

Kite experts gain artistic heights

By DIANE ABRAMS

A square foot of scrap paper and a spool of string is all it takes to make Takeshi Nishibayashi happy.

In five minutes time he'll create a kite and send it flying 300 feet in the air.

Designing kites is Nishibayashi's life. When the Japanese kitemaker isn't developing his flying art, he's participating in the sport. And if nothing else, he's thinking about kites.

This same devotion has Dinesh Bahadur captivated. Known as the master kiteman, Bahadur has broken several world records in his kite demonstrations.

He is also known for his Come Fly A Kite shops. The main gallery, in San Francisco, is one of the largest in the world.

Both men were in Michigan last week for J.L. Hudson's Oriental Odyssey celebration. Speaking in shopping malls throughout the metropolitan area, they demonstrated methods of making kites and explained various flying techniques.

COMING FROM two different cultures, Nishibayashi and Bahadur have both become artists of the wind. Kite flying in Japan or India is synonymous to baseball in America.

"That kites have lasted from the Chinese Han dynasty to the space age is proof of their popularity. There are currently more than 2,000 different varieties available. And kite designers in all parts of the world are developing new ideas every day."

Whatever has kept kite flyers mesmerized through the years has continued unrelenting. But more than a piece of string ties a flyer to his kite.

"Kites are something more than just a piece of paper," said Bahadur. "All kites have their own personalities. They have their own values. They're like good friends who are always there. Through kites, I like to communicate to people."

Nishibayashi said his love of kites is linked to his love of people. He said the greatest joy he gets is sharing his world of kites with others.

"I can make many friends by flying kites," he said smiling. "I love the small children and enjoy teaching them how to make their own kites and then how to fly them."

Nishibayashi is on his fourth visit to the United States. His next stop is Washington D.C. From there it's to the West Coast, then home to Tokyo. By the time he leaves the States, he will have enlightened hundreds of people to the pleasures of kite flying.

JUST WATCHING Nishibayashi make a kite reveals the happiness he gets from his work. He's even written a song about kites which he enthusiastically sings while he's busy cutting and taping.

Though his hands shake ever so slightly, Nishibayashi has complete control over the paper which he quickly transforms into a flying wonder. A few folds and a couple pieces of tape and he's ready to send them up.

"Kite flying is a good sport. It's different than golf and other sports that can be fairly expensive. Kites can be

made very cheaply. The material is not expensive, a garbage bag will suffice," Nishibayashi said.

The paper kites the designer can put together in a matter of minutes have no strut or spar. Those are the cross bars found on most kites. They also have no tails, but that doesn't stop the paper kites from soaring hundreds of feet into the sky.

Size is also unrestricted. Nishibayashi is able to make a kite as small as his thumb nail. These tiny flyers can be attached to a piece of nylon from a pair of pantyhose and sent into the sky as easily as the larger kites.

"I remember one time I was out flying one of my tiny kites and a little sparrow flew by and took it away with him," said Nishibayashi. "I don't know what that bird thought he had, but he liked it enough to take it with him."

ONE THING kites of all sizes have in common is the principle of balance on which they are built. This is the key to a successful kite. Bahadur spent three years studying how to shave and taper bamboo sticks to give his fighter kites just the right balance.

India is known for its fighter kites. These are precision instruments used in a challenging sports contest. During a fight, participants try to skillfully cut their opponent's kite string.

There are a series of seasonal festivals in India in which millions of amateur fighters can participate. In some cities, kite fighting contests, or penches, are done from roof tops. The opponent is hidden and the kites are flown from ground positions, thousands of feet apart.

The kites fly with "a special thread called manja or reel (which) is coated continuously with various secret formulas of powdered glass and used to cut a rival's line," according to Bahadur's store catalog.

Flying is only one technique in the fighting strategy. As soon as the lines touch, the cutter must decide how much line to pull in or let out to maintain enough tension to saw through the opponent's string.

There are several varieties of fighter kites. Small changes in the different styles affect the kite's speed, weight and timing.

Japan also stages kite festivals. For the past 400 years, kite flyers in some servers gather for a giant competition during the first two weeks in May.

KITES NEED NOT be only competitive, though. The aesthetic value of kites is also appreciated. One of the most striking sights is a train kite when it's off the ground. It takes seven people to fly this spectacular creation — 1,585 individual kites strung together.

"Train kites are very beautiful. They look like a rainbow when they're in the air," said Nishibayashi. "Every hundred kites are the same color and they're only spaced about a meter apart."

Although most kites that are made in Japan have pictures and designs on them, Nishibayashi's kites are primarily solid colors. They are designed to fly higher than most picture kites.

Kite festivals are universal. In Thailand, spring is celebrated with hordes of smaller kites that try to encircle a

six-foot star kite and drag it into their domain.

The little kites are known as the females. The star is considered male. Consequently, the event is called "Battle of the Sexes."

SOME KITES are symbolic in other ways. Nishibayashi designed what he calls a "long-trail international kite." It is nine feet long and 15 feet wide. The symbol on the international kite can be changed to represent any country.

He also designed a biennial kite that was flown in Seattle during the 1976 celebrations.

It was in such kite festivals and in demonstrations that Bahadur broke as many as four world records.

He has held the record for the longest outdoor flight, the highest altitude, the most kites on a single line and the most fighting victories in a single day.

Knowing the kind of kite to use on a particular day is also an important aspect of flying. Weather conditions are a primary concern to the kite flyer.

"Balance and a strong wind are the keys to good kite flying," said Nishibayashi. "If there is a soft wind, it's best to use a light paper and light string."

FLYING TECHNIQUES take time to develop, but numerous maneuvers are possible. With practice and patience, flyers can exert complete control over their kites.

"I can make a kite change directions from straight up to straight down," said Nishibayashi. "It is possible to bring a kite inches to the ground and then send it back up for an equally sharp horizontal maneuver."

"Perhaps the nicest thing about kite flying though, is that people of all ages can enjoy it."

"Everyone can learn to love kites, there is no particular age group that the sport attracts. A small boy and an old man can both learn to fly," said Nishibayashi.

It's a nice family sport. I bring kites wherever I go. They are great to have on picnics, ski trips, boats or anywhere. I always bring a kite."

With three sons and two grandchildren, it would seem that Nishibayashi has enough people around him to involve in kites, but not everyone can appreciate his joy.

Nishibayashi's 4-year-old grandson has trouble understanding the attraction.

"Grandpa loves kites — not me," says the youth.

Bahadur was about 4 when he was introduced to his first kite. He was at a festival in India where brothers and sisters fly kites as a symbol of their love for one another. This experience shaped the rest of his life.

"I grabbed the string and when the tension came into it, I felt my heart fly up beyond the buildings. I didn't know that there was anything on the other end of the line."

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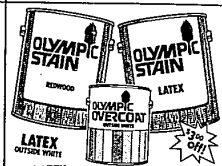
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