



Stimulating the Economy

Most of the materials that I use for making my woodblock prints come through long-established routes. My paper maker has been in business for ten generations, and *his* suppliers for probably longer than that. Up to around a decade ago I was getting my cherrywood from a family that had been in business ever since the days when woodblock prints were common currency in this society.

In these traditional fields, the 'value' of each of the products is well established. The buyer will sometimes have to make a decision on how much he is willing to pay for a higher quality material for some particular project, but in general, the numbers are pretty much set by custom. And as all these supplies are domestically produced, foreign exchange fluctuations don't enter into the picture. Year after year, my bills for wood and paper remain for the most part unchanged. There is, therefore, no haggling over the prices.

This suits me fairly well. I would like to be in a position to pay less for some of these things, as they are indeed very expensive, but I am not a good bargainer at all, and if haggling were the customary method of purchase, I would be at a severe disadvantage.

In recent weeks though, I have been venturing into new territory. My Mokuhankan venture is going to be in the tool supply business, and this means I have to deal with an entire new world of manufacturers and wholesalers. And in some of these areas - timber supply for one - prices are typically arrived at by negotiating each deal individually. For people well versed in the practice, this is not a problem. When you know the true value of something, you have a base for your negotiations, and the actual price you get in the end comes down to what you are willing to pay, and your skill at the negotiating table.

But I am now completely at sea; I neither know what these products are 'worth' - what they typically sell for - nor am I any good at negotiation ... and the sellers can clearly see both of these things. In their eyes, I am a lamb ready to be fleeced.

Around a dozen or so years ago I was in this same situation; my long-time block supplier Shintaro Shimano had died suddenly, and as there was apparently going to be nobody stepping forward to fill his shoes, I visited the Shin-kiba lumber district to try and find some cherrywood that I could store in my workshop with an eye to using it when my on-hand supply ran out. I knew absolutely nothing about how to purchase wood in such a large quantity from the wholesalers, and had no idea of what price would be reasonable. I ended up ordering a massive slab of (beautiful) cherry wood, which I had re-sawn into boards, and shipped to my workshop for storage (where it sits to this day), for a total cost of 400,000 yen. As I have learned recently, I wasn't fleeced at all.

I was slaughtered, sliced, diced, cooked and eaten for breakfast.

Visiting another cherry supplier in Kiba the other day with partner Sato-san (the young man helping me with this new tool project), we chatted with this man about wood and prices and (oh so casually) asked about the cost of a slab of wood of that type and dimension. He thought it would be around 120,000 yen.

Yes. Well, this doesn't tell me anything I don't already know. As we move forward with this project, Dave here has to make sure that - as far as possible - he has nothing to do with the purchasing of our supplies and materials.

There is only one problem with that policy. Sato-san isn't much of a tiger either. We're walking around these places going "Baa ... baa ... Meow ... meow ... ," and I'm sure they are very happy to see us coming.

I suppose the only thing is to look on the bright side. By getting all this money into circulation, we're helping the economy. Right?

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>