



Key Man

The young women who are coming to my workshop to train as printers are really turning out to be an interesting group. They weren't 'selected' at all, in the way that a large company may select from among a large pool of applicants by looking at resumés and doing extensive interviews, so as you might expect, there is quite a wide variance in the particular collection of ages, skills and competencies represented.

I don't think that they would appreciate me giving out too much personal information here, but without naming any names, we should be able to talk about some of these things. I am 60. Going down the decades we have one member just about 50, three members all within a year or two of 40, one just at 30, and one nearly 20. (As of last week we have one even younger than that, but perhaps we should save her story for a bit later!)

As for the competencies, they all share that which in Japanese falls under the term 'kiyo', which is perhaps best given in English as 'handy'. This expresses itself in two ways: firstly at the basic level of working with their hands and fingers. They can manipulate the delicate soft paper without creasing it, position it in the registration marks, etc. and etc. But they are also good at the wider meaning of the word - when a situation arises that they have not seen before, they can usually figure out what to do, or at least can try various things to see what might work.

But as I mentioned above, they of course vary in their skills and approaches, and this is sometimes a tad frustrating for me. For example, one of them takes an extremely methodical approach to her work, and her throughput is fairly slow as a result. Another one has her internal clock set at a different rate, and works at nearly double the pace. As you might expect though, her finished stack of prints contains more rejects than does that of her co-worker.

It's not just speed vs accuracy though. All the various skills that a printer will use - how to tie the baren cover, how to grip it properly and focus the 'power' down into the block, how to sense the proper density of the pigment, how to feel the proper stickiness of the paste ... all these skills are unevenly distributed among our crew. Some years from now, once they have had enough experience, they will all be thoroughly competent at all these things, but that is still some time away.

Back in the old days, this unevenness in skill levels among the workers was handled easily by distributing the work among different people. The master himself would do the printing of the key block, because if this was off even slightly, accurate printing of subsequent colours would be impossible. Apprentices in their first few years would never be allowed to do that job, except on perhaps the simplest prints.

In order to encourage their development, I have been allowing them to do key block printing, but in the case of a major job we are currently working on, we have run into problems. One of our young ladies is struggling with the difficult registration of this print, resulting in most of her prints being rejected. It seems that the only way forward for us at this point will be for me to print the key block for her, and she is not so happy about that, feeling that she has 'failed'.

Well of course there is no failure involved. She has come an incredibly long way in the few months that she has been working here, and has perhaps let her expectations get the better of her. This will be a kind of reminder to her that there is a lot of depth in our work, more than enough to allow her to keep developing for many years to come.

We've said this before here, and will say it many times in the years to come. Good cooking takes time!

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