



In the Wings ...

This is another of those 'on the train' stories - this time I'm on the Chuo Line, on the last stage of the return half of a long trip over to the other side of Japan. I've been on a visit to the family that makes the paper we use for our printmaking. They are based in Fukui Prefecture, in a small village that has been a papermaking center for a great many years. There is an information sign in front of the very large shrine in the village that claims a history of 1300 years of papermaking there, but whether or not this is true I myself cannot tell, and - given the importance of this paper to my own work - I am not going to do or say anything that might disturb the papermaking spirits there!

The purpose of the trip was mainly to 'touch base' with the family, as it has been a number of years since I have seen them face to face. There have been some issues with recent paper shipments too, and such things can only be resolved through personal conversation. Email or the telephone - at least at my level of Japanese ability - is too impersonal.

We had a good discussion, satisfactorily resolving the specific issues I brought up, and I confirmed my orders of paper for the next few months. They then treated me to a very nice lunch, in spite of my protests that my presence was disturbing their work and that I would just be 'on my way'. But I'm glad that I did end up spending the extra hour or so with them, because while we were talking about more general topics I learned something ... 'interesting'!

A bit of background. The current head of the household - a man about the age of my own parents - is the 9th generation to hold that position. Both he and his late father were given 'Living National Treasure' status by the government, in recognition both of their own skill, and the very high quality of the type of paper in which they specialize (*Echizen Hoshō-shi*), and which nobody else is producing, at least not at this level. But this man is approaching the end of his working life, and a great deal of the work is now being done by younger members of the family, specifically his son. This man is some 15 years or so younger than I, so on the face of it, I should have no particular worries about whether or not I will be able to obtain this paper in the years to come.

In the days when I was working alone, I had no specific thoughts about the paper supply 'post Dave'. Such a thing was not my concern. But now that I have begun building a wider business, training a number of other people in these skills, it has become an important factor. What use is there to build up a flourishing print-making venture when - at one stroke - our entire supply of paper could be cut off? It could happen so easily; a car accident, a sickness. No competent leader should allow his business to become entirely dependent on a single source of anything, and yet here we are.

In the lunch-time discussions, the interesting thing I learned was that the *next* generation of this family - a young man just about to leave high school - has apparently no particular interest in the craft. I qualify that statement with the word 'apparently' because the family are themselves not sure which way this is going to go. They have avoided putting pressure on this young man - "You *have* to continue this tradition!" - because that would probably turn out to be counter-productive. They know that he knows the business. Growing up surrounded by it, he knows the pleasures of the work, and certainly knows the trials and tribulations.

As he now moves into adulthood, whether he will be drawn to papermaking, or will fly away to the big city to build computer games (or something), is up in the air. For the next few years, the ball will be in his court.

And those of us who sit in the stands watching the game, can do nothing but wait to see what happens.

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