



## Have I Experienced Racism in Japan? by Chris Broad

On a scale of 1 to shamelessly controversial topic, I'll admit this comes near the top of the list. For that reason, as a precaution, I'll be leaving my sarcastic "funny voice" in a box under the sink for this article.

Surprisingly though, it's a topic I've never touched upon in all the years that I've been doing this, despite it being a popular topic amongst foreigners living in Japan (seriously, type "racism" and "Japan" into Youtube and prepare to be hit with a wave of intimidating thumbnails).

It's also a common question I get asked; with people moving here often messaging me with a sense of panic after seeing the infamous "White Pig go home" video (and if you haven't seen this hilarious gem already: <https://youtu.be/5uC4AUyju7k>).

The sad news is, the odds of being referred to as a "white pig" and being told to "go home" in this hilarious fashion are just about non-existent. I witness Japanese people marching around shouting through megaphones every week in Sendai and Tokyo, and yet, far from telling me to go home, they focus on topics such as pensions, nuclear energy, or concerns over Japan's gradual re-armament and amendments to the pacifist constitution.

In other words, boring things.

In 5 years, I've only spotted one van espousing negative remarks about foreigners, aimed specifically at Koreans - which is by no means good - but still thankfully remains a rarity.

Now if we turn our attention back to those Youtube videos and the experience of vloggers in Japan, if you watch them you'll soon discover a worrying pattern begins to emerge; their stories are embarrassingly lacklustre - little more than an attention grabbing headline designed to lure in viewers.

I know this because I watched 10 videos today for research purposes and it's time that would have been better spent learning how to smile or cultivating strawberries.

The three most frequent cases include:

- 1) Being referred to as a "foreigner" or "gaijin" (外人)
- 2) Being asked why they're here in Japan
- 3) Being stared at in public

First off, there seems to be a frustrating misunderstanding regarding the use of the word “foreigner” in Japan, and many foreigners often sit in bars across the land, debating whether it’s derogatory or not, whilst getting drunk and being sick over pub tables.

I once met an English teacher who regaled their racist ordeal of being referred to as a “foreigner” at a dinner party once - a story which suggested he regarded the word “foreigner” in the same way a black person would regard the ‘n’ word.

But to say the word “gaijin” lacks the negative cultural and historic implications of the ‘n’ word would be an understatement. There is quite simply, no comparison.

Quite literally 外人 means “outside person”, as in “not from Japan”.

Anyone who is aware of the most basic Japanese history knows it was a closed off island nation for an extended period of time. To come from the outside world was a big deal.

To have Portuguese sailors rock up from the outside world into your rural Japanese town 400 years ago would have been nothing short of an utter mindfuck.

In fact, if a Portuguese person rocked up even now, it’d still be an utter mindfuck. I’ve still never met a Portuguese person in Japan to this day.

**2)** Being asked “why are you here in Japan” shouldn’t even require me to type out the line “this isn’t racism.” It annoys me that I’ve had to waste precious calories having to write it out.

Even more worrying, it implies I might be a racist, as when I meet people who’ve migrated to the UK to work from distant lands, I too often ask what led them to move there.

I can only hope there’s not a Brazilian guy making a Youtube video about their racist encounter in the UK, as a result of my question.

**3)** Being stared at is not racist. But it is fucking annoying.

When I lived in the countryside and wandered into the supermarket, more often than not, a child would come skipping around the corner and down the aisle, only to see me, and subsequently freeze in a state of panic.

At first, I enjoyed it. I felt like I possessed some sort of sixth sense or magical gift - albeit one with limited applications.

However, ironically, after I’d lived in the countryside for 2 years, whenever I saw a foreigner I didn’t know, I too would stare and wonder what the devil they were doing out there.

Where there is indeed racism is the imbedded xenophobia towards China and Korea (which they mutually have towards Japan). Ask any Japanese person on their views towards Korea and China, and their opinions are far from good.

I remember holding an English class with a dozen local students a few years ago - locals who ranged from 25 years old to over 60 - and we were discussing an abandoned town in the Fukushima fallout zone, that was being frequently burgled and reported about on the news.

