



# HAND PAPERMAKING

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FRONT COVER: Imai Hiroaki (member of the Oguni-gami Preservation Society, which is a Preserver of Intangible Cultural Asset Requiring Documentation for Oguni-gami) arranges strips of bark for drying that have been harvested from his kozo field. Photo: Paul Denhoed, December 2009. BACK COVER: Earth pigments on paper made from seed heads of spinifex (*Triodia pungens*), 35 x 28 centimeters (13.8 x 11 inches). Made by a participant in a workshop in Alekarenge, Australia. Courtesy of Winsome Jobling. FOLDOUT BACK COVER: Frederic Amat and Paul Wong (right), in 1981, at Dieu Donné Papermill (3 Crosby Street location), examining work-in-progress. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.

## *Letter from the Editor*

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"Dat-daka-chaga, dat-daka-chaga," instructed my papermaking teacher when I was one of a half dozen trainees at a washi center in Japan's Shimane prefecture, circa 1988. He said he did not have the words to describe the way he dips and moves the *sugeta* during sheet formation, but he suggested that we follow the sounds, and imitate. That's how he learned from his father, he explained. So there we were, all mouthing the sounds, trying to repeat the song of the water splashing against the front of the vat and the sloshing of the slurry across the *su*.

As practiced makers of handmade paper, we develop over time a sensibility and intuitive knowledge of our craft. These embedded skills and experiential knowledge often feel like something beyond language, difficult to express to others. At the 2012 meeting of the Friends of Dard Hunter, Winsome Jobling delivered a stimulating talk in which she used a term that I had not heard before—knowledge custodians—which in my mind perfectly describes how papermakers hold the heritage and the know-how in their bodies, their minds, and by extension their spirit.

This issue looks at our field's "knowledge custodians," individuals who accumulate, practice, and propagate the skills and traditions of handmade paper. Winsome Jobling agreed to adapt her lecture into our lead article in which she recognizes aboriginal knowledge in sourcing plants for papermaking. Helen Frederick describes how hand papermaking provides an intersection of cultural values and economic development in China. Paul Denhoed explains the National Treasure system in Japan, and Sue Gosin profiles Paul Wong, whom she distinguishes as our field's American National Treasure. Nicole Donnelly outlines the Hand Papermaking Community Documentation Project with a stunning foldout map of the web of connections in the hand papermaking world. Fred Siegenthaler recounts his development of art watermarks. Steve Miller, along with Martin Vinaver, travels to San Pablito in search of amate. Robert Hauser shares a timeline of the history of Busyhaus Associates with an exceptional 1973 wood engraving by Michael McCurdy, printed for the first time, and exclusively for this issue on Twinrocker paper. Tatiana Ginsberg reports on a series of events celebrating washi in Norwich, England. In addition, Akemi Martin reviews the long-anticipated collection *Washi: The Soul of Japan*, Minah Song shares her impressions of Aimee Lee's *Hanji Unfurled*, and Andrea Peterson gives us her take on Helen Hiebert's *The Papermaker's Studio Guide DVD*.

Papermakers as knowledge custodians hold within themselves tacit knowledge of their craft. This knowledge is not easily explicated, yet one of our goals here in the pages of *Hand Papermaking* is to disseminate this intuitive knowledge across the field. In his book *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge*, Harry Collins calls what we offer, "coaching rules." He repeats an often-used metaphor in developmental psychology, bicycle balancing, as a prime example of tacit knowledge. "When we ride our bikes we do not self-consciously use any physical or mechanical models; somehow with practice and training, the ability to balance on a bike becomes established in our neural pathways and muscles in ways that we cannot speak about. We do not learn bicycle riding just from being told about it (coaching rules and second-order rules aside), or reading about it, but from demonstration, guided instruction, and personal contact with others who can ride—the modes of teaching associated with tacit knowledge." As papermakers, with some coaching rules, we stand at the vat, and find our balance, our rhythm, and our song.

Mina Takahashi



## *Investigating Cultural Literacy*

HELEN C. FREDERICK

*Two men at the vat in the Zhuang Yuan papermill, Jiajiang County. They are part of a network saving traditional craft. The Chinese State Council listed Jiajiang's yuan paper in The National Intangible Culture Heritage in 2006. All photos taken by the author, December 2011.*

In December 2011, I visited two different papermaking productions in the Sichuan area of China in order to witness how hand papermaking provides an intersection of cultural values and economic development. Both the physical properties and historical legacy in China provide opportunity for hand papermaking activity. Plant materials in the area of Jiajiang (bamboo and grasses) and Anhui (blue sandalwood tree) are intricately transformed into sheets of paper, following ages-old traditional processes. In a global world of electronic spectacle, it is compelling to examine how this ancient art/handcraft plays a significant role in contemporary culture.

