



A Rose by any other name ...

Everybody is familiar with the Japanese custom of *meishi* - the name cards which are exchanged when two people meet for the first time in any kind of business or formal situation. They of course carry one's name and basic contact information such as address and phone number (and these days, email address too), but the most important thing on a *meishi* is the person's job description, which identifies not only the company for which he works, but his status there.

Only when these details have been taken in by each side, can the two people then have a stress-free conversation free of the possibility of making social gaffes. It's not actually a question of establishing any kind of 'superiority' on one side (who 'wins'), but simply making sure everybody can feel comfortable.

I of course take *meishi* with me whenever I am going somewhere that I expect to meet people. Not having any company affiliation and job title, my own cards are fairly simple, but it is necessary for me to include *something* that tells people what I do.

I print up my *meishi* in bilingual format - English on one side, and Japanese on the other - and the English side gives me no trouble at all. It reads "David Bull - woodblock printmaker". Now that doesn't give people a whole lot of detail, but it is enough to create the appropriate image in their mind - this guy spends his days hunched over some kind of workbench or press, and creates pieces of paper with images on.

The Japanese side of the *meishi* though, has always given me trouble. The word 'Printmaker' has no translation. The problem, such as it is, stems from the fact that woodblock printmaking has an extended - and varied - history in this culture.

版画家 (*hanga-ka*) is one possible translation, but this refers to a person who cuts and prints his own blocks, based on imagery of his own creation - the Artist Printmaker. Munakata Shiko is perhaps the best-known example of this here in Japan. It is not a good description of how I make a living, although I *have* done that sort of work at times.

摺師 (*suri-shi*) is another - very literal - translation, but this refers to a person who sits in his workshop waiting for a publisher to send him some woodblocks - carved by another person (the 彫師 *hori-shi*) - from which he will then produce a stack of prints. This is not a good description of what I do, although I of course do the same physical work (including that of the *hori-shi*).

木版画職人 (*mokuhanga shokunin* - woodblock print craftsman) begins to get closer, as it would include both of the two previous men (*suri-shi* and *hori-shi*), but falls down on the point that it implies a 'passive' approach to the job - working to order on projects created by an external publisher (which in my case is also me).

The fact of the matter is simply that because I created my job out of thin air, and because I have structured it in a way that is heretofore unknown in this society, there is no 'job title' as such. Using one of those existing words would give people an incorrect understanding of my work.

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I suppose I shouldn't worry about this. After all, when somebody who knows nothing about modern technology meets a person who passes them a meishi reading (say) 'Systems Analyst,' I doubt that they are able to understand much about the work that person does. The meishi exchange simply becomes a starting point for their conversation, and they can then fill out the description as necessary.

So in the end I chose the last phrase - 木版画職人 - for my namecards, because it emphasizes the physical work of the making, which is where my heart lies, rather than the artistic work of creating the design. But the people I meet, after taking my card, inevitably *still* respond with, "Oh, you're an artist!"

Well, it can't be helped, and I suppose there are worse things to be called ...

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