

The Countryside, Here and Elsewhere

Since I was a child, I have always wanted to live in big cities. But in reality, I think I've always actually loved the countryside. This contradiction probably has something to do with my childhood. Until I was 15 years old, I had lived my whole life in a small village. With only 8,000 people, everyone knew everyone. We all went to the same schools - the *Jacques Prévert* nursery school, the *Victor Hugo* primary school and the *Léon Blum* secondary school. I would take the same shortcut to school every morning, through the fields behind the church. Not much to see but wheat fields and cows. More cows than people.

The climate was nothing special, either. The land was flat, no real mountains, or even hills. It wasn't very cold, but the skies were often grey, and it rained a lot. In that sense, I guess I have more in common with those across the channel, than people in Japan, who, wherever you go, tend to enjoy four very distinct seasons. In Japan, everyone talks about my country for its wine, but, where I grew up, we couldn't grow grapes. Instead, we grow barley and hops and make beer, lots of different beers, like our Belgian neighbors. People often think, because of its grey skies and thick dialect, my home is not very welcoming. But in fact, we have a saying that goes, "our people have the sun in their hearts, that they don't have outside."

Anyway, when I was young, I was easily excited, and wanted to know more about the world. I was distracted at home and at school, so, when I was seven years old, the local doctors recommended to my parents that I be 'disciplined' through learning a martial art. So, I began *jūdo*. I loved it, and kept doing it for ten years, even qualifying as a referee. Because it was a very Japanese sport, I had to learn a lot of terminology that was very different to my mother tongue. But, because I had a purpose, learning those Japanese terms was fun, too. And to me, Japan was the image of a very metropolitan – very city – environment, so I chose to make it my third foreign language at high school.

In my country, you have to learn a foreign language at primary school, usually English. But you also have to learn another foreign language from secondary school. I first chose German, because it was the language of the country closest. But there was also another language option, only taught in the city near my hometown: Japanese. I saw this as my opportunity, and convinced my parents that I really wanted to learn it. The Japanese I had begun to learn through *jūdo* became my ticket to the big city! This would change my life forever – after graduating, and entering a university, I came to Japan for the first time at the age of twenty.

Despite having wanted to live in a city, and having images of Shibuya and Shinjuku, and Akiba! When I first arrived in Japan, it was in Jigorō Kanō's homeland. It surprised me that I was more drawn to the history of where I lived, and not the potential attractions. This interest in history, though, would help me connect better with the local people than I might have imagined.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. What country does the narrator come from?

Answer: France.

Hints/Clues: The school names (*Jacques Prévert* nursery school, *Victor Hugo* primary school, *Léon Blum* secondary school) are clear hints – although students would not necessarily be aware of these three individuals, a quick search would be helpful. Further, the narrator talks about his country being famous for wine – while several countries are known for wine production, France is particularly well known for it in Japan.

2. Who does the narrator mean by 'those across the channel'?

Answer: The English.

Hints/Clues: The answer will rely on students' correct assessment of Question 1 – the only possible answer (across the channel = 海峡の向こうの) is the British Isles. Also of relevance, whether or not it is known to the students, is that the British Isles are known for grey skies and rain (something often alluded to by their inhabitants).

3. Why do you think the narrator mentioned 'local doctors' when he began *jūdo*?

Answer: Specific answers will likely vary, but he likely received a diagnosis or something similar to ADHD.

Hints/Clues: Just before the narrator mentions doctors, he refers to being 'easily excited' and being 'distracted' both at home and at school. These are possible symptoms of an ADHD-like diagnosis, also cemented by the doctors' recommendations that he be 'disciplined.' While a specific answer might be difficult for students, attention should be drawn to these factors in aiding their answers, and could provide an interesting discussion point.

4. In what prefecture did the narrator first live in Japan?

Answer: Hyōgo.

Hints/Clues: "When I first arrived in Japan, it was in Jigorō Kanō's homeland." A cursory search will reveal the answer,

5. Were the people of the narrator's hometown friendly to outsiders?

Answer: Likely yes.

Hints/Clues: People often think, because of its grey skies and thick dialect, my home is not very welcoming. But in fact, we have a saying that goes, "our people have the sun in their hearts, that they don't have outside."

6. Continuing from Question 5: The narrator mentioned a local saying, "our people have the sun in their hearts, that they don't have outside." Can you explain the meaning, or give a translation in Japanese. Alternatively, do you know of a similar expression?

Answer: Answers will vary.

Hints/Clues: The only hint is the in-text, "people often think, because of its grey skies and thick dialect, my home is not very welcoming." Focus on the part where the speaker talks about coming to work in Jigorō Kanō's homeland, the small town in the Shingen Takeda mountains, and the cultural experience.