

What's Doing in the Philippines

Orlando T.D. Ongkingco of Manila is “Mr. Kites” in the Philippines. Organizer and leader of the Kite Association of the Philippines, “Orly,” age 45, energetically promotes the sport, has written a book about kites, spreads the word internationally by attending kite festivals.

To deal with the name immediately. Ongkingco—a conglomerate of last, first, middle names—was the full name of a distant relative so revered his family adopted the whole name instead of using only the Chinese surname “Ong.” It’s a big clan. There are several dozen Ongkingcos listed in the Manila phone book. Like lots of other Filipinos, Orly has a mainly Chinese bloodline. Certainly he has the smarts associated with the Chinese.

Born in the extreme south in Davao, Mindanao, Orly has been fascinated by kites since childhood. He recalls as a child flying a kite with his grandfather and thinking: “This is fun. I’m happy. I’m looking up toward heaven.” Orly says he made kites off and on through boyhood but only accidentally succeeded in getting them to fly well, because he did not grasp the aerodynamics. When he finally achieved knowledge and success, he was “exhilarated.”

Marrying young, Orly saw a potential career in medicine sidelined into work in pharmaceuticals, which job he dropped in the late 1980s. Ever since he has free lanced. Being a mountain climber in particular and outdoorsman in general, he made a living manufacturing camping equipment such as stoves, sleeping bags, tents. Now kites are a primary focus.

Orly and his well bred, elegant wife Yolanda have three children as well as three grandchildren, all of whom live with them. They reside in a elderly mansion with courtyard, high walls and dogs. Security is a big issue in Manila. Guarded by security men, banks have a sign at locked entrance doors saying: “No Guns Allowed.”

Manila airport being disorganized, Orly knows he will be unable to meet a visitor with his van, so he has no less than three Tourism Authority employes greet the guest at the exit gate and escort him to the curb where a cell phone call produces Orly and vehicle. This is cited as the way he operates: With intelligence, energy, connections.

Orlando puts his visitor up at a hotel near his home and

every day comes by to take him on kite trips. Most are in pursuit of kitemakers he knows or has heard of, but two are to high-ranked government officials Orly is frankly wooing for kite funds. Having an American visiting him to study Philippine kites is seen by Ongkingco as a way to impress bureaucrats. One of them, Engineer Dion Diaz, who oversees the indigenous games association of the Philippines, is enthusiastic. He recalls flying fern leaf kites when he was 4 years old. “We flew in the summer when the leaves were dry. They had a natural dihedral and all they needed was a bridle of banana fiber and tail of coconut leaves without the midrift. And they flew well.”

Because Manila sprawls, tends toward gridlock traffic and has smog comparable to Bangkok, expeditions to visit



Orlando Ongkingco is the founding president of the Kite Association of the Philippines and has single-handedly devoted himself to restoring and promoting the rich, varied Philippine kite culture.

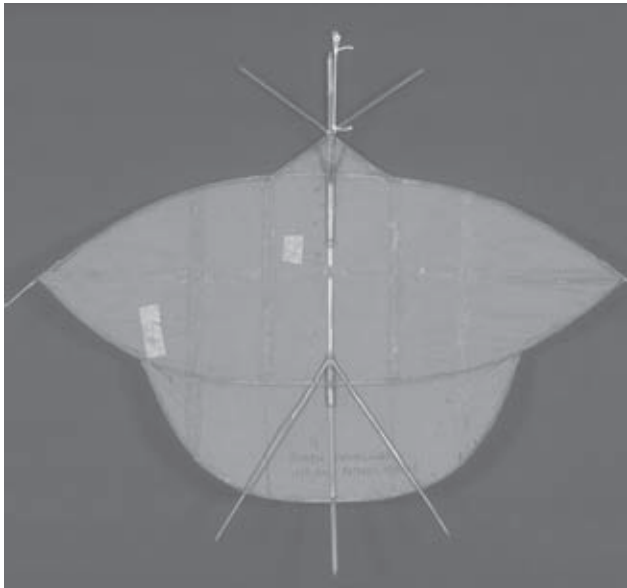
kitemakers can be long and exhausting. One renowned kitemaker whose house is tracked down only after extensive effort has departed the city just three days before, because of ill health. Mixing Tagalog with English, Orly interviews wife and son and gets the man’s phone number for future use. He intends to have him recreate, or at least draw a careful plan of, his famous 20-foot Samson kite which did yearly battle with another giant kite from a village across a narrow river. Formerly rice paddies, the area is now nothing but small houses and shacks overtopped by a maze of power lines. The kite tradition has died. There is simply no place to fly now.

