

Having Fun Fixing Japanese Paper Doors



I first wrote this article in 2003 when I lived in Niigata City, Japan. I posted it on my first website, kt70.com/~jamesjpn. That site went off line sometime in 2016 and therefore I am re-posting on my new site, jamesjpn.net.

Many people have written me saying how much they liked this article. You can read their responses at the end of this page.

This web page is for all you folks who have never been to Japan. You may have heard that houses in Japan are made of paper. As a matter of fact, they are! Well, at least the DOORS are! All situations described in this article have actually happened, and not just once.

Below is a photo of common Japanese sliding doors. The Japanese call them *shoji*. Can you see the patchwork in two places? It's there to cover up holes in the paper! A house that has no holes in its shoji doors is a home with no children. It doesn't take much energy to make a hole in shoji paper. The finger of a two-year-old will make one very easily.

Shoji doors are about as effective in blocking sound from room to room as a barbed wire fence in Nebraska is in blocking the wind. Some light can pass through the paper.



Below is what they look like after an adult puts his or her arm or elbow through them like I did the other night!



The shoji doors normally slide in 2 grooves side by side. Because one door was open and therefore flush against the other when I hit it, as you can see in the photo below I actually put my elbow through two of the paper doors at the same time!



Here are photos of shoji with holes made by little people!



A larger hole from someones hand



Typical hole in shoji door

In the case of little holes, most people will often live with them for a time until the holes accumulate to the point of unsightliness. A tidy soul will at least try to patch them up with paper of various shapes such as stars or hearts. But in the worst-case scenario like the kind I pulled the other night, action needs to be taken! Here is how to fix them.



Materials needs to fix shoji doors



Brush to apply the glue



Water spray bottle to spray water on the new shoji paper

First of all, gather the tools you will need for the job: A cutter knife, a brush, a spray bottle, a roll of shoji paper, and corn starch. The glue that holds the paper to the wood is made of corn starch and water. You put a few tablespoons of corn starch in a pot and stir it over a flame until it starts to get thick, but not too thick.

The paper has to be special paper made for the purpose. Can you guess what it's called? *Shojigami*! The "gami" in shojigami is the same gami in the word *origami*, meaning paper. "Ori" means to fold. Shojigami is rather porous and absorbs water easily. One man in Pittsburgh, Pa. USA who read this article referred to shojigami as "rice paper." It may be called that in America, but according to my Japanese friends, this paper is not made from rice.

Please do not write me an email asking where you can buy this kind of paper in your country. I do not know. I can only advise you to do a search on the Internet or to look it up in your Yellow Pages phone book. If you live in Japan, you can find it at your local Home Center.

The door needs to be taken out of its runner. As you can imagine, shoji doors are very light. But it can still be a struggle to take them out as older Japanese houses often tilt slightly and the door frame is not exactly square anymore.

After the door is taken out, I lay it on its side on the floor or a table and apply water with a sponge to all the areas the paper is glued to the wood. This makes it much easier to pull the old broken paper off.



Wet paper to make it easily removed from the door



Door without paper

After the old broken paper has been removed, I apply the corn starch glue with a wide brush (see above photo) made for the purpose to all surfaces that the paper will touch. Then I carefully unroll the roll of shoji paper over the door. In the picture, you can see the roll of shoji paper is still attached to the paper applied to the door.



After this I take a cutter knife and a straight edge and carefully cut the excess paper off. Try not cut the paper where it is wet with glue or the paper may tear. You can wait till the glue is dry before you trim the paper, make your cuts with the cutter knife, and then use a sponge to carefully soak the paper you want to remove. I found this is the surest way to do a good job in trimming away the excess paper without tearing it. But if you are careful, have a sharp cutter knife, and don't press down too hard on the knife, you can trim the paper when wet without tearing it.



Water spray bottle
to spray water on
the new shoji
paper

After the glue is dry and the edges are trimmed, take a spray bottle and spray a thin film of water over the paper. When the water dries it will shrink the paper and make it nice and tight like a drum! But don't use it as a drum or you may have to have to repeat the above procedure all over again! I have heard that in olden days when there were no plastic spray bottles, professionals used to use their mouths to spray water on the paper.



Here's what the finished product should look like! Looks as good as a professional could do it! (Unless you can look closer at the poor edge-cutting job I did.)





Fusuma door

The photo is another kind of paper door. It is called *fusuma*. Fusuma doors also slide but they have a little indented circle of metal where you put your fingers to slide them open and shut. Light cannot pass through the door as with shoji because the paper is laid in many layers (like an onion), and sound is muffled a bit better than with shoji, but don't expect to hide any marital problems with your spouse if this is the door to your bedroom! Fusuma doors are much more durable and harder to break than shoji, but even they are no match for chair legs or table legs that happen to go through them when you move your furniture around. And if I hit one with the same force I used in breaking the shoji door paper the other night, I'm sure I would have damaged it somewhat. No little kid can push his or her finger through fusuma paper because of its many layers, but a child with a tool like a pen or a pencil will have no trouble at all making little holes all over the door. (Our 2-

year-old grandson actually did this.) Fusuma doors are harder to fix than shoji doors. Most people will pay a professional to do it for them. The door you see in the picture was just newly fixed with new paper by a pro after the 2-year-old boy's hole-poking experience.

Update 15 April 2004. My next challenge is to fix the fusuma door that a teenage boy rammed a hole in "by accident" (probably roughhousing with his friend). . I've fixed fusuma before. You have to take the wood frame off the sides to do it properly.

I've fixed many shoji doors since I first wrote this article. I think I'm getting a little better at it each time. I guarantee that you will get pretty good at it after a while if you have lots of little kids running around in your home like I do. ☐

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Comments from those who liked this article

Yours is the only article Ask.com could find and it is great. I lived in Japan and am now decorating my western house with as much shoji as I can.

Excellent article. And funny....(From Poland)

Thankyou Thankyou Thank..... I live in Japan. We are a military family and finally got offered base housing so we are going to take it..... I have a three year old son that thought he was mighty man because he could punch holes in the Shoji doors. I caught him after the 7 punch! I went to the local AVE store and bought the materials but was not sure about the spraying the water after I got the paper glued down! Thanks so much for your help. You have been a life saver! - Becky D, Yokosuka Japan

I must say this is the most informative site I have found in several days of searching. Your directions are clear and concise, the use of photos very helpful.

Thank You,
Angela
Baltimore MD

I LOVED THIS PAGE!!!!
SO INTERESTING AND WITH SO MANY TIPS!
THANK YOU!
CRISTINA (Argentina)

I like this page very much. I am interested in making a shoji screen for myself, and you have provided valuable information. Thank you very much.

Eric
Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Thank you very much for all the good information on your site. My fiance and I live in Okinawa and have been putting off fixing our paper doors for some time now. Don't ask...(ok HER cat did it). I have finally put down my foot and said that this coming Saturday is the day. Thanks to your web site I will not look like a dumb ass trying to figure out how to accomplish this task. Maybe then will I get the respect a man deserves.

Again, Thank you very much.

-Ryan

Your page rocks!
-kevin (Pittsburgh USA)
