



Seminal publications about washi: Kōgei no. 28 published in 1933 (at left), and Washi Kenkyū no. 16 and no. 17, the final issue published in 1984. All photos courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.



A 1950 meeting of the Washi Research Group taken at the Uemura residence. Seated left to right: Nozu, Machida, Shinmura, Tokuji, Jyugaku. Standing left to right: Uemura, Yabuta, Kagawa, Ōsawa. Courtesy of Machida Seishi.

Washi into the Twenty-First Century

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In the seventeenth century, Japan's tumultuous power struggles ended and the Tokugawa shogunate came to rule, placing a ban on foreign trade and encouraging the growth of domestic industry. The production of washi was already an important industry at that time, but the regional governments, in an effort to increase local cash revenues by producing more washi, kept strict controls over the papermaking industry. As a result, there was a rapid expansion of washi production. Washi was important not only for writing and documents, but also for clothing, as an architectural material, and for many practical uses in daily life. It could be said, that in those days, washi was the most important industry related to everyday life in Japan.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Japan opened its doors to the world and became known and admired by foreigners as a culture "built on wood and paper," a lifestyle that reached both the noble classes and the common people. Trade with the West impacted Japan's traditional washi-based lifestyle in two distinct ways. Firstly, Japan was introduced to a Western lifestyle. The Japanese were attracted to the novelty of the West and soon they preferred everything Western. In place of washi, people liked to use modern materials in their everyday life. The second major impact was the change in the production of paper. Western-style machine papermaking was introduced into Japan. We can trace how the washi industry suffered through these changes during the twentieth century and how it became what it is today.

From 1900 to Japan's defeat in World War II, the washi industry became Westernized and opened up new markets for export. Electricity was introduced and labor saving measures were put into place, making production more efficient. There were as many as 66,000 washi production units in the first part of the twentieth century. While traditional washi had a reputation for longevity and strength, Japanese paper quality began to decline with the use of chemicals and the addition of wood pulp, along with other changes in production which were put into place to compete with Western-style machine-made papers. 1903 marked the start of the decline of the washi industry when the government began using Western paper, instead of washi, for the production of the state-approved textbook. As an economic principle of the industrial revolution, machine-produced industrial goods were favored over handcrafted items

to satisfy the need for low prices and large quantities. Washi was no exception.

To cope with this harsh reality, the major washi-producing areas formed washi associations and established regional cooperative unions and papermaking testing facilities. The printing paper division of the Ministry of Finance attempted to modernize washi production by hiring students and teaching the newest papermaking technology. Under the government's leadership, machine production of washi began. The major papermaking areas, eager to stay competitive, started to use machinery in their handmade paper production. It was a new era in which handmade washi, with its thousand-year history, had to coexist with machine-made washi paper.

With washi's future in danger, admirers of traditional washi began to support and protect hand papermaking. In 1933, the folk art movement dedicated a special issue of their magazine *Kōgei* to the topic of washi. In that year, Dard Hunter came to Japan to research hand papermaking. He praised washi as the most superior handmade paper and commended the washi industry. Shortly afterwards, Jugaku Bunsho, a scholar in Kyoto, formed a group to study the history of Japanese paper and to extol the virtues and beauty of washi. At the same time, in Tokyo, the Oji Paper Company formed a paper association which eventually founded the Paper Museum which is located today in Kita-ku, Tokyo. As the nation was heading towards war, Jugaku Bunsho and his wife Shizu visited many papermaking villages in the country and published their fieldwork in their well-known travel diary.

During the war, the government strictly controlled washi production, recognizing it as an important wartime industry. In the closing years of the war, the Ministry of Defense ordered the washi-producing areas to only make paper for paper balloon bombs. With young men off to war, seniors, women, and children were mobilized in the production of balloon bomb paper.

After Japan capitulated in 1945, the number of washi-producing units dwindled to less than ten thousand, partially due to the exodus of able-bodied workers who were attracted by factory opportunities in the city during the reconstruction period. The American model of consumerism took hold in Japan, leading to a decline in the many uses of washi which was quickly replaced by industrial goods. By 1970, during the high growth period of the Japanese economy, the number of washi-producing units dropped sharply to 847. With the future existence of the industry in crisis washi manufacturers formed the National Handmade Washi Association and began activities to revitalize the industry. By 1975, the younger-generation papermakers formed the National Young Papermakers Gathering which continues to meet every year.

