Bob Sapp, Bobby Ologun, Yon-Sama, and Jero:  
The Changing Perception of “Others” in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract:
Well expressed in *Nihonjinron*, the Japanese have maintained its firm belief in the racial purity myth and have continued to discriminate against non-Japanese despite the country’s official slogan of “globalization”. While *gaijin tarento*—foreign celebrities—have been an integral part of the Japanese entertainment world since the 1980s, they were almost exclusively Caucasians who of all the non-Japanese groups held the highest rank in the Japanese mind. The rise of unusual celebrities the entertainment world has seen during the past several years, therefore, may indicate a change in the Japanese perception of foreign others. This paper will examine the Japanese attitude toward non-Japanese through the analysis of the popularity of Bob Sapp, Bae Yong Joon, *Daalín wa Gaikkōjin*, Bobby Ologun, Billy Blanks, and Jero. It will also consider the experience of Hapa-Japan members as discussed on the club’s list serve. It seems that the Japanese appear to accept non-Japanese more easily now than before but their fundamental attitude has not changed since the end of WW II. Non-Japanese must remain exotic, cuddly, cute, and inferior to the Japanese in order to gain popularity in Japan.

Keywords: perception of non-Japanese, *gaijin tarento* Blacks, Koreans, *Nihonjinron*

On February 17, 2006, two 5-year-old children were stabbed to death by a 34-year-old Chinese woman on their way to kindergarten in Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture. The woman told the police that she felt her daughter who went to the same kindergarten was increasingly isolated from other Japanese children because of her Chinese nationality. She killed the two children because they did not befriend with her daughter. Those who knew the mother also told the police that she complained that she was excluded from the mothers of Japanese children and was concerned about the future of her daughter. The mother’s feeling of isolation was regarded as the motive for this senseless double murder. The Chinese mother came to Japan in 1999 in order to marry a Japanese man whom she met through an international match making agency.
According to NHK News, she grew up in Heilongjiang Province, China, as one of seven children. Her parents were too poor to send her to school so that she had to pay for her high school tuition herself. She spoke Japanese, worked as an interpreter, and seemed well adjusted to the life in Japan. In fact, she told her family in China that she was happy with her life. On the other hand, she had been treated for depression since 2003.

This woman's story represents the experience of non-Japanese living in Japan. Well expressed in *Nihonjinron*, the Japanese have maintained its firm belief in the racial purity myth and discriminated against non-Japanese despite the country's official slogan of "globalization". For instance, The Japan Times regularly reports on discrimination experienced by non-Japanese by residential Koreans, American English teachers, or Chinese sailors. On the other hand, the entertainment world has seen the rise of unusual celebrities during the past several years. Since African American Bob Sapp dominated Japanese mass media in 2003, there has been a number of Blacks who rose to stardom in the entertainment world. A South Korean actor Bae Yong Joon seized the heart of middle-aged Japanese women through his role in TV drama *Winter Sonata* and helped start the Korean boom in Japan. While those *gaijin tarento* (foreign celebrities) whose raison d'être is being non-Japanese have been an integral part of the Japanese entertainment world since the 1980s, they were almost exclusively Caucasians until 10 years ago. (The only exception was perhaps a Sri Lankan A. Wicky who had an English conversation lesson segment on the morning television program.) A comic book series *Daalin wa Gaikokujin* (My Darling is a Foreigner) based on the daily life of the author remained on the best seller list throughout 2004. In the meantime, Hapa Japan, a club for biracial youth was created in April 2004 and, although membership is limited to the people of mixed heritage, has been attracting young Japanese to its parties. All this recent developments clearly indicate an unprecedented interest in non-Japanese cultures among the Japanese and may give an impression that they have finally given up on *Nihonjinron*. Therefore, the murder of innocent children by the Chinese woman seemed such an unfortunate incident, yet a reminder of the fragile relationship between the Japanese and non-Japanese people. This paper will examine the Japanese attitude toward non-Japanese through the analysis of the popularity of Bob Sapp, Bae Yong Joon, *Daalin wa Gaikokujin*, Bobby Ologun, Billy Blanks, and Jero. It will also consider the experience of Hapa Japan members as discussed on the club's list serve. It seems that the Japanese appear to accept non-Japanese more easily now than before but their fundamental attitude has not changed since the end of WW II. Non-Japanese must remain exotic, cuddly, cute, and inferior to the Japanese in order to gain popularity in Japan.
Bob Sapp

Originally from Colorado Spring, Colorado, Bob Sapp played football for the University of Washington and was recruited to the NFL. His NFL career with the Chicago Bears, the Minnesota Vikings, and the Baltimore Ravens, however, lasted only 4 years due to injuries. He then joined WCW and was known as "The Beast". After the fall of WCW, he began to train kickboxing and martial arts under Maurice Smith, a K-1 championship fighter. K-1 is a fighting sport that combines elements of karate, kickboxing and taekwondo and is quite popular among young Japanese men. His debut fight at PRIDE 20 in May 2001 left a lasting impression on K-1 fans and established his place among the fighters. Sapp's reputation as "The Beast" began to be widely circulated through mass media and by the spring of 2003 his image was seen in not only sports newspapers and magazines but literally everywhere in Japan. He released a CD “Sapp Time!” in March, was featured in commercials and advertising, appeared as a guest on variety programs on TV and even acted in feature films, Elektra and the 2005 remake of The Longest Yard. Furthermore, Fuji Television Network created the Bob Sapp room in its headquarters in Odiba, displayed the life-size cardboard cutout of Sapp along with his costumes and photos, and sold the Bobu Hage (Bold Bob) products, such as rice crackers, towels and notepads, for the visitor.

