

IAJS 国際日本学会
ニュースレター

The International
Association for
Japan Studies
Newsletter

The 13th Convention of the International Association for Japan Studies

Date: December 2, 2017
Venue: Waseda University

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Japanese So-called Traditional Kites, Museums... and Art

Cecile Laly

CREOPS, Paris-Sorbonne University and International Research Center for Japanese Studies

This short paper intends to raise questions about the preservation of Japanese kite culture and the way in which these objects have been considered since the second half of the 20th century. It summarizes an ongoing research project along with questions and hypothesis that will be verified in the near future.

When people become aware of the risk of the disappearance or loss of cultural objects, in response, they develop a desire to undertake actions toward the preservation of these objects. These actions are often the efforts of individuals who are enthusiastic connoisseurs of the subject. In the case of kites, it has been very much the same. Since the second half of the 20th century, kites rarely tempt the children who do not have the space to fly them in streets surrounded by high buildings in big cities and who are the recipients of mass produced, industrial, and high technology baubles which have replaced traditional handcrafted toys. As a consequence, the number of professional kite makers has drastically decreased over time. In the 1960's, in correlation to the decrease of the number of kite makers, a movement to preserve Japanese kite culture arose thanks to the efforts of the individual enthusiasts and the thriving economy of the country that allowed those people to satisfy their interest. These kite enlightened amateurs followed a typical “inventory, preservation, and dissemination” approach. Indeed, they traveled all around Japan, collecting kites and kite paintings from each region of Japan (and also from other places in Asia, mostly South Asia). For each object they wrote down the name of the kite and of its maker along with dating information; as a result, in the early 1960's, the first private collections of Japanese traditional kites were constituted, at the same time the first books focusing on Japanese kites started to be published by some of these collectors, and these very same people also established in 1969, a national association called the “Japan Kite Association” (*nihon no tako no kai*). As for the first kite museum, a private establishment, it opened in 1977 in Nihonbashi, Tokyo, thanks to Shingo Modegi 茂出木心護 (1911-1978), one of the leaders of the amateur community during the three decades that followed the Second World War. It seems that only then the Japanese government began to support the preservation of the rich and varied culture of Japanese kites, as for example, by opening five

more kites museums between the late 1980's and the early 1990's, benefiting from the help of the aforementioned amateurs who had previously gathered objects and knowledge.

During the 20th Century, kites have been increasingly considered as objects that are not only scientific (i.e. how to fly) or used for entertainment (i.e. toys for kids or amateurs), but also as objects that should be kept in museums as part of the Japanese cultural heritage. In addition to the previously mentioned private kite museum in Tokyo, there are currently four public kite museums in Japan: the Hamamatsu Matsuri Kaikan (Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture) which opened in 1985; the Ikazaki Kite Museum, (Uchiko, Ehime Prefecture) which opened in 1989; the Higashiōmi Giant Kite Museum (Yōkaichi, Shiga Prefecture) which opened in 1991; and the Shirone Kite Museum (Shirone, Niigata Prefecture) which opened in 1994. There was also a fifth public kite museum (the Giant kite Hall, Kasukabe, Saitama Prefecture, which opened in 1990), but the earthquake of the 11th of March 2011 irreparably damaged the structure of the building, so it was forced to close. In addition to these institutions specifically dedicated to kites, there are also kite collections kept in other types of museums; for example, a large collection of kites is part of the collection of the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka; some Magoji kites are kept in the Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History & Human History; since the early 2010's, the Hike Ichirō collection and the Tawara Yūsaku collection are kept at the Museum of Hōsei University; and for few years already, the Kimura Kaoru collection has been held by the Osaka Museum of History.

Now that the locations of the various museums' kites collections in Japan have been identified, several questions emerge. What process was taken to establish these public institutions and the formation of these collections? What strategies are in place to preserve the Japanese kite heritage and to give communication about it to the public? Is the goal of these kite museums really to protect the Japanese kite culture? Indeed, a quick visit to the four places raises calls into questions the main purpose of these public institutions: is it to preserve the Japanese kite culture or, rather, is it to coordinate and centralize the organization of a festival, which creates social ties and potentially generates tourist activities? As a matter of fact, these four public museums offer different kinds of displays: in Higashiōmi and Hamamatsu, the focus is placed on the kites used in the festivals¹ of both cities, while in Ikazaki and Shirone, the museums offer a small part dedicated to the local festival, with the majority of the exhibition dedicated to a presentation that recalls the catalog-like books produced by

