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***Shifu*: A Traditional Paper Textile of Japan**

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1. Introduction

Looking back at the history of Japanese textiles, the beginning seems to be braiding and/or netting fibres made from tree bark or tall grass (Jomon period - approximately C13th - C10th BC.). Weaving seems to appear after the mid-Jomon period.¹ Silk was brought into Japan in the late-Jomon to the Yayoi period (600BC – 200AD), and for a long time its use was restricted to the upper class.² During the Momoyama period (1573 - 1603) cotton seeds were introduced and cotton grown in Japan. By the mid-Edo period (1603 - 1868) cotton cultivation had spread over the southern part of Japan, and cotton became available to commoners.³ According to Kunio Yanagida, until cotton became known to the ordinary people in the 17th century, they wore cloth made from bast fibres, such as hemp, ramie, *kaji* (paper mulberry), linden, wisteria, etc.⁴ Garments made from tree or grass fibre have been used to protect ordinary people for a few thousand years.

Many stories have been told about the brilliant silk fabrics of Japan but little is known about bast

¹ Yoshioka, *Nihon no iro o someru*, 2002.

² Yoshioka, *Some to Ori no Rekishi-techo*, 1998.

³ Shishikura, *Washi no Rekishi*, 2006.

⁴ Yanagida, *Momen-izen no koto*, 1976.

fibre cloth. Ordinary people's outfits appear in old picture scrolls and we can guess they may have been made from bast fibres, however few actual examples survive. They were worn out so completely that the tiny fragments left were used as part of the fuel supply for the fireplaces.

During the Meiji period (1868 - 1912) the Japanese industrial revolution produced popular machine-made clothing and the unwanted bast garments were left in storage and forgotten. Looking closely at these discarded treasures we get a clear picture of our ancestors everyday lives.

2. Japanese Paper and Paper Thread

According to some paper scholars,⁵ the Japanese have known about paper since the 3rd or 4th century, and paper is supposed to have been made in Japan since the 4th or 5th century. Already in the 8th century, paper was intensively used for copying the sutras, an important Buddhist practice. Until the 17th century, Japanese paper was only for the government and the aristocracy.

Paper thread was used in various ways as soon as the Japanese began making paper. The earliest mention of paper-thread hair-ties appears in the poem books of mid-8th to 10th century Japan⁶. Thin paper-thread hair-ties can be found in the Parkes Collection Japanese Papers at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England.

Recycling is the way that ordinary people used paper in their everyday life. Paper absorbs the sweat well and does not get soaking wet like cotton.

Image 1 is an undergarment made with paper thread from used paper.

⁵ Bunsho Jugaku, Yasuo Kume and Yagihashi Shin are the three major paper-scholars.

⁶ The poem books are Manyo-shu, Kokin-Wakashu and Shin-Kokin-Wakashu.



Image 1

Undergarment, private collection, photo by Chu Fujiwara

3. What is *Shifu*?

Types of *Shifu*

Shifu is a cloth woven with paper thread either in the warp or weft or in both. Traditionally *kinu-jifu* has a silk warp and paper weft; *men-jifu* uses cotton and paper and *asa-jifu* uses ramie or hemp and paper. *Shifu* woven with both paper warp and weft is called *moro-jifu*.

Until the end of the Edo period, different kinds of *shifu* were worn by different classes of people for different purposes. One was the *shifu* made by the samurai class in the Shiroishi district near today's Sendai city. *Shifu* made in Shiroishi used quality handmade paper and was beautiful enough to be presented to the Imperial Court and the Tokugawa Shogunate. The samurai in the district were also encouraged to wear it. The other was the humble *shifu* made by commoners for their own use and it is rarely mentioned in history. Commoners' *shifu* consisted of everyday garments including *kimono*, *haori* (jacket), *obi* (sash), work clothes, the outer layer of duvets and mosquito nets, etc. Looking at the remaining *shifu* from all over the country, we can see this cloth was used for a wide variety of purposes in people's day-to-day lives.

