



Why are Kites Important in Japan?



We know that there have been kites in Japan for a very long time. A Japanese manuscript first mentioned kites about 1300 years ago. Kites came to Japan from China, and then the Japanese made kites part of their own cultural traditions. To fly a kite brought good luck or gave thanks—for a harvest, a child, a ruler. A priest might bless a stalk of rice and attach it to a kite to thank the gods for a good crop. A family might fly kites to honor the birth, or the birthday, of a child. For example, the birthday of Prince Yoshihiro was celebrated in 1558 by flying kites at Hikuma Castle. A *shogun* could show that he would be a good leader by flying a kite. If his kite flew well, its flight symbolized his skills as a leader. But if his kite crashed, his subjects would wonder about his abilities.

Kites are culturally significant in Japan not just because they have been part of Japanese life for centuries. Kites also still fly during important Japanese festivities. Carp banners and kites appear especially on May 5th, Boy's Day (now Children's Day), to encourage young men to be strong and brave, like the folk hero, Kintaro. Kintaro, whose name means Golden Boy, grew up in the forests of Mt. Ashigara, with animals for friends. He was said to be incredibly strong. He could smash rocks, bend the trunks of trees as though they were twigs, and grapple with bears



like a *sumo* wrestler. As a man he served the samurai Yorimitsu Minamoto and mastered the martial arts. Kintaro is still very popular in Japan. He appears in *manga* (Japanese comics) and *anime* (Japanese cartoons)—and on kites.



Boys also traditionally flew kites at the New Year, the most important Japanese holiday. When the Japanese used a lunar calendar, they observed New Year at the end of January or in early February. Now the Japanese New Year celebration starts on January 1st and lasts for several days. Children anticipate special holiday foods and *otoshidama*, a gift of money from parents and other relatives that they can spend as they please. A children's song says,

How many times must I go to bed before *Oshogatsu* (New Year)?
At *Oshogatsu* I'll have fun flying kites, spinning tops (a sport for girls)
I can't wait for *Oshogatsu* to arrive!

Holiday observances are changing in Japan, just as they do over time in many places around the world. Now families may gather on New Year's Eve to watch a special television program, *Kohaku Uta Gassen*, in which teams of singers compete. But many children still look forward to the gift of a kite at the New Year, which they can easily launch in the strong winds of winter.

There are also historical reasons why kites are so widespread throughout Japan. During the 1700s and early 1800s, the government controlled all of Japan from its capital in Tokyo, which was then called Edo. It required all the *daimyo* (regional lords) and bureaucrats to travel regularly



to and from Edo. Just like travelers today, the lords wanted to take home souvenirs. More than a hundred kite makers worked in Edo, where kite flying was at the height of its popularity. Kites became popular gifts, a way of giving the “country bumpkins” a taste of big-city living. Edo-style kites were thus carried to home villages throughout the island nation, where local kite makers could copy or modify them.



More recently, another historical event—World War II—affected the popularity of making and flying kites in Japan. After the war ended, Japanese teachers and students were forbidden to build model airplanes in schools because of the planes’ military associations. Tsutomu Hiroi, professor at a university in Tokyo, revived kite making as a substitute activity. Most teachers in the Tokyo area trained at this university and learned these skills. Like the *daimyo* before them, they helped to spread an interest in

making and flying kites at schools throughout Japan. By 1966 the Japanese Ministry of Education had created educational materials about kites. Because education in Japan is highly centralized (every student studies the same lessons), these materials ensured that all Japanese children learned about Japanese kites.

Key Vocabulary for the reading

Anime: a Japanese style of animation

Bumpkin: an awkward, unsophisticated person; a hayseed or a “hick”

Bureaucrat: an administrative official in an organization, often the government

Centralized: under one control, especially in government

Daimyo: a feudal (during the Middle Ages) lord of Japan who served the shogun

Manga: Japanese comics or graphic novels

Manuscript: a book or document written before the invention of printing

Oshogatsu: New Year celebration

Otoshidama: a small gift of money given to children at New Year festivities

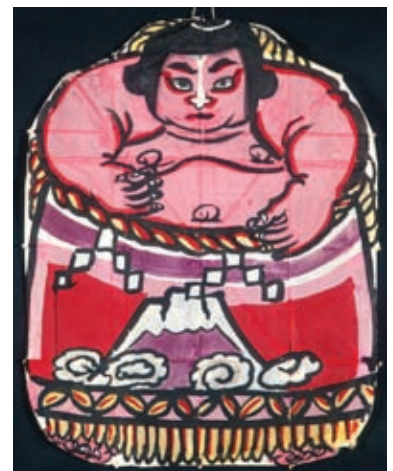
Samurai: a professional warrior in feudal (during the Middle Ages) Japan

Shogun: first military commanders (8th –12th century), then hereditary officials who governed Japan (the emperor was a figurehead) until 1868

Sumo: a Japanese form of wrestling



Oshogatsu



Sumo