



Why are There So Many Different Kinds of Kites in Japan?



In some ways Japanese kites are quite similar to each other. Most Japanese kite makers use bamboo for the kite spars (frame), and *washi*, Japanese paper, for the kite sail (skin). Both materials have long been used by Japan's respected craftsmen.

At one time bamboo grew all over Japan. In a country prone to earthquakes, bamboo was prized for its deep roots. Even an earthquake could not uproot a bamboo forest. Bamboo is said to have at least 1400 uses in Japan, from flutes, fans, and tea whisks to baskets, brooms, and placemats. Kite makers prize bamboo for its combination of strength and flexibility, which enables bamboo spars both to withstand and bend to the wind.



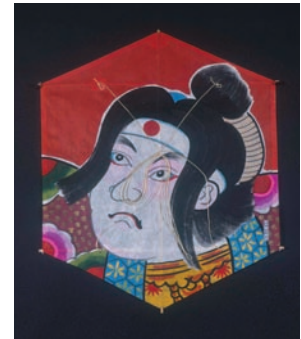
Washi, usually handmade, is prized for a similar combination. Long fibers from the mulberry plant (*kozo*) ensure a paper that is not just strong and flexible but also lightweight, resistant to tearing, and able to be beautifully painted or dyed.

Even though they are made of the same materials, Japanese kites come in many different shapes, as the map with this essay makes clear. Why did these different shapes develop? Japan is a large country, and long from north to south. It is larger than either Italy or Great Britain, and more



than four-fifths as long as the United States (without Alaska or Hawaii) is wide. In each of the four main islands that make up Japan, temperature, humidity, and winds are affected differently by high pressure in mainland China during the winter and high pressure in the Pacific Ocean during the summer.

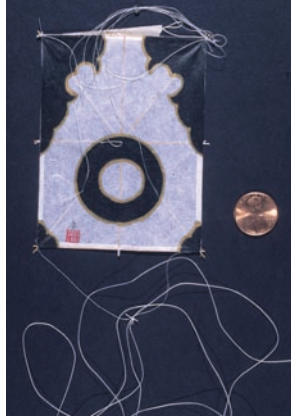
Japan is also very mountainous. The mountains and hills—more than eighty percent of Japan’s terrain—once isolated villages from each other and still create localized climates. Travelers from Edo may have brought home rectangular, rigid kites suitable for the high winds of the capital city, but kite makers in each region adapted this shape to accommodate local conditions. Each village developed a distinctive kite suited to its own seasonal winds and traditions.



Another difference among Japanese kites (that the map cannot make clear) is that they are of many sizes—and the same shape may be made in different sizes, from huge to micro-mini. In fact, Japan has a Huge Kite Museum. The “Huge” in its name boasts of the size of the kites it displays, not the size of the museum itself. These huge kites are called *odako*.

