



The Kite Mistaken for a Shooting Star:

Why Kites are Important in Korea

General Gim Yu-sin was worried. Rebels were leading an army against the new ruler, Queen Jindeok. She had just inherited the throne in 647 ce. The general's royal army had fought the rebels for ten days. Neither side could defeat the other. The general's soldiers were nervous and unhappy because they had seen a falling star near the royal castle. It was a bad omen, promising defeat for the soldiers and disaster for the queen's subjects. What could the general do to restore their hopes?



The clever general hit upon a plan. He used a kite to lift a flaming doll high into the sky. The soldiers and subjects saw what they thought was a star shooting back into the sky. What could its flight mean but that their good luck had returned? The troops rallied and defeated the rebels. The new queen held on to her throne.



General Gim Yu-sin's kite is the first to be mentioned in the historical records of Korea, one of the oldest countries in the world. But it was by no means the last kite to be called upon in warfare. Hundreds of years later, General Choe Yong is said to have relied upon a kite to help subdue some rioting farmers. He sailed to the site of their rebellion and used a kite to carry flame (or, in some versions of the story, a man) over the high walls of the farmers' stronghold. He also, reportedly, used kites for target practice. In the 1590s, when Japan attacked Korea in the "Samurai Invasion," the great Admiral Yi Sun-sin, of "turtle boat" (Kobukson) fame, used kites coded with different designs and colors to send signals to his naval troops. His novel strategy was effective, and his sailors were victorious.

But kites would not be so important in Korea if they were only tools of war. Koreans recognize their signature kite, the Bang-pae yeon or shield kite, as a distinctive cultural artifact. It is rectangular in shape, like a shield, and also is believed to shield the flier against bad luck. Ninety-nine out of a hundred kites in Korea come in this shape, with a round hole cut in the middle of the sail. They are made of paper from the mulberry plant, with five carefully tapered bamboo spars. Four of the five spars—one vertical, two diagonal,



and one horizontal—intersect at the hole. The bow line is tied to the fifth spar, across the top of the sail, and is tensioned to give the kite its convex face.



Although most Korean kites have the same shape, they come in different sizes, and use different colors and imagery in the decoration of the sail. The “head” (top), the “waist” (middle), and the “skirt” (bottom) of the kite can be differentiated from each other. Many, like Admiral Yi’s signal kites, feature bright colors, usually red, blue, yellow, white, and black, and simple shapes, such as circles, half-moons, or stars. Other kites have strips of color placed diagonally or horizontally, like a “belt” around the “waist.” Others are decorated with images—bats, butterflies, a turtle ship.

A kite maker, Mr. Roe Yu-sang, has even been included among the country’s “Intangible Cultural Properties,” an honor accorded him by the city of Seoul. During his boyhood in what is now North Korea, seasonal kite flying entertained everyone in the village. A day-long kite tournament would conclude with singing and dancing. As an adult Mr. Roe visited school children throughout Korea to teach kite making and flying. They gave him the nickname Mr. Kite, or Grandfather Kite. Mr. Roe was also the chairman of the Korean Folk Kite Preservation Association, and in 1956 organized the first “National Kite Competition.” Syngman Rhee, president of Korea at the time, himself participated and thus promoted the popularity of flying kites.



Kites also play an important role in cultural observances at the lunar New Year. The New Year period runs from New Year’s Day (Sol-nal) up through the first full moon, fifteen days later (Jeong-wal Dae-bo-rum). During this time Koreans traditionally prepared for the hard work of the upcoming farming season. On Dae-bo-rum they would eat five-grain rice (Ogok-bap) with seasoned vegetables to promote good health. They would crack and eat hard-shelled nuts to strengthen the teeth—another sign of health—and drink a special wine to clear out the ear tubes and improve hearing.



And Koreans would fly special kites, Aekmakyi Yeon. On their kites they inscribed four Chinese characters—song-aek-young-bok—to drive away bad luck and welcome good fortune, “bad luck away, good luck stay.” Some even wrote their name and address on the back of the kite so that good luck would know where to find them. Kite line was let out and the kite cut free, carrying away any possibility of accident or misfortune with it. Custom dictated that no one should retrieve a fallen kite on this day—unless he wants to take on someone else’s bad luck.

Korea is not very different from many places around the world, where power lines outside and electronic distractions inside encroach on the space and time for making and flying kites. Mr. Roe has said, "I feel sad that few people these days realize what an incredible invention of our ancestors the Korean kites actually are." Nonetheless, Korean kites do continue to fly—especially during tournaments and seasonal celebrations. Those who fly them know, in the words of Mr. Roe, that Korean kites are "simple but capable of demonstrating various wonderful feats in the air."

Sources

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