Another master kitemaker tracked down has, as it turns out, died. His family has discarded whatever kites he left behind, as well as his kitemaking tools.

There is a notable success with a visit to Ruben Pangilinan who Orly knows well. Pangilinan has completed a praying mantis kite Orly ordered for the Drachen Foundation and it is a beauty. He estimates the bright green, three-dimensional kite with realistic face and waving legs took him almost two weeks to make. The charge is a low \$100—still probably high for the Philippines where the peso is going 50 to one U.S. dollar because of continuing political upheaval over rampant corruption, a weak economy and annoyances like a left-wing insurgency in the north and a Moslem rebellion in the south. Pangilinan produces other beautiful kites, including an elliptical-winged *gurion*, which is the Filipino cousin of the Malaysian *wau* and Indian *tukkal*. How the



Master craftsman Ruben Pangilinan of Manila shows off his praying mantis kite. It took him two weeks to construct.



Unlike kite fighting in some Asian countries where razor-sharp kite lines are used to slice opponents out of the sky, Philippine fighters use a more direct approach. The kites are constructed with jutting pointed spars at tops, sides and bottom and the kites attack each other in mid-air, slashing until the opponent is unable to continue flying and tumbles to earth as a victim.

signature *gurion* evolved in the Philippines is a puzzle Ongkingco is attempting to sort out for the next edition of his excellent book on kites of the Philippines. It is apparently the first one ever written on the subject.

Pangilinan then shows something special—a small fighter kite that instead having cutting line to cut opponents out of the sky as in India uses projecting barbs to directly attack another kite in the sky, literally ripping it apart. It’s an evil object. A mechanic by trade, Pangilinan shows the tools he uses to make his kites. One is a knife from a tough hacksaw blade, complete with carved wooden sheath, and another a small hammer with oddly curved wooden handle, very comfortable to the hand. Both were handmade by Pangilinan.

Orly Ongkingco tends to himself seek out and recruit key kite association members. And a selection of these highly distinguished, friendly members takes it in turn to throw dinner for Orly and his foreign guest. One of these is Anselmo Pripon, a dentist. When the talk turns to the Smithsonian’s United States Air and Space Museum facility under construction at Dulles Airport outside Washington, D.C., the visitor finds himself telling about the now buried building near the airport which had housed two sets of ebola-

Asian Kite Scene

“Oh, I know all about that.” Guest is amazed. “The guy who exported the monkeys to the U.S. is my patient,” Pripon says.

Another night the host is a mild-mannered banker, Jerry Leonardo, who used to make loans for his institution. Now he has become the bank’s chief collections officer—for loans he himself made. He notes with ironic smile this why he needs to alleviate stress by going out and flying his comforting *rokkaku*.

On another night the host is Robert Mamonluk, the noodles king of Manila and fluent speaker of several languages. Of indeterminate age in the Chinese tradition, Mamonluk has a daughter who is a physician in New York City and another who does manufacturing in China. He travels the world and counts Robert Loera of Honolulu kite fame as a pal, as he does collector Masaaki Modegi of Tokyo. Mamonluk makes it a point to introduce his guest to Philippine ways, including the eating of *balut*—a chick embryo cooked in the egg, feathers and all—and No. 5 soup, a kind of oxtail soup concoction that is revealed, after the eating and amid laughter, to include meat from “those parts in front of the tail.”

