

CHINA WATCH

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BY WANG RU and ZHU LIXIN

Zhou Donghong, 56, holds a finely woven bamboo screen with his partner. They steep it in a large trough full of pulp and lift it. A piece of moist Xuan paper takes form on the screen, known as a "mold and deckle" in the West. Then they carefully separate the freshly formed sheet of paper from the screen, spreading it flat out without any creases.

The process, called *laozhi* (getting paper out of water) lasts only a dozen seconds, but the adeptness comes from Zhou's experience of doing it repeatedly for 40 years.

This is one of the most important steps in making Xuan paper, a traditional handmade paper in China. The paper, made in Jingxian county, Xuancheng, Anhui province, is the product of a mixture of sandalwood bark, rice straw and stream water from the mountains.

Papermaking is the crystallization of wisdom of ancient Chinese people, regarded as one of the four great inventions of China, with gunpowder, the compass and printing techniques. Among various types of handmade paper in China, Xuan paper is famous for its close links to traditional calligraphy and ink paintings.

The traditional handicrafts of making Xuan paper were inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2009.

Although *laozhi* seems simple, it is the most difficult step in making Xuan paper, with demanding technical details.

"The process of paper forming



Getting the paper out of water.



Drying and smoothing out the paper.



Checking the quality and cutting the sheets.



Checking printed paper pages.

A cultural paper trail

Traditional craft survives and thrives despite challenges



Checking the quality of each sheet is one of the 108 procedures in making Xuan paper. PHOTOS BY ZHU LIXIN / CHINA DAILY

is the most difficult because I have to transform something intangible into something tangible, which means I need to scoop it out from the pulp and turn it into a sheet of paper," Zhou says. "The thickness, uniformity and weight of this sheet are all controlled by my hands. In some way my hands are just like a scale."

The skill can be mastered only through long hours and painstaking practice. Zhou says that he started learning the craft as an apprentice in 1985.

In 1986 he became an employee of a Xuan paper factory in

Jingxian, which is today's China Xuan Paper Co., Ltd. After finding a good teacher, and years of practice, he has honed his skills to the extent that 99% of the paper he makes meets the standard.

In 1993 Zhou was given the task of restoring *zhahua*, an ancient type of Xuan paper renowned for being incredibly light and "just as thin as cicada wings". One hundred sheets of *zhahua* weigh just 3.1 pounds, less than half of the weight of ordinary Xuan paper. Zhou did a lot of reading and experimentation, adjusting the concentration

of paper pulp and the intensity of his movements, and he finally managed to re-create the paper.

Making Xuan paper is extremely demanding, and it takes nearly three years to produce a batch of it through 108 procedures. An artisan can only skillfully master some of them over a lifetime.

For example, although Zhou, a master of *laozhi*, knows all the other procedures, he specializes in that one area and the procedures it entails, because each requires long-term practice to attain the necessary level of skill. As a result, the whole papermaking process



Among various types of handmade paper in China, Xuan paper is famous for its close links to traditional calligraphy and ink paintings. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

requires a lot of collaboration.

Five people form a group, two for *laozhi*, two for *shaizhi* (drying paper) and one for *jianzhi* (checking quality of and cutting paper). Work results of the whole group are evaluated together. "There are high demands for the appearance, evenness and weight of the finished products," Zhou says. "The weight of one piece of Xuan paper has only a 0.035-ounce margin of error. Paper that is not up to scratch is sent back for reproduction, and we're not paid for it."

"It's all about group spirit, tacit understanding and mutual trust."

The earliest record of Xuan paper can be found in *On Famous Paintings Through the Ages*, a book written by the Tang Dynasty (618-907) scholar Zhang Yanyuan, in which he described Xuan paper's function as being a carrier of calligraphy and painting.

Huang Feisong, director of the Xuan Paper Research Center at China Xuan Paper Co., Ltd., says that based on clues in the historical record, Xuan paper was named after its main production area, Xuancheng.

