

Kites – The Chinese Connection

Take any evening in Tiananmen Square or at many of the other open spaces in China, when the heat is rising off the land and you will probably see numerous kites hanging in the air or ascending on the warm currents. If you fly one yourself, chances are that some of the other flyers will come to look at yours, give you advice or suggest some equipment. A pleasant way to while away an evening maybe, but what are the origins of this pastime and would we have reached the moon without it?

China

Origins

Historians think that kites have been around for 2,500 years or more. Most of the earliest records of their use are from the East and in particular from China which was endowed with all the right materials for kite production. Bamboo for frames which need to be light yet strong; silk for the sail that needs to be both light and resilient and then the introduction of paper in the second century AD which will have made kites accessible to all. Traditional kites will have been decorated with emblems for good luck and the earliest designs were often bird shaped and steeped in symbolic significance.

Mythical and Religious Dimensions

What can be more Taoist in nature than experimenting with different ways of designing something to blend with the wind? The pure joy and fascination of interacting with this natural element in a very real way must have been combined with a desire to connect with the heavens. An image springs to my mind of the sage sitting in the mountains flying a kite on the airwaves – with the paradox of him being both the detached observer and a connected participant.

Even today, many cultures see the kite as an emblem of transcendence and its flight is considered to bring the flier closer to the heavens. Still, after many hundreds of years, the *'Festival of Ascending on High'* is celebrated in China by flying kites on the ninth day of the ninth month.

Military and Scientific Uses

Early Chinese records tell of an engineer called Hungshu Phan in the fourth century BC, who is credited with the invention of a wooden 'hawk' that flew for 3 days without descending. (Our word 'kite' is named after the *kite* bird – a graceful hawk).

The kites' earliest recorded military use was by General Han Hsin who was the commander of rebel forces that were attempting to overthrow a tyrannical Emperor. The story says that he flew a kite until it was directly over the Emperor's Palace. By marking the string he was able to calculate how far his forces needed to tunnel to gain access under the Palace. They tunnelled each night until they broke into the courtyard and taking the defenders by surprise they overthrew the Emperor. A new Emperor was appointed and this marked the start of the Western Han Dynasty that would rule the Chinese empire for the next 200 years.

Another enterprising military use was around 200 BC by Huan Theng. His army was surrounded and likely to be annihilated by a much larger force. He came up with the plan of making many kites that were fitted with bamboo sounding devices and then in the dead of night, these were flown over the enemy encampment. Upon hearing this mysterious and unearthly wailing in the skies, the enemy fled in panic believing that they were plagued with evil spirits.

There is another variation of this tale that tells how they constructed one large kite, which was powerful enough to lift Huan Theng. He flew over the enemy camp at night whilst playing on his flute a tune so mournful that it made them homesick. They lost heart for the battle and returned home.

Manned Flight

There are more early Chinese stories of manned flight or attempted flights.

Emperor Wen Hsuan Ti is recorded as taking great pleasure in harnessing prisoners to bamboo mats and then ordering them to 'fly' from a high tower. Should they survive, he offered them their freedom. Whether he did this purely for the perverse satisfaction it gave him or as a sort of scientific experiment into flight, I am not sure.

In 1282 AD the explorer Marco Polo gave an account of how Chinese sailors used kites to lift unwilling and terrified men off the decks of their ships. Depending how successful these flights were would indicate whether the omens showed favourable winds and fortunes for the voyage. The present day wind-sock seems to be a welcome development on this.

Japan and Korea

Thanks to the Gods of Fertility

It seems likely that the kite travelled from China to Japan around 700 AD, probably taken by Buddhist priests as part of religious festivals.

There is a Japanese story of an eminent samurai called Minamoto-no-Emrooreo who was exiled with his son to the island of Hachijo. In a story that is reminiscent of Daedalus and Icarus, they constructed a kite that carried his son to the mainland. Even today, the Hachijo kite traditionally bears an image of the samurai.

In eighteenth century Japan, kites were flown in spring in the hope of ensuring plentiful crops and also in fall as thanksgiving for the recently gathered harvest. Today they are flown at New Year to offer thanks for the successes of the last year and in the hope of a good year to come. Also on the 5th May (the fifth day of the fifth month) they are flown for Children's Day to celebrate the birth of any children during the last year. Originally known as Boy's Festival, this gave thanks for the birth of boy children during the year by flying a windsock in the shape of a fish.

A similar tradition is followed in Korea, where the names and birthdays of male children are attached to a high point on the kite string, to be released to drift freely on the wind and so protecting the child by bearing away any evil spirits and bad influences.

India and Tibet

Fighter Kites and Prayer Flags

Ancient stories from India tell of gods and goddesses taking part in kite flying contests.

'Fighting kites' have been and continue to be particularly popular in India (and to varying extents in Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, Japan and China).