1 Higashiōmi Giant kite festival used to be held in late May every year, but since a fatal accident occurred in 2014, it has been suspended. It consisted of a giant kite of 13 meter high per 12 meters wide being flown by several dozen inhabitants of the area. The Hamamatsu Festival is held every year between the 3rd and the 5th of May. Every year, more than 170 *machi* participate. They fly kites to celebrate the newborn babies of the neighborhood.

the amateurs and which illustrate the variety of kite models that can be found across Japan, together with some old woodblocks of kite decoration, and ukiyo-e that feature kites. In the case of the Shirone Kite Museum for example, this is not surprising; the collection was initially put together by three local amateurs Kazuo Tamura 田村和雄 (1929-2017), Hiromi Endō 遠藤裕己 (1941-), and Atsushi Makiguchi 巻口厚志 (1956-); and of those three, the last person mentioned, Makiguchi Atsushi, is also a private collector who owns about 600 kites from all across Japan.

In addition to these four public kite museums, until recently, as mentioned above, there was also a fifth institution. There is no doubt that a study of the case of the Kasukabe Giant kite Hall which closed in 2011 should also provide interesting information about the way the so-called traditional kites are considered in Japan today. In the late 1980's and the early 1990's, when the economy bubble exploded, the government offered to help as well as subsidize the preservation of the Japanese kite culture. But when the Tōhoku earthquake damaged the museum building in 2011, the museum was temporarily closed for security reasons. Then, in 2014, a vote for permanent closure was made. A study of the process that led to the decision of the permanent closure and the faith of the collection, in a period when the Japanese economy is not as vivid as at the time of its opening, should offer an interesting perspective of how the Japanese so-called traditional kites and Japanese kite culture are now considered, and to which extent this consideration is related to the wealth of the Japanese economy.

Moreover, in these public kite museums—whether the focus is put on the local festival or on the variety of the Japanese kites culture—, and in other types of museums, such as ethnographical museums, kites are mainly referred to as handicrafts. During the festival, they are also considered craft objects that are a means to an end (the end being the festival). But when we listen to Japanese amateurs and professional makers, it is clear that the quality of the kite paintings are essential to judging the value of the kites; as important as they are, the balance and beauty of the bones alone are not enough. For that reason, some professional makers who were not skilled enough with a brush ordered *shitae* (model) of kite paintings to be done by painters and artists in order to reach the expected high standards. Furthermore, since the end of the 20th century, in foreign projects involving Japanese kites, the objects are often endowed with an artistic value, which has also blurred the line between art and craft. In 1980, the American sculptor Tal Streeter published a book titled *The Art of the Japanese Kite*. In the early 1990's, the Goethe Institute of Osaka organized a collaborative international project and a traveling exhibition titled *Pictures for the Sky: Art Kites* which brought together international artists to do the kite paintings and Japanese kite makers to build the bamboo structure of the produced pieces. The Haifa museum—The Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art, held two monographic exhibitions on Japanese kites: one in 1996, titled

The Kite Craze. The kites of Toki Mikio; and one in 2017, titled *Battle Kites from Japan Created by artists Endo Hiromi and Kazama Masao*. In 2004, the book *Japanese Kite Prints: Selection from the Skinner Collection* was published by the University of Washington Press. In 2013, May Louise Schlotzhauer, a student of Art History from the University of Oregon wrote a master thesis on *baramon* kites as emblems of Gotō islands. And I, as a Doctor of Art History, was selected in 2013 by the quai Branly Museum in Paris to analyze their Japanese kite collection.

When we look at the making of the above mentioned collections, exhibitions, and projects, the classification of the Japanese traditional kites, sometimes referred to as folklore, sometimes as craft, sometimes as art, is unclear; so it should be interesting to look at the potential phenomenon of the “artification” of these singular objects. The concept of “artification” has been analyzed and described by Roberta Shapiro and Nathalie Heinich in the book *De l'artification: Enquêtes sur le passage à l'art* (Paris: EHESS, 2012), as the transformation of a modest daily practice into an activity instituted as art and defined as a new genre. Although the context investigated in the book is different—Shapiro and Heinich focused on a French corpus—and they mention in their introduction that the precise process they discuss probably cannot be applied to another country, it does offer a methodological approach that should produce interesting results in the case of the Japanese so-called traditional kites. For example, a focus on the vocabulary used to talk about kites and the messages transmitted in the support of the kite culture by the Japanese government, compared with the vocabulary and the actions of the Japanese and the foreign amateur community, should enlighten the different strategies in use. And at a time when cultural budgets are restricted, it should be interesting to identify if the public and private actions are complementary, or on the contrary, if they sometimes stand in the way of each other, in the definition, preservation and transmission of the Japanese kite culture.