

Washi: An Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

By

Ms. Neha Gupta

neha.gupta.r@gmail.com

Abstract

Human civilization is marked by many milestone inventions. One such invention is paper, which has drastically altered the rate of development by preserving and passing on knowledge, not only from one place to another but also from one era to another. Although paper has its roots in China, other countries did not fail to make it their own. Japan has adopted and modified it in a way that it has become an inseparable part of their culture and lifestyle. *Washi*, Japanese paper is produced completely by hand using three different types of plants and is known for its durability and unique quality of bringing a solemn ambiance to any room. This age-old craft, however, challenged to survive by mass-produced western paper, artisans are making sure to secure its place in today's world by fuelling new ideas and creativity into it.

Keywords

Washi, Paper, Japanese, *Nebuta*, Craft, *Shide*

Introduction

Many things about Japan left me awestruck during my eight-year stay, but the thing that puzzled me most was the usage of paper in windows and sliding doors. I knew Japan was a place where earthquakes are common occurrences and that buildings are built with minimum usage of glass. But still seeing windows with paper screens was a completely new phenomenon for me that needed processing and exploration. How long do these paper windows last? Isn't paper considered to be something that can be torn easily? These questions were further fuelled by my visit to Senso-ji, a Buddhist Temple situated in Asakusa, Tokyo. An enormous 4-meter-tall red lantern made out of *washi* was hanging at

the entrance. This lantern lasts for one decade without being weathered; it maintains its colors, strength, and charm throughout.



Image 1: Red Lantern in Senso-ji Temple

A top-quality *Washi* is known to last for about 1000 years. Its toughness and durability make it a unique substitute for many materials like cloth, glass, and even plastic. What make it stand apart from Western paper are its long threads, the plant used to make it, and an age-old well-preserved method of creating it.

Method and Plants Used

Washi is mostly produced by *Kozo*, paper mulberry; it is a bush crop and is harvested once a year. It has long fibers, thus providing a durable and strong paper.

Mitsumata plant, known as paper bush, on the other hand, has soft and absorbent fibers; thus produces very high-quality *washi*, which is used for writing and printing banknotes.

The *Gampi* plant is the most volatile of these three and offers its challenges as it grows in the wild and its availability is not certain. This plant has long and supple fibers that allow the creation of ultra-thin *washi* with exceptional strength, durability, and a natural sheen of its own. *Gampi washi*, due to its thinness and luster, is used for paper restoration work.

Tree branches tied into bundles are steamed for about two hours to loosen the bark. These barks are ripped off the branch and dried for many days. The inner white part of the bark is separated from the dark part under a running stream by stomping on it several times. This white bark is boiled with alkali to make the fibers soft and then bleached under a cold running stream for two days. These fibers are further pounded and mixed with a viscous substance obtained from the roots of *Tororo-aoi* plants to separate fibers evenly. This slurry is turned into strong *washi* sheets using *Su*, a mesh screen, and then dried on wooden boards to obtain a wood-grain impression on sheets.



Image 2: Making of Washi



Image 3: Washi Window Screen

Mino City in Gifu Prefecture, Ogawa Town/Higashi-Chichibu village in Saitama Prefecture, and Misumi-cho in Hamada City are keeping this heritage craft alive by giving the younger

generation all the necessary knowledge. The *washi* made by these three communities received recognition from UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014.

Cultural Significance

For centuries, Japanese infrastructure has been recognized worldwide for homes with serene and pleasant atmospheres by maintaining a moderate indoor temperature. Translucent *washi*, used in windows screens and *Shoji*, traditional sliding doors plays a significant role in letting in the natural light while blocking the extreme temperatures outside.

Shide, paper streamers are one of the sacred symbols used in *Shinto*. It can be seen hanging in a *Shinto* shrine as an offering to the deity, symbolizing protection and purity. It is used in purification rituals; the impeccable qualities of *washi* amplify the sacredness of rituals and are believed to strengthen human connection with nature.

Aomori prefecture of Japan is glittered with light during summer as it celebrates a week-long *Nebuta Matsuri*, a festival of paper and light. As the sky welcomes numerous *washi* lanterns, the road paves the way for a parade of hundreds of floating *Nebutas*. The gigantic 3D structure of *Nebuta* is created with wood and wire and covered with *washi*, later to be painted with bright colors. *Washi* is an essential part of this creation, bringing nature and art together. *Nebutas* represent the wishes and prayers of people and on the last day of the festival brought to sea to send the bad omens away.



Image 4: Nebuta



Image 5: Washi Lanterns

The world's thinnest *washi* of just 0.02 mm thickness called *Tengu-jo shi* is created in Kochi prefecture of Japan using a unique technique. Many art forms and documents holding historical significance, including "The Last Judgement" a fresco by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, have been given a new life by the skilled use of *Tengu-jo shi*.

Giving a New Twist to *Washi*:

Like many traditional crafts, *washi*'s existence is struggling due to the increased use of cost-efficient mass-produced paper. This challenge encouraged *washi* artisans to explore creative ideas. Igarashi Masami of Igarashi Paper Co. has come up with an idea that uses vegetable waste for producing *washi*, giving it distinct hues depending on the vegetable used. Waste is collected from food businesses and turned into elegant and durable packaging bags and serving bowls, ready to use again.

Mannequins used in the apparel industry, which are usually made out of plastic, are also getting a makeover with the use of humble *washi* in place of plastic, providing a breather to the planet.

Kyoto is giving a significantly new look to *washi*, helping this 1300-year-old craft to enter the future. Campus Plaza, Kyoto offers a glimpse of golden rays through its modern infrastructure as its exterior wall made of 153 giant sheets of handmade *washi* lights up in the evening. 3D *washi* lighting and light walls are being created, these art pieces enhance one's experience with emotions as they are capable of reflecting various moods one goes through.

Sheets created by flinging water or by placing dyed fibers are being used in creating multiple-layered *washi*; when backlit, each layer is visible depicting the thought behind it.

Kurotani paper cloth, produced in Kurotani, Kyoto is made by weaving silk thread and *Kurotani washi* together. *Washi* threads are being used in weaving material for kimono as well as modern-style clothing like jeans. After use these clothes can be transformed into fertilizers for crops using an innovative technique, leaving no extra burden on Earth.

Conclusion

Washi has not only represented Japanese culture for centuries but also proved its versatility. It is environmentally safe, biodegradable, and chemical-free. It may not compete with mass-produced paper, but it has its charm, richness, and uniqueness satisfying the exquisite taste of end users, making it irreplaceable!

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About the Author

Neha Gupta is a writer, poet, and teacher who has experience of teaching in many schools and preparing students for the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) exam. She has written for more than 15 anthologies, and her work has been published online too. She has bagged many laurels for her literary work, including the ALS Wordsmith Award for her stories and poems.

