



## The A-Team

Shortly after I began work on my ten year project to create the Hyakunin Isshu poetry series prints - this was back in 1989, three years after I had moved to Japan - I finally got a chance to meet some of the craftsmen in the traditional printmaking world. One of the English-language newspapers here in Tokyo had sponsored a series of 'Enjoy Japanese Traditional Culture' events for their readers, and I had attended the one on woodblock printmaking.

The presentation itself was not so interesting, but once the actual demonstration began, I parked myself directly in front of the printer, and tried to drink in as much as I possibly could of what he was doing. How much paste was going onto the block? For how many seconds did he brush out the pigment? How 'watery' was the pigment in the bowl? There were a million things I wanted to see and learn.

Gradually the crowd thinned out, until I was - of course! - the last person present. As the men began to pack up their tools, I talked with the printer (in my still very rudimentary Japanese) and then brought out from my pack one of my own prints, the just completed first print in the poetry series. He looked at it a bit quizzically and asked where I had got it. When I replied that I had made it, he kind of laughed a bit and then asked again where I had got it. I insisted that I had indeed made it myself, and he finally accepted this, and we began to talk about what I was doing. But the organizers broke this up - it was time to clean up and clear the room - so we made the arrangement that I would visit his workshop the next day.

It turned out to be the first of quite a number of visits, and I ended up later that year being invited to join the 'Association of Traditional Woodblock Printmaking Craftsmen', and since then I have attended meetings and events a few times each year, getting to know a few of the men quite well.

We now jump forward about ten years. I had a call one day from one of my long-time collectors; it turned out that her daughter was getting married and they wanted to use one of my small prints (a new year 'card') as a gift for the guests to the ceremony. I was extremely busy with my work and had to tell her that it would be impossible for me to supply them. But she wouldn't let go of the idea and pushed quite insistently. So I had an idea. I told her that I myself couldn't print them, but would it be OK if I had them done by a professional printer from the Association? She didn't care; she just needed the gifts, and she needed them quite soon.

So I visited that same printer - the man who I had met at that event years ago - taking the blocks, a stack of paper, and my personally printed sample. He was glad to get the work, and promised to deliver the prints in a week or so, just in time for her ceremony. In due course they arrived, the day before I was to deliver to my customer, and I eagerly opened the package to inspect them.

They were unusable. He and his crew had done a slap-together job. The colour was uneven, there were tool marks here and there, and there was no way that I could ship these. There was no choice but for me to quickly prepare another batch of paper, and work through the night to get enough prints ready to ship to her. Rather than make a fuss with the craftsman, I tossed his prints into a drawer and paid his bill, just writing it all off to experience.

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We now jump forward another fifteen years. As regular readers know, I have expanded my own workshop now and am using the resources of a number of professional printers. As you may imagine, that particular man has not been among them. But in the intervening years, he has become heavily involved in the affairs of the Association, and is now the *kai-cho*, the president. In that position he of course has his ear to the ground, and has inevitably learned about my publishing activities.

He phoned me yesterday. "I've heard about your new publishing projects. It seems you are really doing well; I hear you've sent work out to A-san, B-san, and even now to C-san ..." I listened to this, knowing what he would say next ...

"In our workshop, we don't have much work right now. Please send some, OK?"

Now if I were Steve Jobs - laser-focussed on product quality no matter what the cost, either human or financial - I would tell him to get lost. "Sorry. Only A-Team members are welcome here. You don't make the cut. Good-bye."

But I'm not Steve; I'm Dave. And this man, and his organization, were indeed extremely helpful to me in the early years. The cultural 'rules' that apply here are very clear. I am deeply obligated to him, and should give him some work.

So I will. But the conversation when I visit in a few days to take the blocks and paper is going to be one of the most difficult I have ever had ...

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