

## Methods of infanticide in Japan. Alan Macfarlane

We can divide the methods into passive and active. The active ones were those deliberate actions which were taken to kill the infant. Two methods are mentioned. 'Killing off a newborn baby was a simple enough business. You just moistened a piece of paper with spittle and put it over the baby's nose and mouth; in no time at all it would stop breathing.'<sup>1</sup> The idea of using paper for this purpose may strike a western reader as implausible. Yet one has to take into account that Japanese paper (**washi**) was immensely strong. 'Japanese paper was employed not only for the usual purposes, but also for "bags, umbrellas, lanterns, and sliding screens".' Oiled, it was used as raincoats, it was also made into other forms of clothing, for fireworks, for rope, and even during the second world war for huge balloons to carry bombs. In particular, it was used for homicide. We are told that '**washi** has also been used successfully for generations to suffocate those one wishes to be rid of but leave no marks upon...the killer lays a wet piece of **washi** over the victim's mouth and nose just after a breath is exhaled...and does whatever necessary to keep the victim from removing the paper...in the end all he has to do is peel away the damp paper. The victim shows no signs of foul play, and, once dried, the highly durable **washi** proves perfectly serviceable for sending letters or writing poems.'<sup>2</sup>

If the baby somehow survived this treatment and it was thought unlucky to try again, then it was allowed to live. If the urgency was greater, then harsher methods would be used. 'The old woman reckoned the best way of dealing with unwanted children was by '**usugoro**' (mortar killing')...the usual method was to stick a piece of paper over their nose and mouth or, if that failed, to press on their chest with your knee. In '**usugoro**' the woman went alone into one of the buildings outside and had the baby lying on a straw mat. She wrapped the thing in two straw sack lids, tied it up with rope, and laid it on the mat. She then rolled a heavy wooden mortar over it. When the baby was dead, she took it outside and buried it herself.' (p.210)

Possibly more common was a technique of semi-abandonment of infants. We are told that there was a specific form of practice in the late Tokugawa called **sutego** or abandonment.<sup>3</sup> Young infants were left outside the houses of richer citizens or at cross-roads in the hope that they would be adopted. Up to the Meiji period 'In the city of Tokyo alone, hundreds of babies were abandoned in public places where they were likely to be noticed and picked up. In rural areas they were commonly abandoned in front of the homes of wealthy farmers...'<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps even more common was the exposure of children within the house. A woman described how her mother had delivered her own baby in the fields, and lugged it home with the firewood. 'When we got into the house, Mother left the baby on a straw mat in front of the kitchen stove. You know, she didn't even wrap it up to keep it warm....The baby was bawling its head off and I went to see if it was

<sup>1</sup> p.203

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, Japanese Papermaking, p.8

<sup>3</sup> Kalland, Famines, p.62

<sup>4</sup> Hane, p.209

all right, but Mother said, "Leave it alone. If it's a weak thing it's going to die anyway, so let it get on with it".' (p.207) The author remembered another baby: 'When I went to look, there was a newborn baby lying on a mat in front of the stove, completely naked though it was the middle of December. I seem to remember a couple of babies died soon after they were born but I'm not absolutely certain.' (p.207) In such cases it would be extremely difficult for the authorities to prove infanticide. Many children died a few hours or days after birth and this would just be another. It also had the added advantage, as the woman noted, of ensuring 'survival of the fittest'. It would be most interesting to know more about this. As XXX suggests, 'intentional or inadvertent neglect of undesired children...might show up in differential infant and child mortality figures.'<sup>5</sup> In fact it does not (check XXX) perhaps because the crucial time was in the first couple of months. [Practice of registration of births? Sooner done, more difficult infanticide.](XXX)

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<sup>5</sup>Hanley and Wolf (eds), Family (xerox), 225