“Probably Chinese,” remarked one of the people over 60. Several other older members nodded in agreement.

Meanwhile everyone under 40 face palmed and shook their heads in embarrassment.

Again though, I know many Chinese and Korean people throughout Japan who have been accepted into the culture, and integrated perfectly. Those who make the effort, and embrace the language and the etiquette, are able to integrate comfortably.

Another favourite scapegoat for racism are the bars littered around Japan with signs saying “no foreigners”; a situation so rare, you’re statistically more likely to get hit by a meteorite comprised of chocolate.

And even then, the good news is far from being a calculated insult towards foreign travellers, it’s either a bar owner who is so bad at English, they feel ashamed and uncomfortable serving people they can’t communicate with, or an exclusive gentleman’s club with frequent customers who don’t want their tedious gatherings intruded upon.

It may even be a criminal outfit, in which case, it’s probably not the sort of place you want to wander into in any case - that is, if you enjoy having fingers.

To say that there isn’t racism would be stupid of me of course.

I’ve heard stories of foreigners being asked to present their resident card or passport to Japanese police randomly on the street - something that seems common in Tokyo.

However, the only time I’ve come into contact with the police in Japan was when I moved into my new apartment and the local officer came to give me his number in case of an emergency.

I still recall receiving a knock on the door that fateful morning, and opening it to find an elderly, smiling police officer, who bowed before proudly announcing in English, “I am Japanese policeman!”

Introductions don’t get much more exciting than that.

And then there was a survey earlier this year, which revealed that 1 in 3 foreigners have experienced derogatory remarks whilst living in Japan

Presumably this includes foreigners hearing the classic patronising line of “Oh wow you can use chopsticks!”, which you can look forward to hearing every time you eat alongside a stranger in Japan. Less a derogatory remark, more a naive compliment.

The survey also revealed however, that 40% of survey respondents had experienced housing discrimination - which is a camp I can now officially belong to after the hassle I had finding an apartment last year.

Having found my dream apartment in Sendai, I quickly put in an application, before learning several days later that the owners were uncomfortable with the idea of a foreigner moving in and subsequently turned me down.

And honestly, as pissed as I was, I tried to look at the situation objectively from their perspective. After all, having a foreigner move in as a tenant is extremely rare - why have the added hassle of a foreign tenant who you can’t communicate with and who may not understand Japanese etiquette. It’s just far easier to say no and accept a Japanese tenant instead.

The good news is, if you have a job, your company will help you with the apartment anyway, so chances are you won’t have this issue.

But quite honestly, from my 5 years of experience in Japan, I can safely say there’s no racism to be had here on the level we would see in Europe or the US, where people are verbally abused and assaulted frequently.

On the contrary, I strongly believe as a foreigner living in Japan you have every opportunity to thrive if you play it your advantage.

Make no mistake though, I have looked out for it carefully during my time in Japan. Really I have.

Because, quite naturally, I too wanted to make the standard “Racism in Japan” Youtube video with a captivating title, with which to lure in viewers and ad-revenue.

I even desperately asked Natsuki to beat me with a rusty spanner once, whilst simultaneously shouting “die fucking foreigner”, just so I could cry racism in a video, and use the subsequent ad-revenue to buy us both beer.

Sadly though, he refused to go along with my diabolical and undeniably flawed plan.

To summarise then, whilst you will leave this article without a nice meaty story and without a firsthand account of racism, hopefully you’ll leave reassured in the face of this annoying and overly sensationalised topic.

If and when you move to Japan, you can either allow sensitivity and misunderstanding to get the better of you, or you can get on with building your life here.

Truthfully, I’ve been shown nothing but kindness and opportunity since arrival, and as someone who’s come into contact with powerful businessmen, entrepreneurs and politicians whilst being here - and befriended many of them - I can safely say that being a foreigner in Japan has genuinely never stood in my way.

Don’t let it stand in yours.

*(If you have experienced racism in Japan firsthand, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with your story).*