Tracing the Origins of the Folding Fan

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To the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever discussed and analyzed from a historical point of view, as opposed to a fan collector's perspective, when and where the folding fan was invented. This short essay is probably the first historical analysis of the invention of the folding fan.

Folding fans in England and Europe

One of the oldest books in English about folding fans is *Fans of Japan* by Charlotte Salwey, published in 1893. This book is of particular note to the Japan Society, because it was written in close cooperation with Professor William Anderson, FRGS, who was Chairman of the Japan Society at the time. Interestingly, there was a discussion about Japanese fans at a cultural meeting of the Japan Society on 8 December 1892. At that meeting, a Japanese member advocated the revival of fan culture in England for men as well as women.

According to my research, there were many fan dealers in London at that time, including two famous fan makers in Regent Street: Dickens & Jones, and J Duelleroy at 187 Regent Street. I have seen fans made by these London fan makers at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

To my knowledge, the oldest surviving European folding fan is a *brisé* fan dating from about 1620 in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (see left). The term *brisé* describes a fan made of sticks with no fan leaf.

Brisé fan from Florence, 1620s. The Victoria and Albert Museum (T.184-1982)
However, folding fans appear in paintings even earlier. Probably the oldest picture with a folding fan is a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger in the National Portrait Gallery, London. Known as the 'Ditchley Portrait', it was painted in 1592 and shows her holding a fan in her right hand.

In 1709, the Worshipful Company of Fan Makers was incorporated in England as a guild to prohibit the sale of foreign-made fans within the limits of the City of London. In 1878, a fan makers' exhibition was held at Drapers' Hall in the City, and it was recorded that six thousand visitors attended.

What was probably the first fan auction was held by Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge on 8 June 1882. I have the catalogue of the auction, at which 463 fans were tendered.

In Europe during the eighteenth century, it was common for leather to be used as the fan leaf of a folding fan. The use of paper came a little later. Another fashion in European fans was recorded in the preface of the Catalogue of the Collection of Fans and Fan-leaves presented to the Trustees of The British Museum by the Lady Charlotte Schreiber (1893):

The custom of decorating fans and fan-leaves with historical, political, or social illustrations, engraved or drawn by hand, was very prevalent both in England and on the Continent during the last and the early years of the present century.

**Fixed and folding fans**

There are two broad categories of fan. The fixed, or rigid, fan you cannot fold or unfold. In Japanese it is known as uchiwa. The second category is the folding fan. This is subdivided into different types; generic folding fans (ōgi), fans made out of wooden tablets or
strips (ひおぎ), paper folding fans (かわうろ), fans made out of silk or leather and brisé folding fans made from ivory or tortoiseshell.

Fixed fans have a very old history going back to biblical times and beyond. Tradition has it that Chinese Emperor Hsien Yuan (circa 2697 BC) used fans. Murals in the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs also show the use of a palm frond or other leaf as a fan in ancient Egypt. Those fans in ancient China and Egypt are all fixed fans, not folding fans.

I support the conclusion of the majority of Western collectors that the folding fan is a Japanese invention, while the fixed fan is a very old Chinese or Egyptian invention. Folding fans discovered in China go back to the end of the Northern Song period and in Korea to the Goryeo Dynasty, both the late tenth century. In Japan, however, the Manyōshū collection of 4,536 poems from the period 629–759 already included the use of the word 'fan', although it is unclear whether it referred to a folding fan or fixed fan.

**Western speculation and the folktale theory**

There are ample references to the origin of the folding fan in Western literature. In *Fans of Japan* (1893), Charlotte Salwey describes 'Folding fans, with bamboo frames, invented by the Japanese in the reign of Emperor Tenchi 668–671 AD,' but she fails to give any supporting evidence or persuasive reasoning as to why she concluded it was invented in Japan at that particular time. Similarly, *A Collector's Guide to Fans over the Ages* (1975) by Bertha de Vere Green says bamboo folding fans were invented by the Japanese in 668–671. Presumably, both books subscribe to the so-called 'folktale theory,' to which I'll return later.