Understanding the embodiment of a natural material and its prowess to be transformed into another useful material by hand is a lesson in daily life, industry, art, and science. Recognizing that the endurance of hand papermaking is also a hybrid of so many complex parts—which dedicated communities have worked to sustain its legacy and usefulness into other parts of China, and other parts of the world—provides valuable insights for the contemporary hand papermaker.

Many have said that in our times we are progressively losing our ability to remember, because of electronic memory devices that have taken over that function. The instant recall of ideas from the past by our ubiquitous digital machines does pose a problem. The “waning of time” ceases to exist. I believe that time is a pure contributor to an end fulfillment, especially as we live in an age where we see a rapid dissolution of indigenous cultural products. Historic time-based traditions that are deeply embedded, such as in Sichuan, China, and that identify regional differences in various cultural environments, may provide a buffer to the dissolution of these treasured products.

Social theorist Hannah Arendt designates three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. About labor she states that it is the activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the



vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself. For example the labor we experience as paper artists and papermakers is truly related to our touch, seeing, and feeling, all part of creativity. Such activity requires sustainable time to develop.

Growing up in a small town near my grandfather's farmland, I was exposed from childhood to the cycles of growing and harvesting. Lately this has led me to ponder what is an indigenous vocabulary and how does it develop from a cultural experience in which living organisms play a part? How does hand papermaking provide an intersection of cultural values?

These questions have led me to investigate the potentials of collective memory at sites of hand-driven production in an attempt to discern how these memories shape cultural bridging for indigenous peoples as well as foreigners and outsiders to their regions. Particularly with global eco-systemic decline, what skills are most valuable for artists and artisans and their communities? Exploring life and ingenuity of indigenous populations in regards to hand industries and ecologies, the question also arises, what can best support them? Who can best carry on their traditions?

To learn more about this inquiry and *zao zhi* (papermaking, in Chinese), I was fortunate to speak with Jacob Eyferth, University of Chicago professor, and to read his book *Eating Rice for Bamboo Roots* in which he defines "embodied" skills and an "embedded" society and their effect on economic development. Eyferth's book charts the vicissitudes of a rural community of papermakers in Sichuan. In summary he states, "[T]he process of transforming bamboo into paper involves production-related and social skills, as well as the everyday skills that allowed these papermakers to survive in an era of tumultuous change." The Chinese Revolution—understood as a series of interconnected political, social, and technological transforma-



Women cleaning and sorting native grasses that will be combined with bamboo fibers for production of Jianjiang paper.

ABOVE: A foot-operated stamper that involves a wooden lever and stone cavity. The operator has an enlarged calf from the stamping activity.

FACING PAGE: Outdoor fermenting pits where bamboo is soaked at the Zhuang Yuan papermill.



tions—was, Jacob Eyferth argues, as much about the redistribution of skill, knowledge, and technical control as it was about the redistribution of land and political power.

Eyferth's book traces the changes in the distribution of knowledge that led to a massive transfer of technical control from villages to cities, from primary producers to managerial elites, and from women to men. It asks how a vision of rural people as unskilled has affected their place in the body politic and contributed to their disenfranchisement. By viewing skill as a contested resource, subject to distribution struggles, it addresses the issue of how revolution and marketization have changed rural China.

Most importantly the book's premises compare the value of experiential skills to that of written information. Eyferth explores what happens to small communities who lose their command of their processes such as papermaking.

The first part of my visit was to Jiajiang County, Sichuan Province—the same area visited many times by Eyferth—to see a family papermill near the village of Ma or “horse” village. The family name of the papermakers is Zhanhao Yang, (the father's name), and the paper company name is Zhuang Yuan. In this area the soil is red and there is little agricultural product except bamboo. The bamboo and native grasses produce an especially white, soft handmade paper that is fine and smooth, easily absorbs and retains ink, and is used for calligraphy and painting.

