



**WORLD WASHI SUMMIT 2008**



# LIFE IN A PAPERMAKING VILLAGE

by **PAUL DENHOED**

Over the last 6 years I have had the delightful fortune of being able to visit, study at, or work in a variety of papermaking studios throughout Japan. With rare exception, my hosts have been exceedingly warm, generous and patient. These craftspeople work diligently, often 10 hours a day or more, usually six days a week. The work itself is painstaking, with the degree of care at every step reflected in the finished product. Moreover, the labour is back-breaking, but any complaints are typically followed by a good-natured laugh. I often marvel at these individuals' skill, but also at their endurance and amiability.

One further aspect that is particularly endearing is how the work of many of the studios is highly in tune with nature and closely follows the cycle of the seasons. The best quality papers can typically be made during the coldest months, and indeed papermaking was traditionally the winter task of farmers, done during the cold, slack months. Even today, in studios that grow their own fibre, the cycle is similar; after a late fall harvest, the fibre is processed to white bark, and then the busy season of

papermaking begins, reaching its peak in the coldest months of February and March. During the warmer spring and summer months, attention is turned away from papermaking and towards the needs of the fibre crop.

This cycle, and the fact that it has been followed for many hundreds of years, is part of washi's enduring charm. But will the craft itself endure? Although the sharp fall in the number of papermakers since its heyday has in recent years essentially levelled off, leaving the total at 300-350 individuals, unfortunately the figure for those making high-quality, 100% bast fibre papers is much lower, and papermakers cultivating their own fibre number perhaps in single digits. Will Japanese papermaking endure? In what form will it endure?

Will certain papers go out of production? Almost certainly. Will hand-made washi cease to exist, even within a handful of generations? No one can say for sure. Washi will survive for the foreseeable future. It will change and evolve, like anything else. Old, revered papers will fall out of production as new favourites are developed. Resources of

certain traditional fibres may disappear; new fibres will take their place. Traditional tools and techniques will fall out of practice, and new innovations will be incorporated into the process. But so has washi ever been; it has never been static. The words "traditional Japanese papermaking" are used quite freely, usually referring simply to papermaking in the past. But the methods, tools, and the finished papers of 700 years ago are quite different from those of 200 years ago, which are in turn dissimilar to those of the contemporary scene.

So papermaking in Japan evolves. As lovers of this venerable craft, we can (*and should*) vigilantly mark the losses along the way, but as stewards we must also do everything we can to support and celebrate the way forward, and preserve the links between washi's future and its past. We must demand the best, but also be willing to pay for it. We must learn the traditional uses of this material, but more importantly, we must imagine and develop new, contemporarily relevant applications for the best quality Japanese papers. ♡