



THE GROUNDING OF HONG KONG'S KITES

Kite-flying culture falls victim to urbanisation and regulation

BY THOMAS CHAN, TRACY CHEUNG, BENNY KUNG, JEFFREY LOA



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It is a Sunday morning and Thomas Shum and his daughter have spent an hour travelling to Tai Mei Tuk where the primary school student will experience her first kite flying experience with her dad. Shum holds the string while his daughter pulls the kite, running as fast as she can to get it to take off. As the kite soars towards the sky, father and daughter share an unspoken happiness.

Kites have a special place in Shum's heart, as they were one of the few toys he had during his childhood. It is a different story for his daughter, whose leisure hours are filled with television and electronic games. Now, he wants her to know more about this fading culture in Hong Kong.

"Flying kites was quite a fun activity back then," says Shum, "when I was a child, there would always be at least eight to 10 kites flying together at the same time."

Kite-flying was one of the most popular leisure activities for children in Hong Kong in the 1950s and '60s. Back then, there were no restrictions on kite-flying and kites could be seen in every corner of the city's sky and even beyond — from the rooftops of Sham Shui Po to the corridors of Shek Kip Mei Housing Estate.

Shum says kite-flying was popular because it was so easy to do. Kids could assemble a few bamboo sticks and pieces of paper to make a kite that could be flown in the neighbourhood.

"We didn't have to go as far as the countryside to fly kites. We could always go kite-flying in our housing estates instead," Shum says.

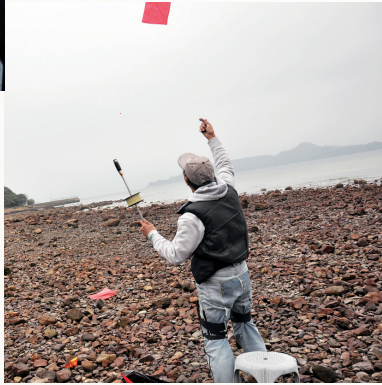
Recalling those days, So Chi-chiu, 59, the vice-chairman of Hong Kong Kite Fighting Club, who has flown and fought kites for more than 30 years, says most people aged 50 years or over must have flown kites in their childhood.

However, as Hong Kong's economy started to boom in the 1970s, kite-flying started to fade. The rapid urban development and bustling air traffic led to the implementation of the Articles of the Air Navigation (Hong Kong) in 1970. This limited the space where people could fly kites to areas at least 60 metres away from any vehicle or building. It made flying kites unfeasible in a city cramped with skyscrapers and teeming with vehicles.

Currently, the Civil Aviation Department only recommends three main spots for flying kites. They are Shek O, Tai Au Mun and Tai Mei Tuk. So says these restrictions stifle the development of kite culture.

To continue and sustain the kite fighting culture in Hong Kong, So founded The Hong Kong Kite Fighting Club with Lai Wah-king in 1986. The two friends became great partners and have taken part in different international kite fighting competitions around the world for the past 30 years.





In kite fighting, the goal is to cut the strings of opponents' kites. The kites use glass-coated strings which were popular in the heyday of kite-flying. "Kite-flying is more about admiring the free movement of the kites in the sky, whereas kite-fighting requires certain skills and constant thinking is needed. There is a lot to learn," says Lai.

Having won more than 20 international championships, Lai proudly says Hong Kong now ranks in the top three in the world kite-fighting stakes.

Despite such stellar achievements, kite-fighting culture is little known in Hong Kong. It pains Lai that few people are interested in kites, let alone kite-fighting. "Very few people know about kite-fighting ... [but] there are world-class kite-fighters in Hong Kong," he says.

Few young people are interested in flying kites these days. Those who are still passionate about it are usually in their 40s and have had experience

of flying kites in earlier times, Lai adds. The number of kite-fighters has dropped from 300 members in the 1980s to 100 members now.

Lai Wah-king approached the Leisure and Cultural Services Department to try to find ways to cooperate on promoting kite-fighting. However, the department never replied. He is resigned to the fact the game will likely fade away with the passing of his generation. "Just let it be," he sighs.

"Two world champions are sitting here. But who would know it?" says So.

As interest in kite-flying wanes, businesses that make and sell kites also face a gloomy future. *Varsity* collated the details of the listed kite manufacturers of Hong Kong and tried to contact them by telephone or in person. We discovered most of the factories have either terminated their business in Hong Kong or will terminate their business very soon.

Kite enthusiast Haiven Woo Ka-hei



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Children are rarely 'educated' to fly kites as a kind of collective activity



started an online kite shop with his brother a few years ago. Although the shop, HK Kite, is still up and running, Woo says selling kites has now turned into a niche market and they can only run their business on a part-time basis.

"Occasionally we used to go kite-flying with some of our regular customers, but there are only one to two people," Woo says. "Even when we wanted to look for people with similar interests, there are really not many."

It seems kite-flying may only survive in Hong Kong as a niche interest, or an occasional outdoor activity. Woo says even his own son and daughter have little interest in it. "When I ask my son to go flying kites, he turns me down and prefers to sit at home and play computer games," laments Woo. "Children are rarely 'educated' to fly kites as a kind of collective activity."

As for So, his kite-fighting days may not be over but he has low expectations of the future for kite-flying in Hong Kong. All he can do, he says, is "hope for a miracle". ▽

Edited by Jeffrey Wong