



A Mouthful

This is another 'on the train' story; this morning I'm making a visit to the people who supply the blank blocks for our woodcarving, and it is perhaps going to be a difficult meeting.

I've got a couple of sample blocks in my bag - one that they sent us just recently, and one that I have had on the shelf for perhaps fifteen years or so. They are as different as night and day. One has beautifully wide and open grain, and will create deep and smooth colour when we finally come to print from it. The other has a wild grain pattern, was cut from the log in the wrong way, and is full of defects and overly hard spots that will all leave traces in the finished print. You don't need me to tell you which is which, I'm sure.

For quite some time now we have been getting more and more frustrated with the quality of the blank woodblocks, and when I mention this to people they usually make the same assumption, "I suppose it's because all the good stuff was logged off in the old days, and now there is nothing left?"

Actually though, it's exactly the other way around. It's not because of over-utilizing the resource, it's because so few people need such blocks these days, that we have no good ones available at the workbench. *Yamazakura* trees reach maturity well within a human lifetime, and far from being all logged off, the mountains are full of them.

Back in the old days, so many print publishers were in operation that a complete industry of supplying woodblocks was in place. Specialist 'tree hunters' scoured the mountains in suitable areas looking for good specimens, and when they found one, negotiated the purchase with the land-owner, and began the work of bringing the wood to the carver's bench - a process that would take years, involving felling the tree safely, getting the raw wood to the timber market, ageing it suitably, then re-sawing it in the proper way and drying it for the number of years necessary to bring it to a stable state.

The last block supplier in Tokyo died in the late 1990s, and his father - before he died - told me stories about those days. I remember one episode in particular where he was describing the job of the 'tree hunter'. That man would know on which particular mountain slopes good trees were likely to be found. with altitude and sun exposure being prime considerations, and when a suitable candidate was then spotted, he would grab a handful of soil from around the base of the tree and taste it. My story-teller demonstrated this by making a scooping motion with his hand, 'tasting' the imaginary contents, and then looking up in pleasure, "Yes, this will be a good one!"

Just what it was that he was testing for I have no idea. General moisture level in the soil? Alkalinity? Your guess is as good as mine.

Now that might be perhaps the most extreme example of the 'lost art' of getting good woodblocks, but it is far from the only one. At every single stage of the process, all the hard-earned knowledge of the craft has now disappeared. What we get on our benches these days are just 'random' pieces of wood, basically the stuff left-over from what the furniture makers have picked over. From the point of view of a block carver of even the not-so-old days - within *my* time - the current blocks are suitable for nothing except throwing into the stove.

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But in a few minutes, when I am in the meeting with our block supplier, I will try to remember my manners, and will refrain from actually saying that. (I hope!)

He is not 'evil' of course; he is doing as well as he can, working with what is available to him in the same way that I do. There is only one possible way out of this situation, and that is to make woodblock prints that are so popular that our business grows so wildly over the coming years, that we reach the point where our demand for wood is enough to re-generate the old supply chain.

Can't you just see the scene a couple of decades from now? 90-odd year old Dave is up on one of those mountain slopes, followed by an NHK TV crew as he looks for suitable trees. Finding one, he drops to one knee, scoops up a handful of soil and tastes it. Turning to the camera, dirt dripping from his chin, you just know what he has to say ...

'Totemo oishii!'

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