

# Saa Paper

## An Age-old Tradition

Text by Sally Bilski  
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Discovering methods of communicating and recording thoughts has always been important to humankind. Early communication tools included leaves, waxed boards, silk, and bronze and clay tablets, but it wasn't until the invention of paper that information could be disseminated easily.

Paper as we know it today was invented by a Chinese court official named Ts'ai Lun in 105 AD. Records indicate that he mixed mulberry bark, hemp and rags with water, mashed them into a pulp, pressed out the liquid and hung the thin mat to dry in the sun. As a result, paper was born.

In northern Thailand, the Karen hill-tribe people have been making paper with a method similar to Ts'ai Lun's for nearly 800 years. They noticed the pulpy bark of the *saa*, or paper mulberry, tree peeling from its trunk at the

end of the rainy season and began harvesting this bark to produce the beautifully textured saa paper that is so popular today.

Saa trees grow easily and abundantly in the mountainous forests of northern Thailand where the climate is cool and damp. They can reach an average height of approximately six to ten meters.

The production of saa paper is quite tedious and requires several stages. To harvest the bark, the trees are cut thirty to fifty centimeters above the ground, enabling new growth to sprout quickly from the remaining trunk. Initial cuttings occur when the tree is approximately one year old, and subsequent cuttings can then be done every six months.

The bark is then peeled from the tree cuttings in long strips and hung to dry in the sun for one to three



Colorful umbrellas display the beauty of saa paper.

Sally Bilski



Judie Fleming

*Paper mulberry (saa) trees grow abundantly in northern Thailand where the climate is cool and damp.*



Rajaneer Prakkamakul

*A worker pulls bark from a newly cut tree.*

days. Once dry, this bark can be stored for several years to be used as needed.

When the workers are ready to produce the paper, the dried bark is soaked in water for twenty-four hours. After soaking, the bark is boiled in cauldrons of water for four to five hours. Wood ash is often added to raise the alkalinity of the water which enhances the softening of the fiber. Once the fiber is soft, the cauldrons are left to cool overnight.

The following day the fiber is removed and washed several times until clean. Bleaching powder is added at this time, if stunning white paper is the desired end-product. The washed and rinsed pulp is then pounded by hand with a large mallet or by using a pounding machine.

The pounded pulp is placed in containers of cool water. If the pulp is pounded by hand, sap from okra may be added to the water to disperse the pulp, resulting in smoother paper. If colored paper is preferred, dyes can be added, many of which continue to be made from natural products such as flowers and plants. A fine mesh screen is then skimmed through the water to collect the pulp. This is repeated several times until the desired thickness of the paper is achieved.

As a decorative touch, fresh or dried flowers, leaves



Judie Fleming

*First soaked in water, the bark is then boiled in cauldrons to soften the fiber.*



Judie Fleming

*Fiber from the bark is washed several times until clean.*



Judie Fleming

*Workers remove the rinsed pulp from large cauldrons.*



Rajaneer Prakkamakul

*Pounding the pulp by hand requires the use of heavy wooden mallets such as these.*

Sally Bliski



*A woman places fresh flower petals on the screen of pulp to add color and texture to the paper.*

or other natural materials can be added. The screens containing the pulp are placed in the sun to dry for about half a day. Once dry, the paper is peeled from the screen and is now ready to be made into numerous types of products.

Saa paper continues to be made by hand in some of the hilltribe villages throughout northern Thailand; however, much of the saa paper now seen is being produced with machinery. When saa paper is made in a factory, the process remains similar to the way it was done centuries ago except that pounding machines are used instead of mallets and drying machines instead of the sun's rays. Although peeling machines have been invented, they have not been perfected, so most peeling is still done manually, a time-consuming task. Saa paper made by hand is much rougher than the machine-made



Sally Bliski

*Screens of saa pulp have been set to dry in the sun.*

Sally Bliski



*Finished saa paper comes in an assortment of textures and colors.*



Sally Bilski

Handpainted cards by Bangkok watercolor artist Rajanee Prakkamakul.



Sally Bilski

Decorative gift bags made of saa paper can be found for sale throughout Thailand.



Sally Bilski

Photo albums are another popular item made from saa paper.

variety and is more expensive.

Saa paper is considered an environmentally friendly product for several reasons. It is made of natural components, the trees grow rapidly and the Thai government has established programs to train villagers to preserve the trees and guard against overharvesting.

Originally, saa paper was used for Buddhist manuscripts, temple decorations during festivals, umbrellas, fans and kites. Today, it is used for a vast array of products including greeting cards, gift paper, lampshades, photo albums, gift boxes and bags, and picture frames. Umbrellas made from saa paper remain very popular with Thais and tourists alike.

Saa paper is no longer essential for communicating thoughts but with its natural beauty and artistic appearance is used more as a form of aesthetic expression. It is certainly worth all the time and effort that goes into the making of this product. Let's hope this age-old tradition continues in northern Thailand. ❖

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*Sally Bilski, Assistant Managing Editor of Sawaddi, enjoys photography and traveling.*

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### Author's Note:

Special thanks to Rajanee Prakkamakul for taking time out of her busy schedule to answer my questions regarding this article. Khun Rajanee is a watercolor artist who paints on saa paper and has done extensive research on the creation of saa paper. Additional information on her work can be viewed at [www.mulberrysquare.com](http://www.mulberrysquare.com)



Sally Bilski

Rajanee Prakkamakul displays her watercolor art.

# SAWADDI

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