
Kite Making

by Lisa Daly

Background:

The Chinese have flown kites for at least 2,500 years. They were probably the first people to make kites, constructing them of wood, then silk and bamboo. After the invention of paper, it became the favored material. The earliest function of kites appears to have been military. Legend has it that Han Xin, a famous general (206-202 B.C.) flew a wooden kite and used the length of the string to determine his distance from the enemy's palace. Once knowing the distance a tunnel was dug and the palace then attacked. Around 549 A.D. a kite flown from a besieged castle signaled for reinforcements. Another flying device called 'the sacred fire crow' could carry explosives to attack an enemy.

Later, the kite came to be used more for pure enjoyment. Li Ye made a kite in the palace (10th century) and fixed bamboo pipes to the head so they would make a sound in the wind., like the zheng, a stringed instrument. Ever since then, the word for kite in Chinese has been fengzheng. Most kites of that time were made of silk painted with gorgeous designs and carrying ornate accessories. The costliness of the kites suggests that they were playthings exclusively for the royalty and aristocracy.

Around the 11th century, kites became a more popular and common amusement. Then it became a seasonal activity. The main kite flying season occurs from Chinese New Year (usually in January and February) through Qingming (usually in March or April) because of favorable winds. After that, kite flying is halted by the great clouds of yellow dust blown down from the deserts north of Beijing.

In the past, many popular superstitions were related to kite flying. One belief was that if the kite string broke and the kite drifted into someone's house, it was a bad omen and the kite would have to be destroyed to avert misfortune. If the kite fell into the courtyard of a neighboring house, the kite owner could attempt to reclaim it. The neighbor might reluctantly return it after punching two holes in the kite's surface to dispel bad luck.

People in North China also believed that during the Lantern Festival (the fifteenth day of the first month in the Chinese calendar), every household must send the God of Wealth, who descended on New Year's Eve, back to heaven. Therefore, everyone from the poorest peasant to the richest prince went out at midday to fly kites. When night came, kites continued to fly, after people tethered the strings and went inside. At midnight, there would be more excitement as everybody would come out again to tie lanterns to the kite strings and set off firecrackers. After midnight, the God of Wealth was usually assumed to have returned to heaven and the celebrants would go home to sleep leaving the kites still flying. In the morning, the kites would have disappeared, leaving only some string behind. It was believed that the kite took trouble and disaster away with it.

The Chinese are experts at making kites. They make colorful kites in the shapes of dragons, birds, butterflies, and centipedes. Some animal-shaped kites are designed so they can roll their eyes and flutter their wings. Other kites are so big that they require four or five people to operate them.

The basic kite colors are red, yellow and blue. These colors were the main colors of the costumes of the emperor, of most women's clothes and even the embroidered shoes of children in the countryside.

In April there is a Kite Festival and everyone climbs a hill or finds an open area for flying kites and having fun. Join the fun and fly a kite!

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