"Xuan paper has many characteristics, such as the ability to show different shades of ink, its stability, its durability and its resistance to insects, of which the first is the most prominent, and that's why it has been the favorite of calligraphers and painters through the ages."

"The other features ensure it can be kept for ages, and that enables paintings, calligraphy, ancient documents and books

to be passed down to the present day."

Li Xiaolong, a Chinese ink painter, says that when one creates freehand brush paintings, showing ink variations is important. Some painters drip or splash ink like raindrops, and Xuan paper is the best for showing what they want to present.

"Xuan paper and artists are just like fish and water, which means they need each other. Xuan paper can show its quality through the creation of calligraphers and painters, and artists cannot give full play to their talent without Xuan paper."

Tang Shukun, director of the Handmade Paper Institute at the University of Science and Technology of China in Hefei, Anhui, says calligraphy and ink paintings, especially freehand brushwork created on Xuan paper, have their unique appeal. As early as the Tang Dynasty Xuan paper was listed as a tribute to the imperial court.

As Chinese calligraphy and paintings developed, so did Xuan paper, Tang says.

Jingxian became an important place for papermaking during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Huang says.

The Xuan paper industry has grown steadily in Jingxian. Last year about 551 short tons of Xuan paper were produced in the county, and more than 30,000 locals are engaged in the industry.



Online Watch the video by scanning the code.



Foldable fans are popular products made by China Xuan Paper Co., Ltd. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Old treasure's fineries on display

BY XING WEN and ZHU LIXIN

Amid the spectacle of the Olympic Games opening ceremony in Beijing in August 2008 the colossal screen in the Bird's Nest stadium displayed the process of creating a traditional Chinese painting, from the making of Xuan paper and the delicate brushwork applied to its surface, to the art of mounting the finished masterpiece on a scroll.

The short film not only showcased the allure of China's "four treasures of the study", namely Xuan paper, brushes, ink and ink slabs, but also conveyed the serenity of classical Chinese art.

Clad in pristine white robes, craftspeople skillfully executed the steps involved in making Xuan paper, an exquisite and enduring material closely associated with Chinese calligraphy and paintings.

The age-old craft continues to be faithfully practiced by a dedicated group of craftspeople in Jingxian county, Xuancheng, Anhui province. The enduring tradition has not only made the county one of the country's leading hubs for handmade paper, but has also breathed new life into its culture and tourism sectors.

Nestled at the base of emerald hills in Jingxian is a white struc-

ture that resembles a stack of gracefully arranged paper.

This is the Xuan Paper Museum, dedicated to the history and craft of Xuan paper production that displays masterpieces of traditional calligraphy and painting.

The museum is part of Xuan Paper Cultural Park, constructed by China Xuan Paper Co., Ltd. People can visit workshops to experience the traditional way Xuan paper is made.

Apart from producing paper in a variety of sizes, China Xuan Paper Co., Ltd. also makes cul-

tural and creative products made from the paper, such as foldable lanterns shaped like books and paper umbrellas. Huang Yingfu, deputy chief manager of the company, said it is also expanding the use of Xuan paper in areas such as stamp production, book printing and as paper used for restoring cultural artifacts.

In the contemporary art world the age-old, humble material also remains a source of vitality and inspiration, inspiring artists to create unconventional installations.

Among the exhibits of the

Chengdu Biennale 2023, Zhu Jinshi's pillar-like installation, which stands 39 feet tall and is 11 feet in diameter, is made using an internal steel frame covered with Xuan paper. He has named the piece Du Fu Tower, in tribute to the Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Du Fu.

Zhu's exploration of the use of Xuan paper in art installations dates back to 1988. Explaining why he has been using the paper for so long, he says that his installations are the product of challenging traditional forms of calligraphy and painting on Xuan paper.



From top: An art installation covered with Xuan paper by Zhu Jinshi. Xuan paper is used in book printing. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY