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The cramped gyoza (dumpling) restaurant was packed with a row of men noisily eating their meal and slurping their soup. Amidst the noise and steam from frying food, the five of us small girls, sat along the bar in the corner of the shop also enjoying our own meal. Three Chinese students, one Taiwanese student, and one American student – we were obviously not the usual customers in this sort of place amongst the hungry, tired, business men with loosened ties and bags under their eyes. We sampled the pickled carrots and cow tail while reading the kanji from the grease speckled sign above our heads, which informed us that if we did not have enough money to pay for the meal, we could wash the dishes for 30 minutes instead. We ate happily, tired from a long day of biking around the city and visiting a nearby shrine. We talked and joked in a mixture of Japanese, English, and Chinese in order to effectively communicate with everyone, and the sounds of the interchanging languages resonated beautifully in my ears. Making friends with the other international students in my dorm has been a wonderful opportunity to practice my Japanese without feeling too self-conscious of my stunted speech and limited vocabulary in Japanese.

This restaurant that we had found, not knowing what to expect, was a strange contrast to the usual taciturn feeling of the streets in this section of Kyoto with old women riding their bikes home from grocery shopping under umbrellas and hats to shade their faces from the sun. However, the atmosphere of the place was refreshing and reminded me that many of the best memories I’ve had so far in my short time being here have been made more vibrant by the mystery of situations and awe of surprise. There is a term in Japanese for someone who lacks a sense of direction, or gets lost easily, a Hk onchi. Sometimes being a Hk onchi has been a hindrance on my travels (getting off at the wrong stops and turning 15 minute bike rides into hour long rides), but most of the time, I find myself in exciting new places that I would never have found without getting off the beaten path. The day that we ate at the gyoza shop was one of those times, a day full mystery and confusion became a day yielding gingerly held memories.

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