*A Book About Fans: The History of Fans and Fan Painting* by M A Flory, published by MacMillan & Co in 1895, offers no analysis of when Japan invented the folding fan, simply saying, 'The folding fan is supposed to be a Japanese invention of the 7th or 8th century A.D.' *The Book of Fans* (1978) by Nancy Armstrong sounds more certain, asserting that 'the fans were either fixed and rigid or folding – the latter being a technique invented by the Japanese in the seventh century AD.' *From the Land of the Fan* (2001) by Michael Dean is
more cautious saying, ‘The folding fan (Sensu)... appears to have been a purely Japanese invention.’

*Fans from the East* published by Debrett’s Peerage Limited in 1978 contains an essay by Joe Earle, the current Senior Vice President of the Japan Society of New York, whom I know very well. His analysis is even more circumspect. He says:

The evidence in favour of a Japanese origin for the folding fan is circumstantial rather than conclusive, but contemporary sources suggest that the fan was popular in Japan long before it became widespread on the mainland and there was certainly nothing resembling the *hiogi*, rather than the paper fan, in China until a much later date.

*Fans of Imperial Japan* (1982) was written by Neville John Irôns, who donated most of his fan collection to the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. Irôns has the following to say:

The *Hiogi* is recorded from the time of Tenji (668–671) and is of the *brisé* genre, larger than most others, constructed of thirty-five to thirty-eight blades, threaded together and secured by an ornamental rivet, made of *Hí* wood or bamboo, painted in bright colours usually depicting a landscape and appended with long skill ribbons. Early examples of the court fan, though smaller, are preserved in the Itsukushima temple treasury and are usually associated with the boy-Emperor Antoku (d 1183). It is upon the existence of this fan that the Japanese case for the invention of the folding fan insecurely rests.

The first literary reference to both *ogi* and *uchiwa* fans appears in a Japanese dictionary, circa 930, and makes the distinction between the two. The *ogi* is defined as a folding fan and the *uchiwa* as belonging to the *pien-mien* variety, which helps greatly in distinguishing the two types.

*Ogi* (1992) written by Julia Hutt & Hélène Alexander is the most comprehensive study of the history of the Japanese fan. This book says the following about folding fans: ‘circumstantial evidence points to the fact that it is quite likely to have originated in Japan.’ This book correctly mentions the second oldest Japanese folding fan made of wooden strips, which dates from the year 877. However, it fails to mention the oldest wooden tablet fan from the

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year 747. The book also fails to analyse when the paper folding fan was invented in Japan.

_Fans_ written by Avril Hart and Emma Taylor, and published by V&A Publications in 1998, says, ‘Folding fans with an attached pleated leaf originated in Japan from about twelfth century AD.’ This book, yet again, offers no analysis of how they reached this date, nor does it give any evidence from the twelfth century. I do not understand why this book says the twelfth century, even though many other English books mention a much earlier date.

_Fans_ (2000) by James MacKay reveals the origin of much of this speculation:

All of the early fans had one thing in common: they had a fixed or rigid leaf, while fans of this type have continued right down to the present day, the folding fan was a relative newcomer, supposedly devised in Japan around AD 670. The story goes that the anonymous artist got the idea from the structure of a bat’s wings, the opportunity to study them arising when one of those creatures got trapped in his bedroom, flew into a lamp in its panic, and burned its wings so badly that it crashed on the floor. As this incident took place in the short reign of Ten-ji (668–672), the invention of Hiro-agi or ‘wide end fan’ can be dated fairly precisely.

In my opinion, though, you cannot correctly judge anything merely from a folktale. There are other English books which adopt this folktale theory to decide a year of invention.