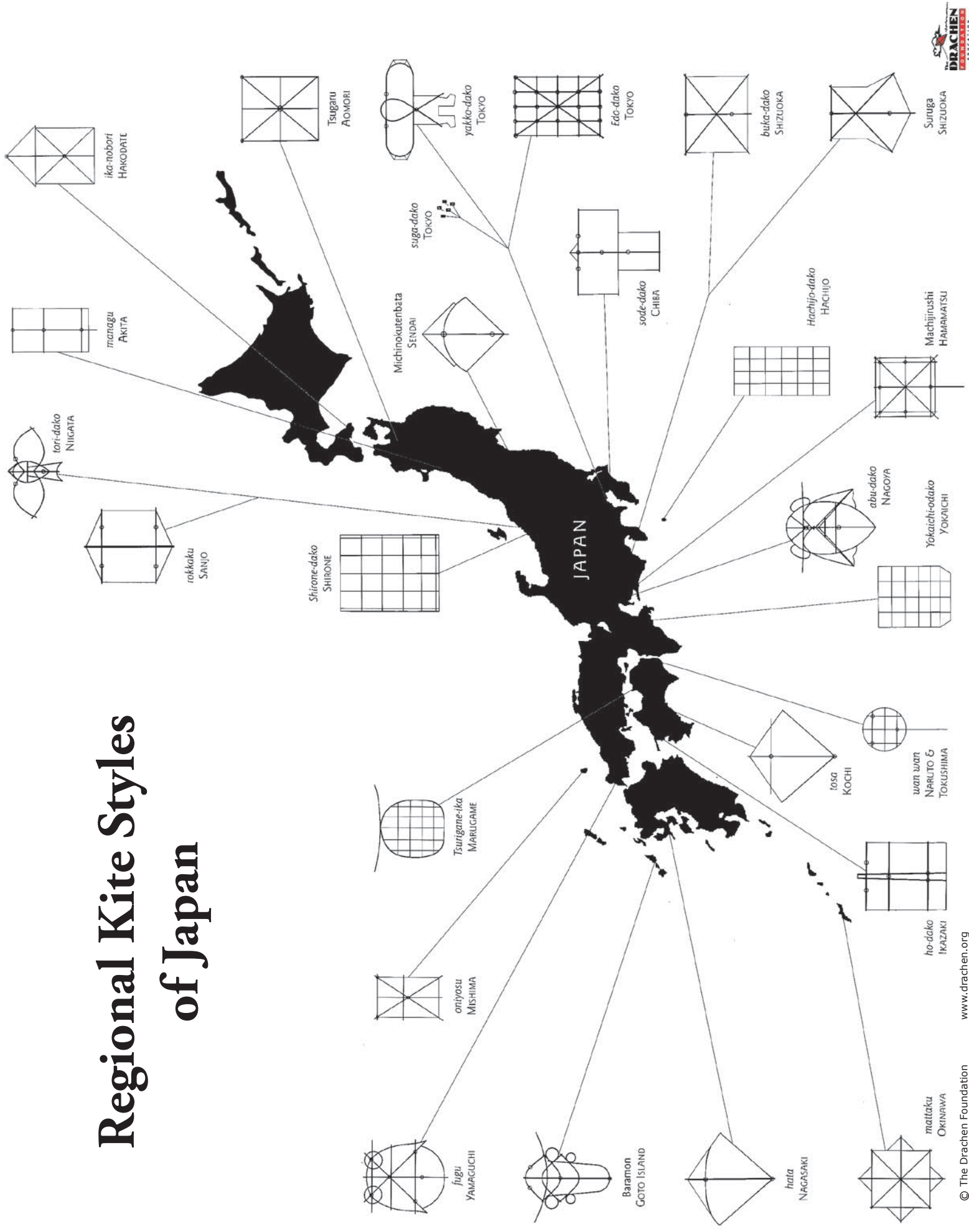


(*Dako* or *tako* sound the same in Japanese, and both mean “kite.” *O-* is an honorific in the Japanese language that applies to very big kites). This kite is a Yokaichi *Odako* flown at the Daimon Kite Festival in 1998. One kite that was flown for 260 years was almost 50 feet high and weighed a little less than a ton. An old *wanwan*-style kite, flown until 1914, was even bigger; it weighed almost 4-1/2 tons.



But Japan is also home to many miniature kite makers. In a densely populated country, where transporting large kites is difficult, miniature kites can be flown almost anywhere. Kite maker Nobuhiko Yoshizumi specializes in making miniature kites. In 2000 he made a kite of about 7 millimeters (just more than 1/4 inch), the world's smallest kite according to Guinness World Records. And later he made an even smaller kite! It was 2 millimeters by 2 millimeters. How small is that?

Regional Kite Styles of Japan



Key Vocabulary for the reading

Kozo: mulberry plant

Odako: the largest Japanese kites (which are huge)

Sail: the material that covers the kite frame

Spar: one of the parts of the kite frame

Terrain: an area of land; a geographic area or region

Wanwan: a style of Japanese kite that is round and very large

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



Huge kite at Daimon Festival

Photo by Scott Skinner



Wanwan

Photo by Scott Skinner