A star member of the menage is Ernesto “Buddy” Lopa Jr., 34, a well known TV newscaster who is also a radio-controlled helicopter, parachuting, bungee jumping, magic, and pistol shooting freak, to mention a few of his passions. Buddy is the perfect media type—friendly, bright, attractive, funny, non-stop talker. Orly says he comes from a politically powerful family and may be the only male in his whole clan who works for a living. “He must have something to prove,” says Ongkingco.

Orly’s right hand man is Jimmy Menina, a restaurant supplier. Menina tells about a client nightclub dominated by corrupt police. When a second group of policemen attempted a raid, there was a wild shootout. “The club was pocked with bullet holes, cars outside were riddled, there was blood everywhere,” says Jimmy. “But within minutes there was not a soul anywhere in the area, wounded and dead having been carted off. The investigation that followed predictably came to nothing.” Jimmy tells the story deadpan.

After a few days, the Orly gang moves en masse to Clark Air Base about two hours away from Manila. Clark had been the largest U.S. military installation outside America until nearby Mount Pinutubo erupted in 1991 and covered the field with several feet of volcanic ash. Pressured by Philippine nationalists claiming colonialism and without further need of such an immense facility, the U.S. responded by closing the base. Handy excuse, Pinutubo.

Now run by the Philippines as an economic zone, Clark limps along. Once green lawns are brown, bathrooms teem

with insects. Orly’s group takes over several grandiose houses which formerly housed U.S. Air Force generals. The occasion for the four-day visit is an international air show featuring balloons, jet fighters, helicopters, private planes in wide variety including ultralights, parachuting, hang gliding and just about everything else in the aerial line one can think of. The Philippine military is very much in evidence. Radio-controlled aircraft and kites are at the bottom of the heap, although high in popularity. As anyone who has gone to an air show knows, the moments of action tend to be few and far between, so something to fill in the chinks is welcome.

Orly’s workaholic wife Yolanda—“Yolly”—manufactures kites as a sideline to her other activities and she takes the occasion of the air show to set up a booth which does a land office business in small, inexpensive nylon and taffeta kites of the sled, Conyne, delta varieties. At various times there are 500 kites flying in the sky at one time. It is a beautiful sight. Orly Ongkingco makes it a point to note he keeps his nonprofit research and educational Kite Association of the Philippines quite separate from his wife’s endeavor.

Unlike kite flying elsewhere and just as predicted, the four days at Clark produce uniformly perfect hot, sunny weather. The *amihan* or northeast monsoon winds blows unfailingly day and night.

Kite competitions on various days bring out experts from the region and many of the kites flown are elaborate and beautiful, some with a religious theme. There are modern notes: multi-line stunters, buggies, even a Martin Lester Legs. One of the fliers is Jing Torno, who says he is apparently the only person to have climbed steep Mount Pinutubo and flown a kite from its rim. Since Jing was alone, the perilous feat was unfortunately not documented. When hit by a gust, his foil once almost jerked him into the crater. But a greater danger, Jing guessed, was the crater edge collapsing under him. Anyway, he survived. Maybe unique to this air show, men and women just out of the Stone Age turn out in abundance. They are negritos, short, black, frizzy-haired, affable, from the nearby mountains and are there to peddle crude souvenir weapons they have crafted such as blowguns, spears and bows and arrows. There were few takers.

Orly takes the occasion of the festival to take his visitor to visit kitemakers in the area, such as Ceferino Gueco, who worked 25 years at Clark. Gueco supplements his small U.S. government pension by making realistic, steady flying bird kites. Another kitemaker is Eulogio Catahan of nearby Angeles City, who is such an important find he is immediately --and perhaps presumptuously--bestowed living national treasure status by this writer. As befits his

Continued on Page

Discovered: A Living National Treasure



The elfin Eulogio Catahan, aged 74.



Catahan shows off the Christ Is Risen kite he flies on All Souls Day to honor the memory of his first wife Martha, buried in the tomb behind him he himself carved. The head, hands and feet of the kite are fashioned of papier mache. The three-dimensional kite has wings as well, not shown.

