



Bargain Hunting

Sadako and I made a short trip to Shanghai in December. It is very unusual for me to do any travelling at the end of the year, because I am always very busy at that time trying to get my print series finished before the January exhibition. But I needed to find a good workshop to mount my prints as scrolls, and China seemed like a logical place to search. As it turned out, we quite quickly found a suitable group of craftsmen, and - as we had planned on having to search a bit longer - we found ourselves with a couple of free days ... time for some sight-seeing!

I've been to Taiwan and Hong Kong before, but this was the first time on mainland China for both of us, so we weren't looking for any 'off the beaten track' experiences - we just looked in our guidebooks for advice on what to see, and then headed out to walk around interesting parts of the city. One of the places we enjoyed visiting was Yu Yuan, an old garden that has been restored in recent years. The garden itself was very beautiful, but what we enjoyed just as much was the amazing tourist district that surrounds it - a warren of shops and restaurants, jammed with people browsing and shopping.

It was here, in a couple of the shops, that we had our first experience with bargaining. In all the places I have lived in my life - England, Canada, and now Japan - bargaining is not a part of daily life, so I have absolutely no experience at this kind of shopping. To me, shopping is simple - you look at the price, decide whether or not you want the item, and then either purchase it or leave it. But here in the markets of Shanghai, the prices printed on the labels seem to be nothing more than a guide. My guidebook gave explicit 'rules' for purchasing things in this area, "You will initially be asked to pay more than ten times the going price ..."

Ten times? But it seems completely impossible - if faced with a product with a price stated as 100 - to offer 10. Surely the seller would become angry? And even if one did offer 10, then what would happen? The seller might come down to 90, you go up to 20, down to 80, up to 30, down to 70, up to 40, down to 60, up to 50 ... with the two of you perhaps ending up around 55. But according to the advice in the guidebook, that would still be paying too much!

Do the local people have to go through this process for everything they buy? I can't imagine doing my daily grocery shopping in a world where bargaining was common. Why not just do it 'our way' - post the price at a level that is satisfactory to both seller and buyer. No fuss, no trouble ...

But while I found this whole situation uncomfortable, Sadako enjoyed the challenge. She had such fun haggling with the sellers that she even did it with people with whom she had no common language at all. The two of them passed a calculator back and forth, alternately punching in their offers, laughing and joking as they did so!

How well did she do? I'm not sure how to answer that - she purchased some of her souvenirs at prices well below what was initially posted, although nowhere near the 10% level. But I also know that for many years to come, whenever she looks at her purchased items, she will remember the fun she had while buying them, and that will add a whole extra pleasure, I'm sure!

It's better if you don't ask me how I did in my own purchasing. When we were in the scroll mounting workshop, after going over many details of the products, it came time to sit down at a table to discuss the question of price. The young girl who was handling business affairs for the craftsmen stated a figure. It seemed reasonable. I looked at it ... thought a moment ... and then said ... "OK".

Maybe next time I'll stay home and send Sadako over to do the business!

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