Also at this time a movement began to restore cultural property that was harmed by the war. Pioneering the study of ancient paper, members of the Washi Research Group, including scientist Machida Seishi, began to examine the paper artifacts and documents that were stored in Shōsōin Imperial Repository which was constructed in the eighth century in Nara, Japan. In addition, an official of the Ministry of Culture, Yagihashi Shin, surveyed the papermaking units located in remote areas in Japan and provided support and guidance to the industry. These activities led to the development of nationwide protection policies for the industry.



Tanino Takenobu, of Najo in Hyogo prefecture, is the most recently designated Living National Treasure papermaker. He is one of three current holders of the intangible cultural assets in the area of hand papermaking. Courtesy of Mina Takahashi, 2006.

In 1968, the Ministry of Culture officially recognized papermaking as a part of Japan's protected traditional crafts. They identified the practitioners of specific areas of papermaking technology, designating them as Holders of Intangible Cultural Assets, and providing them with financial aid. In 1974, The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) enacted laws to promote Japan's traditional craft industry, providing support to washi-related industries. Through this support, major papermaking areas built assembly halls and training facilities which helped to stop the decline of the washi industry and allowed them to survive through the difficulty of the postwar period.

The 1970s marked a flourishing of publications about washi. In 1974, handmade papers produced at the time were compiled and published as the influential *Encyclopedia of Handmade Japanese Papers*. The efforts of the Washi Research Group were very successful in promoting washi, resulting in the publication of numerous deluxe editions on the topic of washi. Among those responsible for these books were: Morita Yasutaka from Kyoto who, as a paper distributor, was knowledgeable about where washi was being made; Machida Seishi of Kyoto who joined the Washi Research Group after World War II; and journalist Kume Yasuo. After these initial publications, Kume continued to research washi seriously and became the nucleus of a new Tokyo-based washi research group that continues to be active to this day.

Despite the revitalization efforts, the number of papermaking units dwindled. In the 1974 *Encyclopedia of Handmade Japanese Papers*, there were less than six hundred units represented in the publication. Washi was no longer an essential everyday material. It still played a role in traditional ceremonies, rituals, and festivals and was employed in the restoration of cultural assets, utilized by artists for calligraphy and Japanese painting, and used in Japanese architecture.



The influential Encyclopedia of Handmade Japanese Papers, published by Mainichi Newspaper in 1974.



Post-IPC '83 tour to Kurodani papermaking village. Morita Yasutaka, at center. Courtesy of the Japan Paper Academy.

During this period of diminishing use, the American paper art explosion gave washi a boost. In 1978 many people came to Japan to attend the World Crafts Conference (WCC). While all genres were represented at the conference, washi had its own sub-meeting. To the surprise of the Japanese, many participants came to the conference specifically to attend the washi sub-meeting. Traditional Japanese handmade paper was noticed by artists worldwide and its value became recognized again. Washi became the focus of lively international exchange. Papermakers and their younger-generation successors were frequently invited abroad to demonstrate their papermaking technique.

In the late 1970s, American curator Jane Farmer organized the exhibition "New American Paperworks" which toured widely, including a presentation at the Kyoto Modern Art Museum in 1983. The washi community seized this opportunity to organize a world paper symposium to coincide with the exhibition. Five hundred participants from 14 countries attended the International Paper Conference '83 (IPC '83). The conference was a huge success, bringing together Japan's traditional washi culture and the new international paper art movement, first in Kyoto for the symposium, then out to the main areas of washi production for site visits. It was one of the twentieth century's most important events concerning paper, accelerating international exchange about paper culture in one fell swoop, adding a fresh page to the cultural history of papermaking worldwide.

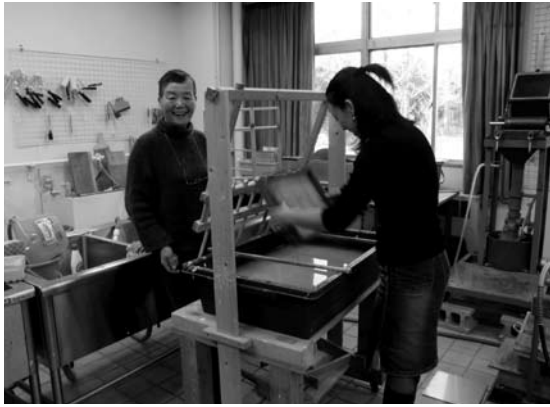
We did not realize it at the time, but the conference coincided with the one-hundredth anniversary of Dard Hunter's birth. It also seems fitting that we gathered in the fiftieth anniversary year of Hunter's first visit to Kyoto. Many of the participants understood the importance of creating an international network to promote paper culture. With that thought, the washi community in Japan realized that they too had an obligation to work together for the promotion of Japanese papermaking.

