

Mino Washi: Sustaining an Ancient Art

One of the challenges for the paper industry worldwide is its environmental impact, from deforestation to chemical pollution. Washi paper uses fast-growing natural materials and has a relatively low impact. Hon-minoshi is made using traditional, chemical-free methods, using tools and processes that have changed little in over a millennium.

Low-impact processes and natural materials

The main shrubs for making the paper pulp are *kozo* (paper mulberry), *mitsumata* (*Edgeworthia chrysantha*), and *gampi* (several shrubs of the genus *Wikstroemia*), which all have a short growing cycle. *Kozo* yields an annual crop, while *mitsumata* and *gampi* reach maturity in three years. The papermaking process begins with softening the bark by boiling it with plant ash and soda ash (sodium carbonate). Neither of these substances have adverse effects on aquatic ecosystems.

The other key material for making washi is *nebeshi*, a viscous substance that is extracted from the roots of the *tororoaoi* (sunset hibiscus). *Nebeshi* is mixed with water and pulped bark fibers to help the fibers disperse evenly through the water and prevent clumping. Specialized growers prune the *tororoaoi* plants to encourage root growth. As the number of papermakers has decreased over the years, so has the number of suppliers of these raw materials.

Sustaining the papermakers

Just 6 papermakers are engaged in making Hon-minoshi. Making paper is repetitious and physically demanding and finding young people willing to carry on the craft is a major concern. Fewer washi makers also mean less demand for the specialized tools and equipment used in the process. Month-long courses for aspiring washi makers are offered at the Mino Washi Paper Museum, and the Hon-minoshi makers are open to taking on apprentices.