The Fighter Kites of Korea

In many countries throughout Asia, flying a kite usually means fighting with a kite. In India, Japan, Thailand, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia, and Korea, kite battles fill the skies at seasonal tournaments and festivals—and even in the streets after school. Fighters compete to cut each other's kites out of the sky. Kites climb, swerve, and dive, trying to avoid the deadly friction from a competitor's line coated with finely crushed glass or diamond dust.

Just how popular is this sport? Perhaps seven of every ten of the billions of kites in Asia are fighter kites. And which do international competitors think are the toughest and fastest fighter kites in the world? The fighter kites of Korea.

The Korean fighter kite is the country's signature kite, the bang-pae yeon, a rectangular, bowed "shield" kite with a hole in the middle of the sail. Master kite makers cut the hanji (paper) sail a centimeter or two wider at the top than the bottom so that the kite will be rectangular after it is bowed. The frame uses five bamboo spars—one each across the top and the "waist" of the kite, a "spine," and two diagonals. The spine and diagonals are carefully tapered toward the bottom, and the spar at the waist is very thin so that it will bend easily in the wind.

The kites are made in different sizes, with larger kites flown in heavier winds. The width is usually two-thirds of the length, but some fighters prefer the speed and maneuverability of a width four-fifths of the length. The size of the hole also affects how fast the kite can be flown. Usually the hole's diameter is a bit more than a third of the kite's width and helps the kite to fly more stably. But stability means sacrificing speed, so competitors do reduce the diameter of the hole (to as small as one-fifth of the kite's width) to help the kite gain speed. The trade-off? A kite with a smaller hole is harder to control, especially when the wind is light.

What else makes the Korean fighter kite distinctive? Surely the elaborate wooden reel, crafted from maple, Canadian oak, black or red ironwood from Indonesia, or Korean pine for children's versions. The reel has four to eight branches or spokes, with a longer central rod for carrying. The reel allows a practiced kite fighter to let out and take in long lengths of line with amazing speed. To manipulate his kite, to make it climb or dive, the flier may

pump the reel rapidly from eye-level to knee-level and vice-versa. The flier must also take care to wind the kite line evenly on the reel. Otherwise, the sharp line will slice itself.

Sharp line? Like fighter kiters throughout Asia, Koreans use cutting line—two to three thousand feet of silk (or Spectra) line coated with glue or resin and some kind of sharp substance, powder from crushed porcelain or glass soda bottles at one time, powdered synthetic diamonds now. Kite maker Pierre Fabre calls Korean cutting line "the strongest and most dangerous in the world."

Kite fighters bring their kites, reels, and cutting line to tournaments and engage in a series of one-on-one battles until a winner prevails. Combat can last for five minutes but usually concludes in two minutes—or in as little as ten seconds! Fighters stand ten yards apart and send their kites to the same height in the sky before the battle begins. The contest takes place at a great distance, as much as 3000 feet above the heads of fighters and spectators. Fighters can attack from above or below each other's lines. Mr. Woo Du-sang, an expert kite fighter from Seoul, originated a "climbing attack" when he was a young man. He taught his technique to his friends in a local kite club. Because Mr. Woo won more than one hundred competitions, this tactic replaced the diving attack in popularity.

Mr. Woo is now seventy and has spent more than forty years in developing his expertise as a kite maker and a fighter kite competitor. He makes kites for friends and club members only, by special order. He matches the kite's size to the personality of the fighter, and the "kite behavior" the competitor wants, but decides himself on how to decorate the sail. Mr. Woo has demonstrated his skills in several countries—France, Indonesia, Japan, and Singapore. He argues that, given its popularity, kite fighting should become part of the Asian Games.

Sources

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