

Mino Washi: Layers of History

The oldest known extant paper in Japan comes from Mino, in Gifu Prefecture. It was used for a family register from Mino, dated 702 CE. The paper is stored at the Shosoin Repository in Nara Prefecture, which houses ancient treasures and artifacts. The technique of making paper with hemp and bast fibers came to Japan from China. An account in the *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*), published in 720, mentions that the Chinese method of making paper was introduced to Japan by a Buddhist priest from Korea in 610, but papermaking may have been introduced earlier, with the arrival of Buddhism in the mid-sixth century.

The origins of washi

Hemp is difficult to break down into fibers, so techniques were developed locally using plants such as *kozo* (paper mulberry), *mitsumata* (*Edgeworthia chrysantha*) and *gampi* (*Wikstroemia*). Paper made with these plants became known as washi (literally, Japanese paper). Making washi was a profitable activity for farmers during the winter. Over time, it grew into a key rural industry. The way of making Mino washi has changed little in over 1,300 years.

Paper and taxes

Along with commodities such as rice and salt, washi was used to pay taxes. Washi grew in importance as Buddhism spread throughout Japan. Mino washi was used from the Nara period (710–794) for the copying of sutras and for government records including family registers. Mino benefited from convenient access to Kyoto, the capital during the Heian period (794–1185) and beyond.

Demand for Mino washi grows

With the establishment of a Shogunate in Kamakura in Kanagawa Prefecture in twelfth century, Mino washi became popular among the samurai as a gift to present on formal occasions. The Toki family, who governed the Mino region from the fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, opened a paper market in Oyada (part of present-day Mino City). The market was held six times a month, selling Mino washi to merchants who sold it in Kyoto and Osaka.

Mino washi in battle

In 1600, samurai Kanamori Nagachika (1524–1608) who governed the Hida region in the mountains north of Mino, fought on the side of Tokugawa Ieyasu in the Battle of Sekigahara, at the end of the end of the Warring States period. Their decisive victory signaled an end to over 100 years of civil war and social upheaval and united the country under the Tokugawa shogunate. A tassel of strips of Mino washi topped the baton (*saihai*) that Tokugawa Ieyasu used to convey orders to his troops. A replica of the black-lacquered *saihai* is in the collection of the Mino Washi Paper Museum. Mino washi became the official paper of the shogunate, and local makers were given official titles and exemptions on duties. For his loyalty, Kanamori was rewarded with the lands around Mino. He expanded the port on the banks of the Nagara River and developed the town as a center of the paper trade.

Protecting the future

The fortunes of Mino washi waned after World War II, increasingly replaced by printing machines and Western-style wood pulp paper. Lifestyles changed, and the market for washi for use in everyday items such as lanterns and shoji screens diminished. In the twenty-first century, Mino washi is used mainly for traditional crafts and restoration work. The number of papermakers in Mino has dropped from thousands in the late nineteenth century to a handful today who follow the same methods established over 1,000 years ago. Through local efforts, the techniques of making Mino washi continue as part of Japan's craft heritage. In 2014, the handmade washi techniques of Mino were added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.