**Strips of wood bound together as notebooks**

The Japan section of the Chinese history book, _Song History_, refers to two types of folding fans among the gifts presented by a Japanese monk Chônen to the Emperor of the Song Dynasty in 988. The list of gift items from Japan includes a ‘bat fan’ (_kawahori_) and a wooden strip fan (_hiôgi_). The Chinese poet Su Dongpo (1036–1101) wrote a poem saying, ‘It was a surprise to know that the barbarian Japanese produced such a complicated folding fan.’

So, how was a folding fan of wooden strips or wooden tablets (_hiôgi_) first invented in Japan? The aristocracy used wooden strips as a notebook to inscribe something important. When there are many things to write, you would need either numerous strips, or a very
large board like a classroom blackboard. When you want to carry your notebook, a large square board is inconvenient. Therefore, narrow strips are more portable. However, it is also inconvenient to carry around a large number of unbound strips of wood. Thus, the need to bind them arose. It was quite natural to bind only the bottom edge so that they could slide and open to form a shell shape, allowing you to read all the strips at once.

In Nara, which was the capital of Japan (710–784) before Kyoto, archaeologists have discovered many wooden strips, on which many things were written, such as court records, complaints, and rules and regulations of the aristocracy. This illustration shows a common shape of the wooden strips found in Nara. Several strips were bound together by string at both the upper and lower grooves. The string in the upper groove was used to bind all the strips, and the string in the lower groove was used to bind the strips like loose leaf paper. The bound wooden strips found in Nara could have been a very primitive style of folding fan. Judging from the date of items excavated in the same place, the oldest wooden strips in a fan shape discovered in Japanese soil date back as far as 747. This is the origin of the Japanese folding fan.

Most wood strips of the Nara period were nearly one shaku (尺) in length (30.3 cm) and about five bu (分) wide (1.5 cm). In the Heian period (794–1185), the shape of the wood strips changed as shown in the following illustration.

Using a pivot hole in the centre of the bottom of the strip meant they were no longer ‘loose leaf’, but had become a permanent binder, thereby forming a perfect fan shape. The upper groove was used as a string holder as well as to paginate through the strips.

The second oldest wooden strip fan in Japan was discovered in 1959. We know how
old it is because the date is written on one of the strips: December in the first year of Gangyō (877). The fan was discovered inside one of the arms of the statue of senjū-kannon, the thousand-armed Kannon goddess of mercy in Tōji Temple in Kyoto. The fan has twenty wooden leaves with pictures and writing on them about the carvers and carving technique of the statue. This fan is about one hundred years earlier than the first folding fan in China or Korea. As I mentioned earlier, even the oldest Chinese or Korean fans so far discovered are from the late tenth century.

From wooden strips to paper

A paper folding fan was called kawahori, which means a bat, because of the similarity of appearance between an opened paper folding fan and the opened wings of a bat. Due to the fragile nature of paper, the oldest surviving paper folding fan is incomplete. It was found in Akitsu village in Wakayama Prefecture. Archaeologists said the fan was from the late Heian period. Unfortunately, we cannot pinpoint more specifically the year of creation. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, the Japan section of Song History used the word kawahori, so one can say that paper folding fans appeared in Japan before 988.

The next question is how many years earlier than 988 can we go back to determine when paper folding fans were invented in Japan? To answer this, we must study the history of paper in Japan. Before the introduction of paper from China, Japan used bamboo or wooden sticks or strips as writing material. Many wooden strips have been discovered by archaeologists. They date back as far as 100 BC to the fifth century.

In January 604, Prince Shōtoku established the first Constitution of Japan, the Seventeen-Article Constitution, and unified Japan on the basis of Buddhism. Surprisingly, this 604 constitution remained the sole constitution of Japan until the Meiji Constitution of 1889. Although the original Seventeen-Article Constitution no longer exists, I believe it was written on paper, not on wooden strips or bamboo plates. I base this belief on the preciousness of paper at that time (therefore the Prince could use it), and its proximity to Hokke Gisho, an annotated commentary

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On the Lotus Sutra written by Prince Shōtoku in 614 and the oldest surviving paper manuscript. It was only ten years before the Hokke Gishō that Prince Shōtoku promulgated the Seventeen-Article Constitution. Paper itself might have been imported from China before 604, as it is said that paper production technology arrived in Japan from China in 610.