Shifu Through History

Shifu was first mentioned as a local specialty product in Volume 4 of *Kefukigusa*, (edited by Shigeyori Matsue, 1638). Until this book was written, there was no record of how *shifu* had been used. However, as the Japanese people have known about paper since the 3rd or 4th century, we can suppose that paper was made by hand, paper thread was spun, and *shifu* was woven no later than the 5th or 6th century. The use of *shifu* may be dated back ten centuries prior to the recorded documents.

Shifu was mentioned in books⁷ during the 17th and 18th century because, in Shiroishi near the present City of Sendai, the production of *shifu* by samurai during peace time received official sanction. This *shifu* was well regarded for its high quality and this, in part, was due to the fact that the local climate was ideal for cultivating high quality *kozo* (one of the main materials for papermaking). This cultivation was encouraged by the local clan. Papermaking was intensive and *shifu* garments made by and for samurai were encouraged.

Durable *Shifu*

Few people know that Japanese handmade paper can be turned into paper thread and woven cloth. However, when we think about the reason why *shifu* was made from Japanese handmade paper it seems obvious that the quality of the paper is the important factor.

Around the 10th century, papermaking methods in Japan were established and during the next 1,000 years, all the features of a strong, handmade paper were in place. Materials for making that paper probably came from wild *kozo*. Peeled bark from that plant would have been soaked in a river or placed on snow to bleach. The bleached bark would have been boiled in lye extracted from soaking wood ash. Then, the cooked bark would have been soaked in a river or spring water to rinse off the lye. Following nature and making paper as naturally as possible is the most important condition for durable paper.

For over 1,500 years, and with only a few refinements, this traditional papermaking method produced strong paper. This paper was and is spun into thread and the thread woven into a durable *shifu*. Without quality handmade paper neither strong paper thread nor strong *shifu* could be made.

Here are a few *shifu* examples.

Image 2 is a travel jacket for the lower class of samurai or the merchants whose lives were more relaxed than the country farmers. The warp is cotton and the weft is paper thread (*men-jifu*). The fabric is dyed with indigo and the lining is indigo-dyed cotton.

⁷ Some of the books are *Wakan-sansai-ezu* by Ryo-an Terashima 1712, *Ohu-kanseki-monroshi* by Dogen Sakuma 1719 and *Fonai-dosanko* by Toemon Satomi 1798.



Image 2

Travel jacket, private collection, photo by Kenji Maruyama

Image 3 is a unique working jacket made with wisteria vine and paper. The warp is wisteria vine thread and the weft is wisteria vine thread wrapped with cut paper to make the fabric softer and warmer. Most of this type of *shifu* was made of used paper. More than one hundred years ago, this was the kind of clothing worn by ordinary folk. Image 4 is a detail of the working jacket.



Image 3



Image 4, detail of image 3

Working jacket, private collection, photo by Kenji Maruyama

Image 5 is a *Ko-bai-ori* kimono. In Shiroishi, *Ko-bai-ori* (red-plum blossom) has a silk warp and wefts of both silk and paper. Although it is plain tabby weave, a spontaneous design is created by the different coloured threads. There is no proof that this kimono was made in Shiroishi but it has all the qualities of *ko-bai-ori*. Image 6 is a detail of the kimono.



Image 5



Image 6, detail of image 5

Ko-bai-ori kimono, collection of the Yamane Paper Museum, Tottori, Japan, photo by Kenji Maruyama

Continuing *Shifu* Making

Until the end of the Edo period, the word “paper” referred to Japanese handmade paper. From the time that machine-made paper arrived in Japan from the West, (c1874), Japanese handmade paper was called *washi*, (*wa* - Japanese, *shi* - paper), to distinguish it from Western paper. Handmade paper couldn’t compete with machine-made paper in quantity but the former was superior in quality. Then in the 20th century, as wood pulp was added to handmade paper to produce it more cheaply, the quality rapidly deteriorated. An early 20th century travel diary, *Kamisukimura tabi-nikki*,⁸ commissioned by the royal family, describes in great detail the life and work of papermakers throughout Japan. Along with the decline of traditional papermaking and the revolution in the textile industry during the Meiji period, the demands for paper thread and *shifu* decreased.

Fortunately, *shifu* evolved in a brand-new way due to the dedicated effort of a few who attempted to resist the changes of the 1930’s. One of them was Nobumitsu Katakura, a descendant of the Clan Katakura, which was the ruling clan of the former Shiroishi district. In the 1940s, he and a few others started working on a revival of *shifu*. Their efforts to conserve Shiroishi *shifu* continued until the 1980s under the leadership of Mr. N. Katakura. Most active *shifu* weavers⁹ today learned about *shifu* and paper thread making from Mr. Katakura during his lifetime.

⁸ One hundred and fifty copies were self-published by the authors, Bunsho and Shizu Jugaku, in 1940. They were covered by Shiroishi *kinu-jifu*. In 1943 the first popular edition was published by Meiji-shobo.

⁹ These weavers are Kazuyo Kajiyama, Akemi Ikeda and Sadako Sakurai.

4. Contemporary *Shifu* Based on Tradition

Shifu Revival

Under Nobumitsu Katakura, the traditional *shifu* which had almost disappeared during the first half of the 20th century, revived on a modest scale. The necessary handmade paper was made by people with a strong will to keep the tradition going, and *shifu* was made by those who aimed to be paper spinners and *shifu* weavers. These included other members of the Katakura family. In the 1950s a revolutionary change occurred in the Japanese textile industry with the manufacture of synthetic fibres. Inevitably *shifu* entered a different phase. After generations of functional cloth, *shifu* found a new purpose. Today, although one weaver may continue to make *shifu* in the Shiroishi tradition, another weaves it for everyday use in order to pursue its value as folk craft. Yet another feels pleasure in making *shifu* to meet the demands of people who want to wear sophisticated garments like *shifu* -- a rarity in this affluent age. Some papermakers now weave *shifu* to prove the strength of their own handmade paper. Others want to create a new type of *shifu*. Each and every *shifu* weaver can make their own original *shifu* with their own individual ideas.

Whatever the reason for making it, the focus of every weaver is to continue to weave *shifu* based on tradition. Through their efforts, a greater number of people come to know and appreciate *shifu* -- a cloth that was almost lost.

Handmade Paper and Contemporary *Shifu*

In 1874, the production of machine-made paper began in Japan and by 1913 it exceeded the production of handmade paper. Since then papermaking, once carried on throughout Japan until the early 20th century, declined. However, the end of the 20th century saw a revival of the tradition, and today young papermakers are determined to keep it alive.

Even though the reasons for making *shifu* have drastically changed, one factor that has not is the quality of handmade paper. The process of making paper thread is a strain on the paper. During the dyeing stage, the thread is boiled in a dye bath, then left to soak for many hours. Strong paper thread absorbs the color and does not dissolve. Although it is less elastic than many other fibres, it can be used as warp. Even with the continuous up-and-down motion of the heddles during weaving, paper thread does not break. Finished *shifu* is carefully washed in hot water and dried using wooden clamping devices and a number of bamboo stretchers called *shinshi*. A gentle ironing finishes the process.

5. Conclusion: The Significance of Contemporary *Shifu*

Contemporary weavers have continued to make *shifu* following the techniques and procedures of the past. They choose handmade paper made as traditionally as possible, spin paper thread following traditional procedures, use natural dyes in an ecological manner and weave *shifu* by hand.

Shifu has a long history: it came from the needs of people's day-to-day lives. As with most arts and crafts in Japan, contemporary *shifu* evolved from the traditional. Today the reason for making *shifu* is no longer the same as in the past. The beauty and significance of *shifu* no longer derives from its traditional role, but rather from the unique nature of the material used, from the commitment and skill of the makers, and from its special place in the history of Japanese culture.

Following are some examples of contemporary *moro-jifu*.



Image 7 (detail)

"Shifu" by Kazuyo Kajiyama, 2016, 12m x 42cm, indigo, kasuri, photo by Hiroko Karuno



Image 8



Image 9, detail of image 8

"Indigo / Warp-stripes" by Hiroko Karuno, 2015, 15m x 38cm, indigo & walnut, plain tabby, photo by Kenji Maruyama



Image 10



Image 11, detail of image 10

Pine soot / Particoloured” by Hiroko Karuno, 2014, 12m x 38cm, pine soot, plain tabby, photo by Kenji Maruyama

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