

Success Story in Cambodia

After its total suppression by the Khmer Rouge, kiting has made a resounding comeback in Cambodia. Last year a national kite museum was opened in the capital Phnom Penh with His Excellency Ouk Socheat, undersecretary of state for culture, presiding. Educational workshops for children at the museum were initiated and judged a great success. School tours of the facility began. And an annual kite festival bloomed with 80 enthusiastic participants. This kite activity parallels the revival of other unique Cambodian cultural manifestations such as Khmer royal dance and the country's classic cuisine. All were victims of the Khmer Rouge, whose infamous Maoist rule from 1975-79 caused 1.7 million deaths in the small country, including most members of the educated classes.

The major figure in the return of kiting as not only a sport but also an important symbol of Cambodian cultural identity is Sim Sarak, director general for administration of the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Arts. Sim was an enthusiastic flier as a boy and never forgot this early fascination. He has been greatly aided by his wife Tcheang Yarin.

Another landmark in the resurgence of kiting in the Southeast Asian nation was the recent publication-----in Khmer, French, and English-----of a scholarly book on Cambodian kites. This excellent, well illustrated work was written jointly by Sim and Tcheang, both of whom know English and French. The English-language version of the volume was supported by the Drachen Foundation. Drachen has also given funds to the museum for educational purposes, such as workshops and the purchase of a computer, copier, and other useful equipment.

Ali Fujino, administrator of Drachen, worked with the Cambodians and pronounces the joint, wide-ranging project successful beyond her hopes. "They're total stars," she says of the Cambodian group. "They had a goal and a focus and they carefully orchestrated the project from start to finish. Their collaboration with each other and with Drachen was exemplary. Able people in the field completed tasks assigned them. There was no deviation. This was a case of nationals doing it on their own, and doing it well. As the leaders, Sarak and Yarin had the passion, not uncommon in third world countries, but also the skills, often lacking, to complete a grand plan. They and their group have my deepest respect."



The new kite museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

1. Glorious Angkor Wat in north Cambodia, with dancers posed in the foreground. Royal court dance was one of the Cambodian traditions almost wiped out by the Khmer Rouge, but now undergoing a rebirth. Another is traditional kiting. 2. A grant to the new kite museum in the capital Phnom Penh from the Drachen Foundation receives formal recognition. 3. Young Khmer fliers. 4. Workshops teach traditional kitemaking. 5. The Drachen gift was used to buy electronic and other educational equipment. Assembled in the museum, it was blessed at a ceremony by His Excellency Ouk Socheat. He is flanked by Sim Sarak and wife Tcheang Yarin, who are chiefly responsible for the successful governmental kite program.



All photos by Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Arts

