



Saa-bisu!

Woodblocks - the actual pieces of wood that are used to make woodblock prints - have been 'front and center' in my affairs this week. A few days ago, printer friend Shingo Ueda sent me a stack of old Meiji-era blocks for inspection and study, and these are scattered all over the workbench downstairs. They are a wonderful treasure trove, and we'll definitely be hearing more about those in the not too distant future.

Of more immediate interest though, much of the recent activity concerning woodblocks has been because there is a new trainee here learning about the basics of printing. I have been digging various simple blocks out of the storeroom for her to practice with, and have also begun to carve some new ones, with the idea that they will be ready for use by the time her skills have reached the appropriate level.

She will not be making very complex prints at first, so I am doing this carving on small 'offcuts' of blank cherrywood. I have a large box of these on hand, and am happy to finally have a chance to put them to good use. They have been waiting for quite a long time.

When brushing off the dust and opening up the box of offcuts, I thought about the circumstances under which I got them, and had to smile at the memory that it was all because of an error in Japanese that I made one day.

The blocks came from the workshop of Mr. Shimano Shintaro, who at the time was the last craftsman supplying blank cherry blocks for printmakers. I had been purchasing wood from him ever since coming to Japan. We had got over our initial strangeness with each other, and I enjoyed dropping by his workroom when I was in Tokyo. Stepping over the threshold was the proverbial 'time slip' - one moment on a busy Toyko back street, the next moment in the old workshop, his bench on the floor in the middle of the room, surrounded by wide planks of wood stacked against the walls, with mounds of smaller offcuts littering the rest of the space. Wood-shavings were everywhere, and if my visit was during the winter, he would immediately reach out, grab a chunk of cherry, and toss it into the little pot-bellied stove. (You have to show your guest that you are at least *trying* to make the place a little bit more comfortable for him!)

I would chat with Shimano-san and his wife while he worked on his planing. I would give the details about my next order - what type of wood I needed, the dimensions, and when I needed it to be ready, etc. - and she would of course give me some tea and a little snack.

One day - it must have been at least a few years after the beginning of the long poets' series - as I got up to leave, I tried to say 'thank you' to them for their cooperation with my work. In my (English) mind I was thinking something like "Thank you for all the excellent service you have given me." But I couldn't think how to properly translate the term 'service', so simply rendered it phonetically - *saa-bisu*.

What happened next surprised me. They quickly looked at each other, and jumped into action. He picked up a couple of pieces of the offcut cherry, and passed them to her. She grabbed some newspaper, carefully wrapped the pieces of wood, then packed them into a shopping bag and passed them over to me. They then thanked *me*, bowing as they did so, and off I went, slightly confused about what had just happened.

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When I told somebody (Japanese) about this, I learned about my error. 'Saa-bisu' in Japanese is the word used to represent the little gifts or 'extras' that a merchant may throw in to sweeten a deal. If the clerk at the bakery tosses in one extra bun, this is 'saa-bisu', and you nod your head and say 'thank you'. Now when this happens, that's nice, but you certainly don't *ask* for it, which is what I had done that day with Shimano-san, saying in effect, "Thank you for tossing in something a little extra ..."

The next time I went to see them, I apologized for my 'indiscretion', but I am not sure that they felt completely comfortable with that, because for all the years to come, right up until the time that he passed away, I would always find a 'little something' tucked into each shipment of blocks, sometimes a standard gift object like a hand towel, but more often a couple of small offcut cherry blocks.

Blocks which now, after all these years of quietly waiting their turn, are coming 'alive' and being turned into woodblock prints. Shimano-san, thank you for the wonderful service!

Oops!

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