



Coming Home ...

It has been well over thirty years - more like thirty-five - since my earliest visits to Japan. I came a couple of times on exploratory trips, before coming again in 1986 on what has turned out to be a permanent 'visit'.

Based on what I had learned during the early visits, I decided at that time that I would like to live in the Asakusa area. This was of course because that was the 'center of attraction' for my interest in traditional woodblock printmaking. The *shitamachi* part of town was where the genre had been born, and where many of the craftsmen still active in the field lived, so it seemed like the most sensible thing for me to do was to live nearby.

It wasn't possible. We were a four-member family, and needed the kind of living space known as a 3-DK (a dining-kitchen space plus three other rooms: one for my work, one for the kids, and one for general use). This was still 'bubble' time in Tokyo, and the rent for such a space in that area was astronomical, something well over \$3,000 for even an old place.

The only solution was to look farther afield, and I have described in other stories how my search took me day by day farther and farther away from central Tokyo, until I ended up in the suburb of Hamura Town. The rent for a place there was just around \$700, easily manageable for us, and we spent many happy years living in the very pleasant suburban environment.

After my family left, during the time that I was living alone, a chance came along to purchase a building of my own. As it happened, this was even further out of town, in Ome, but because I no longer felt any requirement to be close to other craftsmen, I took the opportunity and made the move.

So my time living in Japan has been a combination of 15 years in Hamura, followed by nearly the same length of time in Ome, both a long long way from shitamachi, in both distance and character.

If you have been following recent blog posts (and these stories) you will know that this situation is about to change. It's not that I am selling this place and moving; I have no plans to do that at all. But I am expanding my print publishing activities this autumn with the opening of a shop down in Tokyo. We'll have a small retail space, a place where some of our printers can work, and an area where we can hold our Print Party events for people visiting Japan who would like to try their hand at traditional printmaking.

And as you have probably guessed by now, yes indeed, the shop will be in Asakusa. Over the past couple of months, I have made many trips down there as part of our preparations, and each time I finish the business at hand, I take a bit of extra time, and just stroll around the district.

It sounds quite melodramatic to say this, but it's true nonetheless - I have the strangest feeling that I am 'coming home'. This is almost certainly a psychological game I am subconsciously playing with myself, but the feeling is no less real because of that.

It might be quite a bizarre thing for a Yorkshire boy to say, but I feel like I belong here. And that's not something I have ever been able to say about my homes in Hamura or Ome. I have lived happily in those places, and I have called them 'home', but this is something different.

When I opened up my Mokuhankan venture a few years back - moving away from being a solo craftsman to begin involving other workers - I said at the time that I was ready to shake up my life and 'bring on' some adventure.

That is happening - in spades - but I didn't expect to also be 'coming home' ...

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