

## Ripped Off, But Satisfied

I didn't expect to get ripped off within an hour of my arrival – who would? When I left the airport, I told the driver the name of my hotel. The smiling young man said, very naturally and in a friendly way, “it'll be about seven dollars.” So, I got on board. I heard later that a normal rate would have been about three dollars – oh well, it was still a lot cheaper than Japan!

Anyway, it was nice to drive through the city at night. A while into the drive, a huge, glowing dragon came into view. Well, a bridge in the shape of a dragon. Who on earth would decide to make a bridge in the shape of a dragon? The dragon shifts in color from red to blue to yellow. The design really impresses on me that this place is not Japan – it has a much stronger influence from Chinese culture.

The accent of the locals' English is quite difficult for me to understand – I need time get used to it. Actually, even on the plane, it was difficult to understand what the flight attendants said. For instance, after a brief struggle, I understood that I was being asked, “Salmon or beef?”

I answered quite clearly, or so I thought, “Salmon, please.” Soon after, a beef *donburi* was placed in front of me. It's been a while since I've had this kind of challenge.

Anyway, most people in this country don't speak English to begin with. How about French, then? Few people speak French, too. In fact, apparently less than 10% of the population speak French. It seems unbelievable that just a few decades ago, French was one of the most important languages in this country.

The hotel I stayed at was a fine one, also built in a French style. However, the food is expensive and not really interesting, so, the next day, I decided to go outside and find a local restaurant. Walking around, I notice that the trees lining the streets seem particularly strong – here and there, I can see their roots breaking through the paved footpaths. Overall, this country is very fertile, and, of course, food is abundant here because of that.

I spot a noodle restaurant that seems popular with the locals. I can't read much of the language here, but these noodles are very well-known, so I can recognize the letters on the menu. You can also find these noodles in Japan, but there are so many more varieties here. I choose a dish at random and wait, while I look at the condiments on the table – the chili peppers pickled in vinegar stand out.

The noodles arrive. The hot soup is garnished with fresh herbs – some people really don't like this herb, but to me, it's very tasty. Unlike instant noodles, the meaty broth of the soup has punch. The vegetables are also very flavorsome, and really stand out. I tried adding the vinegared chili – it's not too spicy, and the flavor is perfectly balanced. These noodles are fantastic. And, cheap.

In the afternoon, I had an appointment to visit a high school where my friend works. I called a taxi again. Getting in, I was slightly worried about being ripped off again. The driver starts talking to me, but when we realize that we don't share a common language, he uses a translation app on his phone, through which we had the following conversation:

- Where are you from?
- I'm from Japan.
- Oh, the Japanese people are so polite and punctual.

It takes me a few seconds to reply, but I smile and answer, ‘thank you very much.’ I also think to myself, ‘I hope all Japanese that have visited before were polite...’

Although our conversation wasn't very deep, the driver seemed to take a liking to me, and he said, ‘tell me when you'll finish, I'll come to pick you up.’ This time, I didn't get ripped off at all. In fact, I tried to pay more, because I didn't have any change, but the driver went out of his way to walk to a nearby shop to exchange money and make change for me.

Anyway, I arrived at the high school where I had my appointment. The school had many women teachers – and all of them wore a bright national dress. That was their uniform. The dress had long sleeves and trouser legs, but with slits that showed just a little skin. They look like they would feel cool in the hot weather – and they look graceful. The women also have good posture, and seem confident. When visiting the staff room, it was almost like entering a botanical garden.

The students in the class I visited were all learning Japanese, and all greet me with a friendly ‘*konnichiwa*.’ Their teachers said that Japanese is as important as Chinese and English to them. Of course, the importance of Japanese is not because the Japanese army was here for a short time in the past – no, it’s because Japan is an important business partner for this developing country.

Although they no longer use *kanji* characters, they still share a lot of common vocabulary with Japanese, which brings a feeling of closeness. All of the high school students laugh a lot, and also study seriously. I guess many dream of visiting Japan one day. I hope that if they do, the Japanese are as polite as they think we are.

### Questions, Answers and Hints:

**1. What country does the narrator visit?**

**Answer:** Vietnam.

**Hints/Clues:** Many clues – the bridge in a shape of a dragon: *Da Nang* – a quickly Google search with key words will find this. Also, the importance placed on historical French – although seemingly not so important these days, the French influence remains due to the fact that Vietnam was a French colony for an extended period.

**2. What languages can the narrator speak?**

**Answer:** Japanese, French, and English.

**Hints/Clues:** Several clues, but she appears to be Japanese, given the “it was still a lot cheaper than Japan!” exclamation, as well as many references to Japan, and thus will likely speak Japanese. She also struggles with the *English* pronunciation of the locals, suggesting she has proficiency in English. Finally, her specifically bringing up French suggests that she is capable of using the language for communication.

**3. What noodle dish does the narrator eat?**

**Answer:** Phở.

**Hints/Clues:** Given the understanding that the country is Vietnam, the most well-known noodle dish is Phở. If students have missed that the country is Vietnam, other hints include the condiments on the table – chili pickled in vinegar, a common condiment in Southeast Asia.

**4. What kind of herb was added to the noodle dish?**

**Answer:** Coriander/Cilantro (パクチー).

**Hints/Clues:** Again, given assumed knowledge of the country and dish, arriving at ‘パクチー’ is a reasonable conclusion, particularly given the phrase, “some people really don’t like this herb, but to me, it’s very tasty.” Apparently there are genetic factors in tasting coriander – this non-linguistic knowledge is also a route to the correct answer.

**5. What is the kind of dress the women teachers wore?**

**Answer:** Áo dài.

**Hints/Clues:** “The dress had long sleeves and trouser legs, but with slits that showed just a little skin” – but also, knowing the country is Vietnam, this can be found with a cursory Google search.

**6. Why doesn’t this country use *kanji* characters anymore?**

**Answer:** Colonialism.

**Hints/Clues:** “Although they no longer use *kanji* characters,” is the primary clue, but this comes from a more general-knowledge application, based on the understanding that the

country is Vietnam.