



Will You ...

Over the past couple of months or so, there has been a small experiment under way here at our Moku-hankan printmaking workshop. In what is a first for us, we have commissioned a set of blocks for a print from an 'outside' carver. For over a year now, we have been using the services of a few professional *printers*, but all the carving work has always been done by me.

Over the course of the past year or so, it has become increasingly apparent to all of us here that having me as the sole carver is a major barrier to growth. I cannot possibly work any more hours that I am already doing, and this is setting an upper limit to the number of print projects we can undertake. Given this situation, hiring outside carvers is a 'no-brainer' it would seem, but this is something that is easier said than done.

There are perhaps three or four people in Tokyo still doing such work, but only one of them works at a level that I respect. He is busy with his own projects though, and is not available for other work. As for the others, I have seen their recent work, and it is an embarrassment to our craft; I cannot consider using them.

Training somebody from scratch, as we are doing here with printers, is simply not feasible. Although a printer can produce useful (simple) work from a very early stage, until a carver has basically mastered *all* the fundamentals of their craft - something that takes more than a few years for even the most capable person - their work will not be suitable for distribution. We simply don't have the resources to support a non-productive person for that long, especially with no guarantee that it will work out.

So when I learned a couple of months ago that there was a young lady down in Kobe who had trained as a carver for a number of years, but was now doing other work to make ends meet, I jumped at the opportunity and contacted her. She was at first resistant to the idea of trying some work for us; she had basically put print carving behind her, due to its highly uncertain future, and hadn't carved in some time.

But there is no way that I would give up so easily, and after a number of conversations finally succeeded in getting her to take on a trial job for us, working on it in her spare time.

Her blocks arrived the other day, and they are wonderful! She carves with taste and delicacy and can clearly work to the standards we demand. I have already arranged to send her another job for her to work on whenever she can find time.

I have also invited her to come up to Tokyo for a visit next month, paying her train and hotel expenses, so that she can meet the crew here and see what we are doing. At that time, I have to make a decision: to continue to send her small jobs, or to bite the bullet and offer her full-time employment, including relocation to Tokyo.

This would be a gigantic step for us. We have nowhere near the budget for a full-time employee, and it would be a gamble that her added productivity would result in enough increased sales to provide the revenue to pay her. Is it 'fair' to her to make an offer under such circumstances? And from her point of view, would she have to be insane to quit her job, make the move, and come to work for this 'old man'? Remember, we are not a stable company with a track record; Mokuhankan is quite a speculative venture, being run

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out of my personal pocket. And I'm going to be 62 next week, something that doesn't bother me overly, but which surely must be a factor that would cause her to wonder just how stable - and long-term - a job with us could possibly be.

All I can do is be completely open with her, not promise beyond what I can foreseeably deliver, and try to get her to drink our Kool-Aid. If I am able to get her to see our vision for the future, and if she has a gambler's gene tucked away somewhere, she may agree to join us.

It has been a very very long time indeed since I last made a young lady an offer, and waited for a 'yes' ...

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