

# FROM SHEET TO THREAD TO PAGE

AIMEE LEE

One of the most popular and enduring techniques I have used in my artist's books is a combination of ancient Asian paper manipulation, traditional fiber methods, and book binding structures that result in knitted books. I will explain the first step in detail, which is based on shifu (paper cloth) preparation.<sup>1</sup>

The best paper for making thread is strong, thin, Eastern-style paper made from long fibers. Most good-quality kozo paper will work, though Asao Shimura<sup>2</sup> makes excellent paper for this purpose from pineapple fiber. Begin by folding a sheet of paper against its grain in half. Then repeat this fold with one variation: leave a half-inch clearance at the two open edges of the folded sheet (as you develop facility, you can vary the width of the clearance). Square a triangle against the folded edge closest

Torn edges along one edge, which will leave slubs after being spun.



Cut paper opened, with edges intact.

to the open edges, and cut parallel slices from top folded edge through bottom folded edge. These cuts are parallel to the grain. The width of each strip determines the thickness of the final thread. Always leave the top edge intact, or else you will cut your sheet into many separate strips of paper, rather than one continuous strip.

This method increases efficiency because you cut through the entire length of the paper by moving your knife through only a quarter of the length (and four layers simultaneously). It also prevents accidentally cutting through the top clearance, because you cut away from the intact ends. Next, open the whole sheet. For the weakest thread, go immediately to the next step: starting at one intact edge, tear away the first strip from the right corner of the sheet. Then travel left, tearing every other cut through the clearance. Once you finish that edge, turn the sheet upside down and repeat, but with staggered tears based on the already-torn edge. If you tear at both ends of the same cut, the whole strip will fall off of the sheet. In the end, the whole sheet will zigzag open into one single strand.

I manipulate the paper after cutting, to roll and texture the individual strands. In traditional shifu making, the pre-torn strips are rolled against special rocks. Some students rub the strands between their hands. I use



# knitted paper books

Korean joomchi techniques by misting the front and back of the strips lightly with water, gathering the uncut ends together, and squeezing together the entire bunch of strips. Then I pleat that length into a tiny ball, roll it between my hands, and throw it onto a table until it opens up again. I grab one set of ends and whip the length against the table, and repeat on the other side. After a while, the strips look less like paper and display distinctive joomchi wrinkling and added strength.

After I tear the ends while damp, I finish the process by rolling the thread against my thigh with my hand. I start with one end and push the strip away from me with my right palm on my right thigh. The left hand is the anchor and holds the paper waiting to be rolled. As I work, I pick up the wound thread and pull it to my right, where it falls to the floor. This end will slowly unwind, but the strip retains the memory of being

Damp paper thread after thigh spinning.



Aimee Lee, *Pairs II*, 2013, Hanji, washi, marker (knitted slip and slide binding), 2.5 x 2.25 x 1.25 inches closed

wound. For a tighter spin, I use an antique Swedish bobbin winder with one end of the dry strand taped to the shaft.<sup>3</sup> For the most elegant thread, work on the thigh first and tighten on the bobbin winder.

Once I have enough paper thread, I knit pages and covers out of paper. I purl exclusively for more tension control because paper has no elasticity. With so little give, you will develop painful hand cramps if you knit too tightly. I have used varied binding techniques to piece these books together, from accordions to pamphlets to single-sheet and exposed-spine bindings, but my new favorite is the slip-and-slide developed by both Hedi Kyle and Alisa Golden (who calls it a slot and tab). Inspired by Velma Bolyard's experiments with this binding in woven form, I knit pages and covers that slide into each other to provide an elegant, non-sewn solution. Content, color, and visual texture can be added by making marks on the intact sheet before cutting, which was used in the past as a way to transmit secret messages. More options include printing and sewing onto the final knitted field, and any other techniques that your books demand.

1 See Susan Byrd's excellent article in *Hand Papermaking Magazine*, Volume 1, Number 2 (Winter 1986): "Shifu: Fine Handmade Paper Cloth." Her book, *A Song of Praise for Shifu*, will be published by The Legacy Press in fall 2013.

2 Asao can be reached at [hanjishifu@yahoo.com](mailto:hanjishifu@yahoo.com) and his website is [asapress.info](http://asapress.info).

3 I recommend learning this technique from Velma Bolyard, an expert paper and textile weaver, who offers workshops across the U.S. and Australia: <http://velmabolyard.blogspot.com/>.