



Chapter 10: Papermaking

10.0 Origin of Paper

It is said that in 105 A.D. Ts'ai Lun, who lived in the Eastern Han Empire, broke off a mulberry tree's bark, pounded it into a sheet, and so made the first paper. This carefully guarded secret somehow made it to the secluded Kam who have passed it down from generation to generation in a barely modified form. Every woman learned to make paper in her childhood and throughout her life made many sheets to store valuables like clothing. Some sheets would be used for sorcery, however.

10.1 Paper Magic

Coarse fibers run through tan-colored Kam paper like veins on the old shaman's hands. Master Wu is cutting magic figures from paper we brought to him. Women usually do so to block some sort of evil from harming their families. They collect paper bark and make paper themselves but trust the shaman with creating the right fetish from it.

A row of stiff horses emerges from under green-handled scissors first. Master Wu explains that a paper horse is used to worship ancestors, to put on their graves. I remember seeing a beautiful horse glued to a gravestone of a mother who died some time ago. I assumed it was a child remembering his mother in a tender way at that time.

Five other patterns are in the shaman's repertoire: a latticed rectangle to bring better fate called "building a bridge" that is hung on a bridge as the name suggests, a circle to put on a sick person's headboard to heal them, a chandelier-like form to guard the door from gossiping neighbors, another one for ancestors, and the last one for the gods.



Above left: Master Wu is cutting a horse motif from Kam paper
Above right: Finished horse motif to be used for ancestral worship
Opposite: Grave in the old cemetery with ancestral horse motif





Top: Wu Gai Tian looking out of her house onto the street

10.2 Removing the Mulberry Tree Bark

It's the second day of having an interpreter so we can communicate with people. We go to visit Wu Gai Tian, whom I had met during earlier trips, and want to see if we can apprentice with her. She is well regarded for dyeing fabric, and her paper does not have any additives that others use. Her sixty-eight-year-old friend Wu Huan Can, who lives nearby, is visiting her at that time.

Wu Huan Can is holding four bundles of dry bark in her arms, all white and stiff.

"This is to make paper," she explains. "This is enough to make four pieces."

She crosses the unpaved road next to Wu Gai Tian's house and descends a few steps down to

the river. She throws the bark into the water and weights it down with stones.

"Soak the bark in running water for two days first," Wu Huan Can tells us when we all come back to the cool shade of Wu Gai Tian's house.

"There is only one kind of paper we make, and it has not changed since I was born. I make it partly for sale to our community and some to tourists and then use some for storage and sacrifice. Once a year, we use paper as sacrifice on graves."

We spend a few hours talking with both women, and they agree to start us off by showing us how to strip paper mulberry tree bark. They invite us back that evening.



Dried mulberry bark under-layer is soaking in the river



Above left and middle: Wu Huan Can is examining the white under-layers that will be made into paper

Above right: Wu Gai Tian is fixing her fence with the leftover mulberry sticks



Wu Gai Tian, Wu Huan Can and Anastasya Uskov peel top layers off the mulberry bark with dull sickles

Our first lesson starts festively followed by a delicious dinner. Wu Gai Tian's third son brings fresh vegetables, probably from family fields and a large catfish that he caught today for dinner. We help cut green peppers with a dull cleaver leaving spicy seeds in while we wait for Wu Huan Can to bring the mulberry branches. Our interpreter Ivy has easily fit into our ranks and is helping in the kitchen with us.

Wu Huan Can brings about ten one-centimeter-thick, one-meter-long leafless sticks of the Chinese mulberry tree. They are not mature yet since it is only July and they are harvested in April. The

women carefully peel bark off branches all at once by pulling at a small piece that they separate using a dull sickle. Then, they peel off two outer layers, brown and green, with sickles leaving only deepest white under-layer. It looks easy but we struggle to emulate them, and we keep cutting through the bark without actually peeling anything.

Anastasya observes that they move the sickle in two-centimeter long strokes at an angle, slicing but not cutting the bark. It is much easier once we know that. We gently push at the sickle as we move it forward at an angle, and we separate the two layers relatively well.

When we're done, Wu Gai Tian gathers leftover sticks and fixes her fence with them. She throws the outer layer of bark into the garbage to burn later. We thank our hosts for the lesson and ask whether they would not mind showing us where the plant grows since we wish to learn the entire process.

"It is too far and too hot for you. We do not mind bringing more for you." The women get visibly uncomfortable so we decide not to push them. We will find an opportunity to search for the plants later.



Embroidered dragon by Wu Liang Ming

We still have time to help finish our dinner. We help cut eggplant and chat with Wu Gai Tian's son while he is preparing the main dish. He tells us the story of nearby Tang Gung temple that he heard from his mother:

The emperor of China once came to Guizhou and wanted to visit Dimen. When he was getting close, he asked someone where Dimen was. That person lied and told him he would wear out nine pairs of shoes before arriving to Dimen. The emperor, therefore, turned around and went back home. Many years later, the emperor died and his spirit finally traveled to Dimen and found out it was indeed very close. He visited the Dimen people in their dreams and told them to build a temple.

He then transformed into a dragon and lived in the temple. Ever since then, this dragon protects Dimen. Once the mountain people wanted to attack Dimen and kill its people. All the neighboring villages fell and were killed. The Dimen people heard of the killers coming, and they hid indoors shaking with fear. However, when the mountain people tried to attack Dimen, they saw thousands of soldiers and ran away. The dragon protected Dimen by sending his otherworld army.



Dinner with Wu Gai Tian and Wu Huan Can's families

We eat in the main area that opens out into the street. Two half-circle low tables are joined together and a big steaming wok is placed in the middle. We are having a catfish hot pot, which, as the name suggests, is catfish in a soup made of fresh peppers, preserved fish, tomatoes, rice wine, salt, and ever-present pepper sauce. Anastasya claims it's the best catfish she has eaten. We sit together

with Wu Gai Tian's and Wu Huan Can's families on low stools around the pot holding a simple bowl of rice in one hand and chopsticks in the other. Children run outside and peek in through the open doorway. Dozens of moths and mosquitoes fall all around us, wings burned by the bare light bulb hanging above us. It was a surreal experience.



Chinese mulberry



Wu Yin Niang, Wu Hua Zhuan and their friends waiting to show us the mulberry tree

10.3 Finding and Harvesting the Mulberry Tree

The Chinese mulberry tree, otherwise known as *Morus australis* in Latin, grows wild all around Dimen. A person just needs to know where to find it. The trouble is every woman carefully guards her secret harvest place so that someone does not raid it and force her to search for a new place. After a delightful lunch full of singing, teasing, and camaraderie at Wu Yin Niang's place, we ask our teachers to show us the plant.

They talk together for a while; Wu Hua Zhuan's voice is the loudest and most commanding. They agree to take us there immediately. Our camera batteries are about to die, and we are out of memory space so we beg them to let us go back to our rooms and come back with fresh supplies.

When we come back, all seven women we had lunch with are there. Everyone wants to be present to show us the treasure. Some carry umbrellas since the sun is scorching hot. Our interpreters and we arm ourselves with hats, umbrellas, and plenty of water and snacks in backpacks. We are ready for a long trip to the mountains.

We head out of the village, and the women stop before the last houses have disappeared. They point at a large bush. That's it! Well, we slightly over-prepared for the journey this time.



Left: Chinese mulberry

Right: Woman with a mulberry branch

The mulberry grows just above the main road on a steep slope so it's no secret to anybody. There are about twenty-five two-meter long shoots of about 1 centimeter in thickness growing on a stony outcropping. They form a sphere so I mistook them for a bush, but they will look more like trees when mature.

One of the women climbs above the outcropping precariously balancing a sickle in one hand and swiftly chops off one branch. She then quickly comes down without ever looking. Before we can examine the branch, she chops off all its leaves and takes to removing its bark in one long piece. Without missing a beat, she removes the top layer



and only then deems it appropriate for us to examine her work. She left a few leaves at the very top of the branch intact.

Wu Hua Zhua gets hold of the branch and holds it in both hands in front of her. "There are male and female trees but both are good for making paper," she says waving the branch to emphasize her point.



Left: Woman removing leaves from mulberry branch

Middle: Wu Hua Zhuan lecturing about mulberries

Right: Detail showing mulberry leaf shape



We carefully observe the mulberry leaf. It is very jagged and quite different from leaves I've seen before in Europe and the United States. Now we know how to identify the tree, but we still need to find it in the wild. This starts us on a long quest. Anastasya inserts one leaf into her journal so that we can compare possible candidates. It will take several long trips to the mountains, most of which



are unsuccessful to find at least a few branches.

"There, I can see it," I shout at Anastasya as we climb above the museum.

"No, the leaves are actually quite different, Marie," Anastasya glances up to where I am pointing. This repeats many times through our trip. I take a lot of photographs of beautiful red-colored clay formations, red rocks striped with black veins. We