

# Letter From Switzerland

## ‘Allowing Kite Prints to Speak’

*Editor's note: Following is a letter from a banker in Castelrotto, Switzerland, who makes and collects kites, related memorabilia, and in particular Japanese kite prints.*

*By Iqbal Hussain*

It was with the awe and wonder of a small child receiving candy that I opened my copy of the recently published book *Japanese Kite Prints: Selections From the Skinner Collection* by John Stevenson. The book was in a way a culmination of not only Scott Skinner's dream, but also mine. I will explain.

I had a passion for kites at a very early age. As a child growing up in Pakistan, I learnt to fly Indian fighter kites as a sort of birthright, and still remember my father who would fly them with friends and family from the rooftops of our house, often betting sums of money on his kite cutting skills against that of his opponents. I loved to fly kites and was out flying them whenever I could, both with friends and foes, so to speak. In 1964, at the tender age of 10, I and my family moved to England and I flew kites only a very few times after that.



*Iqbal Hussain*

What set off my passion for kites again was my stay as a teacher at the Sacred Heart International School in the heart of Tokyo, starting in 1982. For three years I taught Japanese and Chinese history. By chance I met Takeshi Nishibayashi whilst visiting a local park. He was flying a train of bird kites. I was hooked----how could the kites fly in and out like that, just like real birds? I gathered up my courage and walked over to him to take a closer look and to ask for information.

Since that first encounter, I remained friends with Nishi until his death. I went to his house almost every weekend to learn about kites and became an expert at making light wind kites with plastic nylon and fiberglass. In turn, I introduced Nishi (as he was called by the kite fraternity) to the world of Indian fighter kites. He made hundreds of them out of plastic and fiberglass and gave them as gifts during his visits to Korea and China. Nishi also introduced me to a whole new world of kites----makers, festivals, and, of course, the museum on the fifth floor of the Taimeiken restaurant in Nihonbashi, run by the Modegi family. He once took me to a meeting of the Japanese Kite Association, and it was through him that I met another of my kite teachers, Eiji Ohashi. Nishi would invite me to fly kites with him and Ohashi on the banks of the Edo river.

During this period I came across the world of Japanese woodblock prints with kite images. I had already become interested in Japanese prints and was collecting them. Coming across one with a kite, the first part of a triptych *Pictures of Edo Flowers and Scenic Spots* (on page 152 of Scott's book), I was enthralled by its beauty and magic. I started collecting prints whenever I found them, flipping through hundreds and hundreds in galleries, hoping to come across one with a kite image.

Once a well-known gallery near the school where I taught held an exhibition of Japanese woodblock prints. I went to the exhibition and my heart leapt as there displayed was one with a kite. But unfortunately, the asking price was exorbitant and beyond my means. I asked if the gallery could give me a discount and was told the prints were

owned by an elderly gentleman who was a specialist in the field. When I was told he'd be on hand and I could ask him in person, I eagerly returned at the appropriate time. I asked the gentleman, clearly past 80, for a discount, but he shook his head and said the print was very special. I returned to the gallery nearly every day in between lessons to admire the prints, especially the one with the kite.

Finally, on the last day the old man said he would give me the print at half price. My heart leapt for joy. After paying him he turned over the print safely wrapped as well as a small envelope that he said was for me. I opened it and found a small woodblock print of a boy flying a kite. He explained in his limited English that he had carved it himself for me as a special gift. I was very moved and have always treasured his kindness.

After Tokyo, I moved with my wife to Switzerland and continued to make kites and to collect kite prints. I also began collecting kites, especially Japanese and Chinese ones, as well as kite-related materials, so as to organize local exhibitions to promote kite culture. But Japanese kite prints remain my main passion. It was only last year that I managed to complete the triptych *Pictures of Edo Flowers and Scenic Spots*. I read all the books on the subject I can lay my hands on and I often study my collection so as to understand the prints better, but I was and still am a novice.

Several years ago I was invited to a festival celebrating the opening a kite museum in Demold, Germany. At the hotel bar I found Scott Skinner, who I had met at the Cervia, Italy, kite festival. Scott noticed I had in hand the Roger Keyes book *The Male Journey in Japanese Prints* and we started talking about kite prints and I urged Scott to publish his collection. I remember that the name John Stevenson came up as a possible expert to write the text. Little did I realize that both our wishes would come true in the not too distant future.

I would like to thank the Drachen Foundation and Scott Skinner for all their efforts to promote kites as a bridge across different cultures that enrich this world. The Skinner volume is a pioneering work which not only sheds light on a fascinating but relatively neglected area of Japanese kite culture, but also a specific and important contribution to the world of Japanese woodblock prints. Author John Stevenson's profound scholarship has brought to life the symbols and underlying aspects behind the illustrated prints in a beautifully written manner. For me, the book has finally given voice to my silent passion and allowed the prints to speak to me.

## What the Reviewers Had to Say About Skinner Kite Print Book

*Editor's note: Following are comments by critics on the 234-page volume Japanese Kite Prints: Selections From the Skinner Collection by John Stevenson. Scott Skinner is the president of the Drachen Foundation.*

"Offers up a delightful feast of Japanese wit, art, and culture----all presented in an art form that, until now, has been largely overlooked." (Art Times)

"These prints were known as *ukiyo-e*, which means 'pictures of the floating world,' a pun on a Buddhist concept of the fleeting world of desires that is, coincidentally but poetically, appropriate for a study of kites borne on the wind." (Cultural News)

"Provides a background of Japan's history in the Edo and Meiji periods and describes the history of the use of kites there." (Reference and Research Book News)

"Color plates of superb quality." (Booknews)