The technical knowledge of every step of the papermaking process has passed through twelve generations in the Zhuang Yuan mill. Long-held skills include knowing exactly how and when to harvest the bamboo (generally in May or June); how long to soak (ferment) the bamboo in outdoor troughs (around two months); how to steam the fiber at a low temperature with lime (which takes about two to five days to complete); and how to rinse and do a sec-

ond steaming with caustic soda (which in the past they did with wood ash). After a compressed fermentation for about two weeks, the papermaker pulps the fiber using a foot-operated device that involves a lever and stone cavity. The fiber is then bleached, and formed into sheets by two men working at the vat. After pressing, the sheets are separated by a woman who brushes them onto limestone walls in spurs of ten sheets. Over several days the spurs dry, and are taken down from the walls and parted. Then the sheets are curated and packaged. About 500 to 700 sheets are pulled a day (one sheet a minute for the length of a 10-hour work day; each sheet having a water weight of 25 pounds).

Eyferth describes, and I witnessed, the embodied skills that are sensory in nature. Papermakers use their sense of smell and taste of pulp; they listen for the sound of pressing to know when it is just right; and they can quantify, without the use of scales, the exact ratio of fiber to cooking agent to the temperature and length of cooking time in order to achieve a suitable pulp. This knowledge is based on experiential learning from generation to generation. While the mechanics of the papermaking process can be reproduced, the nuances at each step require a set of detailed, knowledgeable decisions that do not lend themselves well to written instructions. In addition, these skills are not proprietary, but shared. The activity of papermaking is communal, and in Sichuan's papermaking region, the nucleus of reciprocity endures.

Papermakers possess a single surname so that a compact group of relatives and neighbors are core professionals who “all in the family” share knowledge of hand papermaking. The families acknowledge and embrace their obligation to pass down a centuries-old legacy. Eyferth's book states that between 1930 and 1950 papermakers were born into, or married into work and skills that were naturally regulated by membership and entitlement.

Eyferth cites 1650 as the earliest emergence of papermaking in the Jiajiang area. In 1930s and 40s papermaking reached a peak and there were about 60,000 papermakers. In 1949 the Socialist Revolution took place and the paper industry contracted. In 1959–61 the Great Famine took over 25 million people throughout the countryside. In the 1980s a recovery of papermills blossomed and papers were produced for calligraphy and woodcut. Today, modern industry demands that scientific knowledge be expressed in the written word. Embodied knowledge is viewed as an obstruction to economic development, and thus, communities that hold skills and knowledge, like the Jiajiang papermakers, were pushed aside, but some have survived.

My second visit was to the ANHUI (Shenden) Papermill where *qing tan* (*Pteroceltis tatarinowii* Maxim, or blue sandalwood) is employed. I was gifted packs of large-size Anhui paper and have found the paper's strength, luster, and absorption useful in printing woodcuts and etchings. In Anhui, a fountain spring river flows from different hills and different soils. Fibers are laid on the soil in the sun for eight to ten months. It is believed that a *yin/yang* combination of sun, moon, and dew produces valuable papers in this area. By leaving the fibers out to the elements, the dew acts as a buffering agent. This attention to natural and traditional hand processes was demonstrated at the paper museum. There we witnessed the varied steps of the process that were similar to those we saw at Jiajiang. I suspect that this embodied knowledge is not reflected at the industrial papermaking factory that was down the street from the museum.

A major question that I continue to investigate in my research and in my art practice is how productive collaboration across cul-

tures and increased cultural literacy can benefit us as cultural workers and global citizens. I believe that the flattening effect of innovative technology in our century can be counterbalanced by our work to understand, create statements about, and protect indigenous cultural literacy.

Traceries of these concerns are found in my own art, in which I strive to leave evidence in the realms of witnessing and transformative interaction. In observing cultural and immigrant experiences that contain a living work experience, my studio practice celebrates, reflects, interacts, protects, and takes action within group activities. I believe that an artist's practice cannot be separated from community information gathering. Spoken word and collaborative hands-on experience guide my process. I continue to search for skillful practitioners in many cultures and to share the skills I have learned thus far. This seems to be the papermakers' way—to cooperate, exchange, and let knowledge travel. A shared research process that blends expertise towards common goals reassures that an integrative process rather than a single outcome in art develops a valuable organization of concepts and gives the artist (and paper artist) a vital role in society.

Creativity is central to life. Life is enhanced by collaboration. Collaboration enables the formation of hybrids. Hybrid activities manifest as synesthesia and transform into meaningful conversations. Conversations birth new cultural literacy in community. Cultural literacy enables the making of objects and systems and eventually sustainable industries. Objects lead to a larger context of phenomena. Phenomena live through consciousness. Consciousness promotes creative awareness. Creative awareness is central to life.



Hillside drying of fibers outside the Anhui (Shenden) Paper Museum, Xuancheng District, China. Capturing the dew is believed to help "buffer" the paper for longevity.