In 1988 Kotani Ryuichi, the head of the IPC '83 Executive Committee and vice-president of the Kyoto Chamber of Commerce, spearheaded the establishment of the Japan Paper Academy. According to Machida Seishi, a founding member of the Washi Research Society, the Academy had a different organizational structure, but carried the same spirit. In its twenty-year history, the Japan Paper Academy organized two international conferences and four international exhibitions of paper art that traveled throughout Japan and overseas. The Academy published research, studies, books, and bulletins, and collaborated with corresponding organizations in other countries on various efforts.

With IPC '83 as the main impetus, the prominent washi production areas initiated activities geared towards the international community. In the summer of 1983, the Hall of Awa Japanese Handmade Paper located in Tokushima began to offer a papermaking training course, open to foreign participants. To this day they continue to offer a regular schedule of courses and events.

There was a gradual increase in administrative support for village revitalization and tourism development, leading to a revival of the washi production areas. The city of Mino in Gifu prefecture began its annual artist-in-residence program in 1997, inviting five international artists every year to spend three months in Mino. The city sponsors the program, offering the space and resources to the artists to manufacture, show, and publish the work they produce during their residencies. The residencies are managed by city officials, attended by people from urban areas who want to learn the craft of Japanese papermaking, and run with the cooperation of local volunteers.

Timothy Barrett was the first non-Japanese to have fully mastered the art of Japanese papermaking in the mid-1970s. Now, there are many non-Japanese who are training in the washi production areas, and it is no longer rare to find a non-Japanese



The author teaching in the papermaking studio at the Kyoto Institute of Technology. 2006.



An architectural treatment—walls of handmade paper—designed and produced by students at the Kyoto Institute of Technology, installed in Milan at the Salone Internazionale del Mobile. 2006.

settling in these areas to continue making paper. In the past, washi had been practiced as a family business with papermaking trade secrets handed down from father to son. Today, papermaking methods are being shared more freely. The washi industry is in a new phase, gradually gaining independence and self-sufficiency. Innovative papermaking initiatives are on the rise and the washi field is gaining the attention of designers and artists. The prominent washi production areas are ushering in young people with new ideas about papermaking. In this way, the post-IPC '83 era has brought new energy to the field.

A few years ago, Uemura Yoshizo of Kyoto, with the cooperation of the National Handmade Washi Association, called upon all of the current producers of washi in Japan to participate in the publication of *Washi: The Soul of Japan—Fine Japanese Paper in the Second Millennium*. This landmark publication, scheduled for release next year, includes virtually every kind of paper being made today including handmade washi, machine-made washi, and other finished paper products. This unprecedented undertaking should be recognized as a milestone, showcasing present-day practitioners of the craft, each sharing his or her technique and philosophy. This tome contains a total of 1,070 paper samples, representing a full picture of the washi industry today, including new papermakers who joined the field since IPC '83. Recently, the media has taken up the cause of washi, leading to a second publishing boom about washi culture.

Today, paper that is used in everyday life in Japan is generally Western machine-made paper. For the continuation of the washi tradition, we need to create a plan to develop new areas of need worldwide which only washi can fulfill. Universities have started to teach papermaking as part of their fine art and design programs. In the past, when printing methods became modernized, washi could no longer compete with the precision and low cost of machine-made paper. But today, washi is gaining

attention as a printmaking paper by photographers and designers. The new printing technology of digital printers is more compatible with washi. Because the ink is sprayed onto the paper, printing digitally on washi allows for more nuance and detail than on machine-made paper. Digital printing has opened up a new market and renewed demand for washi. There has also been an effort recently to include papermaking in cultural education for the general public, especially for elementary school children who are given hands-on papermaking experience as part of their studies.

The days of washi as an everyday item are gone, and the development of new papermaking technology is moving beyond what is handed down from generation to generation. I believe that washi should be viewed, not just as a paper used in Japan, but as “international washi.” It will take us a long time to reach this goal, but I believe that if we, who hold dearly the traditions and innovations of washi, continue to spearhead dynamic initiatives and work with each other around the world, we will be able to create a foundation and demand for “international washi.”