



Time to Split Up!

This is a kind of 'good news' / 'bad news' story. Something not so happy is happening here in our workshop, but it is all in a good cause, and we hope that it will lead to a brighter future.

Regular readers know that just over a year ago we opened a new workroom here in my Ome building. The people who own the neighbouring property - not using their basement space at all - were willing to rent it to us, so we knocked an opening into the wall, spent a couple of months on renovation work, and created a beautiful new space where our printers and packing staff could do their jobs.

It hasn't always been 'full' every day, because our printers work to their own schedules, and don't come full time, but we set up a schedule board to minimize conflicts, and all-in-all the space has served us very well.

Because none of these printers are full time professionals, they don't own their own tools, but use the collection of brushes and baren (the printing pad) that I have built up over the years. This too, has required difficult scheduling, as inevitably some of the tools have become 'favourites', and when four people are working here at the same time, they sometimes all want to use the same baren!

Last Tuesday was a kind of special day in this room; four printers, two packing ladies, one of the general staff helpers, and myself, were all here at the same time. A major TV program had asked permission to film here, and although such a process is really quite disrupting to the work, we all acceded to the request. Why? Because we knew that the resulting program would serve as a wonderful memento of the year we have spent working together here.

Memento? Why would we need that?

Because over the next week or so, we are splitting up. Half of the printers are leaving this room and will be working over at our new shop in Asakusa, down in central Tokyo. These are people who live down there, and who have been making the very long commute out here each day, so they are very much looking forward to this change, although it means separating from their compatriots.

For me as a manager the new staff scheduling has been easy; what has caused no small amount of headache has been the division of the tools. As long as everybody was in the same room, it wasn't such a major problem to share them, but we now have to split our collection into two completely separate 'sets', and this is next-to-impossible. *Everybody* wants to use the favourite '#6a' baren. *Everybody* wants to use the beautiful 'Green #L1' brush. (We gave identifying numbers to all our tools a long time ago; it was the only way to keep them properly organized.)

So yesterday, myself and a couple of the senior printers (one who will work in Asakusa, and one who will stay here in Ome) sat down to work out how to do this. We spread all the brushes out on the floor, arranged them in categories and sizes, and then tried to make a fair distribution.

You might ask, "Why not just buy some more?" but this is just not possible. We *have* ordered a few more baren, because an excellent craftsman is still making those, but the brushes currently on the market are practically useless.

The three of us first joked about having a brush 'draft', with the two printers alternately choosing from the pile until everything was gone, but in the end we just worked together to do the distribution in a logical way, making sure that neither of the workshops would be left without a critical item.

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Some of the favourites went one way, some went the other, but the two ladies both understood that this was how it had to be done, and I myself am very glad that I invited them to work on this together with me, instead of doing it myself and presenting them with a *fait accompli*.

And now we are waiting ... Surely, after the new shop is open, and we get some good publicity ... surely somebody will read one of those newspaper stories and get in touch with us. "My grandfather was a printer many years ago, and I have a few boxes of his old brushes here. Might the Mokuhankan printers have any use for them ...?"

Hah! Dream on!



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