but then I fell in love with the craftsmanship and beauty, and it became my passion.” Now he is a master kite maker, with more than thirty years of experience.

Japanese kites can be enormous or minuscule. Yoshizumi-san (as he is called by those who respect his skills) often makes kites that are about four feet wide by six feet high. He makes the kite sails from *washi*, Japanese paper made from the fiber of the mulberry plant. He likes to paint them with the face of a *Kabuki* actor, a *samurai* warrior, or an animal, such as a tiger or a bird. He may wrap the bamboo spars with cloth to give the painting extra protection.



He says, "Some kites I can make in an hour, but some can take a week." In April 2005 he made a kite and painted its sail right on the beach at a kite festival in Cervia, Italy.



Yoshizumi-san

also makes miniature kites. In fact, one of his kites holds the Guinness World Record for the smallest kite ever flown. As small as it is, it still flies. According to him, "If it doesn't fly, you can't call it a kite." He first started making miniature kites from New Year's greeting cards that he exchanged with the members of his Kyoto kite club. His idea became popular, and the kite makers began to compete among themselves to make smaller and smaller kites.

Flying miniature kites was once a hobby of retired *samurai*. But nowadays Mr. Yoshizumi likes miniature kites because they are easy to transport on Japan's crowded trains. They can also fly "pretty much anywhere," even inside a building without any wind, because their bamboo spars are carefully slivered to be very light. He belongs to the International Friends of Small Kites, an organization begun by Dutch kite makers, and is able to share his drawings and kite plans graphically despite the language barrier.







Yoshizumi-san also designs kites for Japanese businesses to give to their customers at New Year's. Sometimes a business will place a special order. For example, Disney Japan once asked Mr. Yoshizumi to make a big kite of Pocohantas. He also gives away his kites to friends or donates them for kite auctions. He says, "Personally I don't like to sell my kites for money. It might be related to Japanese culture. We don't want to talk about money with friends. If someone asks me to make a kite, I just give it to that person as a gift. It happens to me a lot." This kite shows rabbits

making *mochi*, a New Year's treat of steamed and pounded rice. He made it for the owner of the Panama Hotel in Seattle, where he participated in an artists' residency in 2003. He decorated it with *sumi* ink to "create a three-dimensional feeling with a tint effect."

Mr. Yoshizumi's "Fish Kite" is his adaptation of a traditional Japanese children's kite. The "fins" that extend on either side help the kite to fly stably. Another Japanese kite maker, Masaaki Modegi, calls his kite of similar design a "Chicken Kite." On his kite the "fins" are supposed to be wings that flap in the breeze. Fins? Wings? Arms? Legs? Horns? Tentacles? Rays? You can choose on the kite you make.



## Key vocabulary for the reading

**Kabuki:** a form of popular drama in Japan, developed in the 17th century

**Minuscule:** very small

**Mochi:** a New Year's treat made of pounded rice that has been steamed and formed into small balls

**Sail:** the material that covers the kite frame

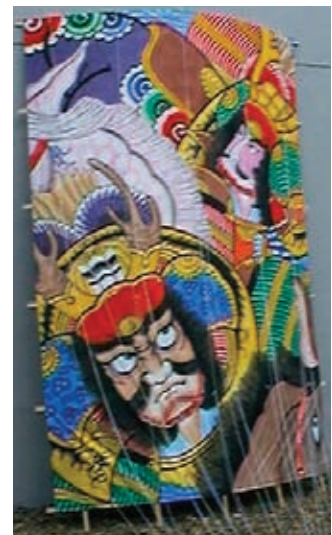
**Samurai:** a professional warrior in feudal (during the Middle Ages) Japan

**Slivered:** made into a sliver, a small, thin, often sharp piece of wood

**Spar:** one of the parts of the kite frame

**Sumi:** Japanese black ink made by mixing plant soot and glue, used by painters and calligraphers

**Washi:** Japanese paper, often handmade, although washi can also be produced by machine



Samurai Image

*Photo by Ali Fujino*



Making Washi

*Photo by Daniela Zitzmann*