



## I Should Be!

Here's a story 'hot off the press' - about an experience that I had just last night!

The craftsmen working in my field - traditional printmaking - have a kind of 'association', what is known in Japanese as a *kumiai*. This translates into English as 'union', but it certainly isn't much like a western trade union. This field is so fragmented now, and work has become so rare, that there is certainly no need for any kind of labour negotiations, even if there were any employers left to negotiate with!

But they hang together, this steadily decreasing number of elderly craftsmen, and in recent years their *kumiai* has served both as a social network for them, and as a means of banding together to try and initiate work, instead of simply waiting for publishers to create projects.

I have been a 'member' for I guess nearly twenty-five years, although I put the word member in quotes. They happily agreed to let me in, but one of them made it clear to me at that time that there would be no work coming my way because of my membership. That was fine by me, because I create my own projects, and am not actually available 'for hire', as they all are.

From their point of view - given that they have all known each other since they were very young apprentices - I am certainly an 'outsider', although I have to state up front that I have never felt any hostility from most of them about that. They are happy that I am deeply interested in the same things that they are, and that's good enough to let me keep my seat at their table.

They have a number of social activities that I don't take part in, but I do always make sure to attend the *shin-nen-kai*, the 'opening the new year' party that every organization in this country puts on sometime in January. That was last night.

In recent years they have been having this event at a particular Chinese restaurant near Ueno park. It's a bit of a run-down place, but that suits them just fine, as nobody is worried about appearances. It's just an excuse to get together for a meal, some drinking, and a chat. One of the members is tabbed to be 'entertainment director', and - this will give you an idea of what the average age of the membership is - the featured activity is usually a bingo game.

A few 'special prizes' had been prepared, and the director handed out cards to us all, and then called numbers while we nibbled away at our dishes. He made a bit of a mysterious announcement about the prizes, intimating that whoever won them would (could?) be in for something very special this year. In Japanese, the differences between 'would' 'could' 'will' and 'might' are sometimes a bit blurred compared to English, but after he made his announcement everybody seemed to perk up quite a bit, and watched their cards quite carefully, in order not to miss anything.

Well, I think perhaps you can see where this story is going. No, I didn't win the 1st prize, but a minute later, when number calling resumed, my neighbour and I noticed that we both needed a single number for our own Bingo ... and it was the same number. We looked at each other with challenge in our eyes ... who would be able to call it first? And while we were doing so, that very number was called!

**David Bull**  
**Seseragi Studio**  
**Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City**  
**Tokyo Japan 198-0052**  
**<http://astoryaweek.com>**

Of course, we both hesitated, then shouted out exactly together. So we received 2nd prize and 3rd prize, and as for which of us received which one, the group as a whole called their consensus - priority to the younger member!

And I - who for all these years has been among the youngest in the kumiai - lost that little 'battle'. For my neighbour was the newest member of the entire group - a young trainee intent on become a wood carver one day, and only in his mid-twenties. Of course I deferred to him with a laugh, and he was given the 2nd prize, while I received the 3rd.

As for the 'in for something special!!' aspect? As the director gave us our prizes - quite fat envelopes - he congratulated us on our upcoming 'great wealth'. And the contents of the envelope?

It certainly *felt* like a thick wad of money, but when we winners opened the envelopes up for inspection, we had to laugh at what we found, and received a very loud cheer from the group when we held them up for inspection.

Lottery tickets. In my case, 80 of them.

Well, about a month from now, perhaps I 'might' be a millionaire, or 'could' ... or ... 'will!' Yes, I like that translation better!

**David Bull**  
**Seseragi Studio**  
**Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City**  
**Tokyo Japan 198-0052**  
**<http://astoryaweek.com>**