Think of a living national treasure kitemaker and one thinks of Japan, Right? But these wonderful people can be found elsewhere around the globe, sometimes in surprising places.

One clear candidate for the honorary title is Eulogio Catahan, 74, of Angeles City, the Philippines. Angeles City adjoins Clark Air Base, formerly the largest U.S. military installation outside the country, but now operated by the Philippines.

A stonecutter and carpenter by trade, Catahan served for years as the caretaker of the cemetery right across the street from his little streetside shop and house. Monuments in the cemetery are grandiose compared to the modest habitations nearby.

Carved by Eulogio himself, a devout Catholic, a huge gravestone honors his first wife, Martha. It is surmounted by the word “Catahan” and below that is an oversize figure of Jesus Christ and the dates of his wife’s birth and death, Oct. 13, 1926-March 17, 1983. Flanking are marble decorations and burial boxes for other members of the family.

Kites enter the picture when Catahan and his second wife produce and assemble a 14-foot Christ figure kite he constructed in honor of Martha and which he flies November 1 on All Souls’ Day. “I believe in the Mysteries,” says Catahan. “Flying a kite is an expression of this honor we pay to the deceased. It’s a form of communication with them. Everyone rises from the dead. There is hope for the future.”

The Christ kite has painted, attachable papier mache head, hands and feet. The body is a three-dimensional bamboo framework covered with white cloth. Large wings are attached at the back so the figure can fly.

A walk into the series of small rooms and garage that constitute the outer area of the Catahan property reveal kites and parts of kites everywhere, some quite aged. They lean on shelves, reside in corners, hang from nails. Many of the kites are extremely elaborate and many have a religious theme, although there are a few commercial bird and bat kites among them which Catahan sells or gives away to children. Most of the big kites are completely original—Catahan had a concept and created the kite. No international kite magazines for him. His work is authentic folk art, original, arresting. The craftsmanship is superb.

Although the father of nine sons, Catahan has not had a single one of them take an interest in kitemaking or

Asian Kite Scene



Hands of a stonecarver, carpenter and kitemaker.

daughters, he says, some have helped him decorate kites but their interest does not extend to design or construction.

Still Catahan has his acolytes, young men from the area who come to his shop and receive instruction in kitemaking. One of these students, Jing Torno, leader of an area kiteflying gang, says Catahan has been generous in sharing his knowledge of how to shape and bend bamboo and other important kite building techniques with the group. Beyond technique, though, their interest in kites runs to two-line stunters and other modern day manifestations of the sport. Catahan's expressionist, religiously oriented kites are no inspiration to them at all, he says. The group holds its meetings with Catahan right in the cemetery, where there is lots of room, and then afterward members fly their kites there, over the tombstones. No power lines to snag kites on,

Jing points out, smilingly.

Small and elfin looking with the roughened but delicate hands of a sculptor, Catahan has been making kites since he was a boy. He makes them only as the spirit moves him. Over the years, his work has caught the attention of many and in addition to admirers locally and in nearby Manila his work has been collected internationally. But most of his masterpieces simply hang on pegs in his garage and slowly deteriorate. He's sanguine. He built them because he wanted to do so, their fate is now out of his hands.

Vegetarian and nondrinker but admittedly a cigarette smoker, Catahan speaks Tagalog and some English, but is not given to conversation about his art. A discussion by visitors as to whether his kites are important creations and should be purchased and conserved for future generations leaves him bemused. He is just as gracious in greeting visitors, showing off his kites on a moment's notice and posing for photographs with them as he is in saying farewell to his guests.

Admittedly not beautiful like, say, a sleek, gorgeous Nagasaki fighter, Catahan's kites pose a difficult issue in kite collecting. As unique works of folk art, probably never to be repeated again and right now doomed to rot away in the tropic climate of the Philippines, should the world kite community attempt to preserve them, and if so how should this effort be mounted? If no one in the Philippines—public institution or private collector—seems to have funds or sufficient interest, who then? The issue is unresolved.

—Ben

Ruhe



Masterpiece kites by Catahan hang from pegs in his garage.