In this sport, part of the string is coated in powdered glass, sharp sand, ground pottery or even knife blades. Each player attempts to bring down an opponents kite by cutting its line whilst it is taut. This requires skilful manoeuvring to cross an opponents line and yet keep ones own line slack when it is under threat.

(Evidently kite fighting became an obsession in France in the eighteenth century, to the extent that the sport was banned in 1736 because of riots and damage to crops).

In India and Indonesia, the kite is considered to bring us closer to the heavens and the gods and its movement is regarded as an expression of the soul of the flyer.

In Tibet prayer flags are used to carry prayers on the wind to all corners of the earth.

Pacific

Fishing Kites

Polynesian folklore tells of a contest between two wind gods called Range and Tane. These brothers duelled in the skies with kites until one was victorious. This battle is still re-enacted in local customs where the highest kite is proclaimed as the winner.

Kites have been used for centuries as an aid to fishing on many of the Pacific Islands. Their construction is of bamboo frame with a leaf sail and they are used to carry the fishing line out beyond the shallow waters. The tail has bait connected, which is dangled into the water ready for the bite. Such a design would not disturb the waters, nor would it cast telltale shadows.

Greece

Daedalus and Icarus – As High as a Kite

A famous story from the Greek tradition is of the great inventor Daedalus, designer of the labyrinth, sculptor and inventor of many tools. His sovereign, King Minos, did not want Daedalus to leave Crete, in case his knowledge and expertise were put to the service of a rival power. Daedalus and his son Icarus were essentially captives, so Daedalus put his mind to formulating an escape plan. He designed huge wings made from many feathers and held together by wax, one pair being attached to Icarus and the other pair to himself. The story recounts that he warned Icarus not to fly too high lest the heat of the sun should melt the wax. All went to plan at first but Icarus got carried away and forgetting the dangers, he soared too close to the sun, his wings disintegrated and he plunged to his death in a section of sea that to this day is still named the Icarian Sea. Often the telling of the story finishes here but fuller versions say that Daedalus did not make the same mistake and that he successfully escaped to a new life in Sicily.

Rome

Dragon Battle Standards

It is known that the Romans adopted hollow windsock banners called Draco (Latin for dragon) and carried these as battle standards. Draco were also used to indicate the wind direction and strength and so gave the Roman archers a clear advantage over the enemy forces.

Europe

Journey to the West

Historians think that kites entered Europe via the silk trade routes from the Orient.

For a long time they were seen mainly as a children's toy, but many scientists began to see possibilities in their potential for scientific advancement.

Building Bridges and Reaching New Heights

In the fifteenth century, Leonardo da Vinci drew many designs for flying machines and invented a prototype of the parachute. He also developed a method for spanning a gorge or a river with the assistance of a kite. This method was later used when in 1847, a competition among New York children attempted to establish the first connection over the Niagara River Gorge. One boy spanned the gorge with his kite; a series of heavier lines and cables followed which eventually led to the construction of the first railway suspension bridge linking America with Canada.

Another early kite experiment was conducted in 1749 by a Scotsman named Alexander Wilson who linked a chain of six kites with thermometers attached to each one and so was able to measure temperature at various heights up to 3,000ft.

Three years later in America, Benjamin Franklin set out to prove that lightning was the same as generated electricity. In a famous experiment, he risked being fried alive by hoisting a kite during a thunderstorm.

In the 1800's, the British meteorologist E.D. Archibald used kites to measure wind speeds at various altitudes and he was also the first to use them for aerial photography.

When Guglielmo Marconi first sent a radio signal across the Atlantic Ocean in 1901, he employed a kite to elevate the antenna at the receiving station in Newfoundland.

Journey into the Skies

In 1804, Sir George Cayley built a model glider that incorporated a kite as its main wing. His design was successful in carrying his (willing?) coachman across a valley at his estate near Scarborough.

In 1826, a Bristol schoolteacher named George Pocock patented a kite to pull a lightweight carriage – the '*Char-Volant*' or flying chariot. Because English law did not recognise such a vehicle, he was able to travel the highways without paying road tax.

Samuel Franklin Cody was a friend and contemporary of Buffalo Bill and both pioneered successful Wild West Shows. Captain Cody, as he was billed, introduced kite flying into his shows and after settling in England he was involved in a kite powered crossing of the English Channel. He met his death in 1913, when one of his creations broke up in flight.

Journey to the Heavens

The Wright Brothers constructed kites, gliders and biplanes, leading to the development of the aeroplane and the first powered flight in December 1903.

This is still only a hundred years ago, yet since then we have reached the moon and sent probes into further expanses of space.

This may seem a long way from the Taoist sage sitting on a hilltop and flying a kite and yet the kite can truly be said to be the forerunner of the aeroplane and also space travel. Not bad for a mere toy!

Today's kite designs benefit from all the pioneers of the past; making it easier now than ever before, for us to experience the pure fascination and exhilaration of the art of kite flying that has attracted so many people over many centuries.

Go fly a kite!

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