In the Asuka period (592–645), paper was very rare in Japan. As a precious writing material, the use of paper was limited to the top aristocracy. It was a kind of privilege for a high ranking person like Prince Shōtoku to use paper for writing. Hokke Gishō can be considered as a kind of Japanese Bible of Buddhism. It was written on four scrolls of paper, and the originals are kept today by the Imperial Household Agency in Tokyo. It is more than a National Treasure (kokuhi). It is an Imperial Treasure (gyobutsu). I recently made a phone call to the Imperial Household Agency in Tokyo and confirmed that Hokke Gishō was safely kept by them. The second oldest paper manuscript in Japan is the Golden Light Sutra (konkōmyō kyō), a Buddhist prayer book found by archaeologists in Osaka. It was written in 677.

**Chronology of the origin of the paper fan**

In order to determine when the paper folding fan was invented in Japan, there are nine important facts:

1. The arrival of paper production technology from China in 610.
2. The oldest surviving evidence of the use of paper in Japan is from 614.
3. The second oldest paper manuscript is from 677.
4. The oldest surviving wood strip fan is from 747.
5. The Gion Festival in Kyoto started in 869. The festival conductors use paper folding fans. Since the Gion Festival is a townspeople's festival organized by volunteers of many districts in Kyoto, it is inconceivable that they used wooden strip fans, which were solely for use by the aristocracy.
6. The second oldest wooden strip fan is from 877.
7. The oldest historical evidence of the use of the word kawahori (namely a paper folding fan) was in 988.


One can therefore reasonably and safely conclude that the invention of the paper folding fan in Japan was after 747, but before 988. Considering that the existence of paper itself and of paper production technology in Japan both predate the oldest surviving evidence of a wood tablet fan from 747, one can further reasonably conclude that the paper folding fan was invented immediately after 747. I would therefore conclude that the paper folding fan was invented in the middle or late eighth century in Japan.

**The paper fan both as an art object and in art**

After the invention of the paper folding fan, it evolved into a portable painting. Portability is an important factor in Japanese art, whereas Western art tends to be huge and immovable. The Japanese fan evolved into a combination of Japanese painting and the best of decorative art including carving, maki-e (a technique of decorating lacquer ware by sprinkling gold or silver dust over wet lacquer designs), inlay, zōgan (marquetry), and metal jewellery.

A Korean Essayist, Lee O-Young, properly described the Japanese folding fan as a 'moving museum' in his book *The Japanese Taste for Miniaturization*. He also said in his book, "The Japanese folding fan is art that condenses the universe into the size of your palm."

In Kyoto, many fan makers appeared as early as the fifteenth century. One of the earliest was Kawauchiya, which was established in 1405. Paintings from the time show us that fan making was the profession of women. The first fan market, where many fan sellers got together, was held in Kyoto in 1490. Thereafter, the market was held periodically.
The Annual Events Picture Scrolls (Nenjū-gyōji emaki), which were created around 990, depict the daily lives of aristocrats, soldiers, and townspeople. They show people using fans. The Animal Caricatures (Chōjū-giga) scrolls were created in or around the late Heian period. I found some pictures there of anthropomorphic animals carrying fans in their hands. These pictures mean fans became popular items among ordinary people.

A folding fan became one of the most popular gifts from a samurai to his Lord. The Nakajima Setsunokami Moritsugi Diary of the Muromachi period (1333–1568) said, 'A samurai must carry a folding fan at his waist between a long sword and short sword.'

Folding fans were introduced from Japan to Europe through China along the Silk Road by Japanese Buddhist monks who went to China to study Buddhism from the eighth century. In Europe, they first arrived in Italy in the sixteenth century at the time of Catherine de' Medici. And from Italy, the folding fan travelled to France and Spain, and then to England.

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