

# *Racial Bias in Japan* by Jackson Sellers

*I've got relatives in Kentucky who are highly biased against Japanese. They wouldn't dream of buying a Japanese automobile, and it goes deeper than that, harking back to the big war 60 years ago. But when they are with me, knowing my inclinations and my wife's nationality, they usually just say things like "some people around here [not them, of course] don't like Japanese much." I typically respond with another truism: Some Japanese don't like Americans much either. In my "Bittersweet Journey" book, which I am trying to finish this year, I address the matter several times. Below is a sample, mostly taken from my journal of a few years ago:*

We had an ugly encounter with racial bias in northern Gunma Prefecture. A bus in which we were the only passengers stopped on a mountain road for 15 minutes before taking us the rest of the way to Dogenso, the only hotel in Yunokoya Onsen. This area is about as rustic as it gets in Japan. The eastern Kentucky mountains might be a good comparison. The bus driver, a man about 45 years old, stepped out for a smoke. Since we both smoked, we went out with him. The surrounding mountains were alive with color. The temperature had dropped and Gunma's first snowfall was expected around here. Right away I sensed the driver's hostility, so I never said a word to him. I had met his kind before. Decades ago, when I was a young man named Jack, squiring young women around Tokyo, such men would come up from behind and rabbit-punch the girls in passing. The mere fact of being with Jack, an obvious *gaijin*, probably an American, made the girls targets of bigotry. As I recall, there were at least three such incidents. The cowards never touched Jack, only the Japanese women who were with him.

Yoshi can hardly imagine this. She thinks all strangers love her, and why wouldn't they if their minds were not warped. She attempted to chat with the driver about the autumn beauty surrounding us. He was curt and walked away, even crossing the road and pretending to be interested in something in the distance. We still had seven minutes to wait, so Yoshi wanted to look around a bit up the road, in case there was something more worthy around the bend. I declined, saying I would get back on the bus and wait for her inside. Although I didn't say so, I feared the son-of-a-bitch would drive off without us if we were 30 seconds late. As I sat alone in the bus, I saw the driver light another cigarette. Innocent Yoshi approached him again and said or asked something politely. With cigarette

sticking out of a stony face, he never even looked at her. He turned rudely away and strolled out of my sight. Befuddled, Yoshi climbed onto the bus to find my friendly face. “Yoshi,” I said, “the bus driver doesn’t like you.” She replied with words that touched me: “I know, but I don’t know why.” I had to explain it to her. *It’s me, not you, and if it’s you, it’s because you are with me.* She fretted about it for the rest of the day, even days later.

One must take these things in stride. Often they are subtle, not blatant at all, and may not even be what they appear to be. Two hours after the incident with the bus driver, Yoshi and I were soaking alone in a large mixed-sex bathing pool at Dogenso. It was one of several *rotenburo*, or outside pools. The others were sexually segregated — either men or women but not both at the same time. A small family — father, mother and grown daughter — came down the stone pathway and took a look at our pool. They saw us in the steaming water and turned back. We joked about it. “I’m chasing away customers,” I smiled. “Yes,” Yoshi replied, “they are saying right now: ‘A *gaijin* is in there!’” Or maybe not. It was getting dark, and we were at the far edge of the pool, under a shed roof that covered half of the *rotenburo*. They may not have recognized me as a foreigner, only as a man. And they may not even have known that the pool was assigned to mixed bathing, until they saw a man and woman soaking together there. Maybe race had nothing to do with it, and sexual modesty had everything to do with it.

Over the decades, all in all, I have found Japanese to be much like Americans. They are hardworking, a highly successful and literate race, and they take pride in their nation and culture. There are few Christians in Japan, but that doesn’t bother me — I’m not much of a Christian myself. Japanese in general are gracious to foreigners like me. Only a few are assholes like that bus driver. Anyway, Yoshi gave him an earful after pondering the matter and growing angry. “*What’s wrong with you? I’m going to report you to the bus company!*” For more reasons than one, he was surely glad to get rid of us at the hotel.