

An Expanding Asian Kite Scene

Editor's note: On a recent visit to Southeast Asia, the author of the following articles took in kite doings in Cambodia and the Philippines. There is more flying there than might have been expected. Herewith are reports from that trip.

Bringing Kites Back to Life in Cambodia

By Ben Ruhe

The Khmer Rouge holocaust of the late 1970s not only wiped out an estimated third of Cambodia's population, but because it was aimed at the intelligencia—anyone wearing glasses, for example—it obliterated much of the country's culture. All but a handful of the royal dance company, which had performed worldwide, perished.

Just as these few survivors have reestablished classic dance in Cambodia, others in the country have worked to bring back other folk arts. Among them is Sim Sarak, director general of administration and finance in the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Sim (his surname or last name) has focused, among other areas, on restoring kitemaking and kiteflying to Cambodia. The tradition goes back more than 2,000 years.

Starting in 1994, he has organized kite festivals, written a book about kites and taken the beautiful *kleng ek* (or musical) Cambodian kite on the road to international kite celebrations

in Dieppe, France, and Cervia, Italy, as well as Asian festivals in Hong Kong, Indonesia and elsewhere. His ministry is now refurbishing a large new exhibition hall of folk crafts in the capital, Phnom Penh. The very first craft honored was kites. Large *kleng ek* and other style kites grace the walls and hang from the ceiling in a stunning installation—tribute to a Cambodian cultural tradition Sarak and disciples refused to let die.

With his vivacious, stylish wife Tcheang Yarin, mother of his three children, helping his English along, Sim recalls he became interested in kites as a boy in his village in Kompong Chan Province, 70 miles northeast of Phnom Penh. "There was no radio, no TV then," he says. "Kites were fun. It was our recreation. We had competitions and I particularly liked to fly kites with hummers attached. Since the northeast monsoon wind from November through March blew right through the night, one could put kites up and fly them for days at a time. When there were a dozen or more up at one



Krong Ngoun Ly prepares to launch his traditional musical kite in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Note the long hummer at the top of the kite which creates the music as flowing air vibrates a thin, stretched membrane.

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sound, but was the most fragile. Rattan was the toughest.”

“I was born in 1950, so now I’m 52,” says Sim. Eldest of three children of a carpenter, he was already grown when the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975 and proceeded to decimate the population in a bloody, inexplicable agrarian reform movement that lasted four years. “I was a teacher of literature from 1970 to 1975, then I was able to hide my background during the holocaust. I lost my mother in 1977 but otherwise the family survived.”

After the Khmer Rouge was ousted, Sim found a job with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in 1980 and has been there ever since, rising through the ranks to his current position of eminence. Promoted last year from director to director general by King Norodom Sihanouk himself, Sim now has a staff of 70 and oversees the national library among many other responsibilities. He is currently drafting a copyright law for his country and has important financial responsibilities in addition to his cultural ones.

Tcheang Yarin, his wife, several times makes the point: “Sim Sarak is recognized as the person who brought back the ancient tradition of kitemaking and kiteflying in Cambodia.” She and a lots of others think it’s a wonderful achievement.

Sim, Tcheang and entourage from the ministry make a visitor very welcome with dinners and expeditions. Two of these visits are to skilled kitemakers, one in the city and one in the country.

The Phnom Penh craftsman is Krong Ngoun Ly, 45, an auto mechanic, who in his spare time creates the classic



Striking decorations on various types of Cambodian kites on display in a new folk art museum in Phnom Penh.

Cambodian musical kite. Using a temporarily unoccupied slatted bed as his workbench. Krong mixes a classic material, bamboo, for the frame with a modern one, Tyvek wrapping paper from Japanese imports, for the sail. Because the musical kite is traditionally large (up to 15 feet high and 12 feet wide), fragile, and made in one piece, it is hardly ideal for collecting. Krong is one of the few Cambodian kitemakers Sim has been able to convince to scale down his kites so he, Sim, can take them to festivals to fly and display and so buyers can cope with transporting them.

Krong shows off his kites and kitemaking tools—axe, big knives for cutting and splitting bamboo, awl, plane—then leads his visitors to a nearby field. The kite he brings is far too big to fit in a van. No problem. Krong takes a back seat on a motorcycle, holds the kite high, and the ‘cycle roars away. It is an unforgettable visual image.

Out in the field with officials and dozens of boys watching, Krong launches the kite and it zooms up until it squats in the sky. Although a flat kite, it is as stable as a delta with a keel. Everyone smiles. Point about flyability proved.

The Sarak caravan on another day visits Pol Stem, 43, who lives with his wife and seven children in a woven mat house

stare open-mouthed at the author of this article. Pol shows off his big kites and is particularly proud of their hummers. Taking a hummer outside, he explains he can get four tones—sometimes five—from it, and whirls it around his body to demonstrate. As he changes speeds and angles, the tones change. The whirring sounds are arresting, a bit eerie.

Pol has been making kites since he learned how from his father and he uses a kite pattern handed down through the generations. He says it takes him a week of labor to make one kite, which he sells for \$25—that's less than \$1 an hour for his labor. Pol uses bamboo for the frame but unlike his city brother uses brown book cover paper for the sail. Kitemaking is only a part-time job for him. His main work is climbing 100-foot palm trees to harvest the sap from which he makes sugar and palm wine. It is a highly dangerous job and Pol does not intend to teach it to any of his sons, although he is teaching them about kites. The kite tradition will continue. Sim is pleased.

As the author of this article prepares to leave Phnom Penh to return to his base in Thailand, a Sim deputy delivers an eight-by-eight-foot cardboard box into which are packed kites, tools and other kite gear destined for the Drachen Foundation. Because the box is so large, it fails to fit into the hotel van. It is suggested the box go on top. "Police fine us for this," says a hotel staffer, refusing to help. "I'll pay the fine," says the visitor. Off the van goes, with boys leaning out windows on either side to hold down the box.

Needless to say the driver goes as fast as possible in an attempt to see if the box atop the truck will actually take off and fly as he hopes. Luckily the traffic is heavy and he is thwarted in his endeavor. The container quivers, lifts slightly, but never does quite fly. We see plenty of police but they never give us a second look.

At the airport, the box is too large to go through the electronic scanner. Because it would be a lot of work to open the container, the idle security staff, after reading a letter from



Sim Sarak (center) and wife Tcheang Yarin pose with expert kitemaker Krong Ngoun Ly (second from right) in front of Krong's kites. Cambodian government cultural officials are at either side.

Sim about the kites written on fancy government stationery and after hemming and hawing, decide to forgo a visual inspection and to okay the shipment. The container goes unexamined into a 777 bound for Thailand. So much for aerial safety out of third world Cambodia.

At Bangkok airport, the container causes multiple problems involving transport within the building, storage between flights, and the fact it is way oversize as passenger luggage. At departure, it is at last opened and inspected by security, all of whom quickly fade away after granting clearance, leaving the job of re-closing the box to the author and a sweating porter.

There is more of the same in Seattle, settled only when the chief of customs himself arrives and pronounces the cargo drug-free and safe to enter the United States. Luckily it is dawn and the resident U.S. Department of Agriculture official has apparently slept in. What in the world would he have thought of all that untreated bamboo?



Bamboo cutting tools used by Krong Ngoun Ly.