Sapp’s primary appeal to the Japanese was his large physique. Standing 6 feet 8 inches tall and weighing 376 lb., he easily dwarfed most Japanese K-1 fighters, let alone regular Japanese men. In the commercials for a home electronics manufacturing company, he was paired with a small Japanese man and danced together. When he appeared on variety programs, he showed off his muscles and answered the questions about what he ate and how much through an interpreter. (Since Sapp did not speak Japanese, there was not much the producers could do.) Thus, Sapp proved to TV viewers that he was indeed “The Beast" although he was not as menacing as he acted on the ring. In his interview with Kyodo News, Sapp said, “They [the Japanese] like my smile…. He continued by comparing his popularity to that of Pokemon and Godzilla: “The fans like me more than just as a fighter. I really enjoy it”. The comparison to Pokemon and Godzilla is very interesting because Sapp’s success stems from the combination of the two monsters; he is as threatening as Godzilla and as cute as Pokemon. Foreign celebrities must be cute and cuddly to appeal to the Japanese who put premium on cuteness.

Bae Yong Joon

By the summer of 2004, Sapp seemed to be forgotten by the Japanese other than the K-1 fans. Instead, the Korean Wave that swept across East and Southeast Asia since the dawn of the new millennium finally reached its peak in Japan. When NHK (Japan Broadcast Corporation) began broadcasting a Korean drama Winter Sonata in April, it didn't take long for Bae Yong Joon
who played the main character to catch the heart of Japanese women over 40 year old who called him "Yon-sama" (His Majesty Yong) adoringly. When Bae visited Japan in November, an estimated 3,500 fans greeted him at Narita airport. In comparison, there were only 1,000 people at the airport when the Japaneese team returned after winning the first World Baseball Classic. The Yon-sama boom not only opened the door for other Korean television programs and movies but increased the interest in Korean culture in general, including food, language, and tourism.

There are a variety of reasons for the appeal of Bae and of Winter Sonata. Some attribute it to nostalgia for the old time. When the drama started, it was often compared to the enormously popular Japaneese radio drama of the 1950's 君の名は (What is Your Name?). The Japaneese were nostalgic for the old-fashioned social values of their own society. Others consider that because many middle-aged Japaneese women have never experienced true romance or they have forgotten the feelings they had in youth, Bae allows them to live or relive the fantasy. Yet, others explain the appeal by saying that Korean dramas depict various emotions felt in real life, such as happiness, sorrow, and anger, more expressively than the Japaneese counterparts. Many women fans feel Korean actors are more straightforward and better at expressing their love to a woman than Japaneese actors, let alone their husbands. Reportedly, one Japaneese housewife divorced her husband because he didn't resemble Bae even remotely.

Regardless of the reasons for the appeal, what is interesting is the complete lack of interest in the neighboring country's culture among the Japaneese until 2000. Partly aided by the Korean government's decision to lift the ban on Japaneese cultural products and by the co-hosting of the World Cup in 2002, the Japaneese public finally began to come to terms with the history of their troubled relationship with the Koreans. This change was further accelerated by the Korean Wave, more specifically the Yon-sama boom in 2004.

Daalin wa Gaikokujin

While middle-aged women were mesmerized by Yon-sama, young Japaneese women, married or single, were reading a comic series ダーリンは外国人 (My Darling is a Foreigner) by Oguri Saori. In the books Oguri who unexpectedly fell in love with an American and eventually got married to him depicts numerous episodes of culture shock she has experienced in her daily life. Married women consider the books reflect their own experience; even though their husbands are Japaneese, they still experienced culture shock because the couple did not necessarily share the same values. To single women, on the other hand, Oguri became a role model. According to Shoji Kaori, Daalin wa Gaikokujin was "being hailed in joseishi (women's magazines) as both a heart-warming love story and a kind of instructional manual for those preparing to take the kokusai kekkon [international marriage] plunge themselves". The number of international
marriage has rapidly increased in Japan since the 1980s. As marriage for love replaced traditional arranged marriage as the norm in Japanese society, more and more young women began to seek a non-Japanese partner because supposedly he was more romantic, passionate, caring and less chauvinistic than a Japanese man. These women dreamed about the day they would meet their daalin by reading the comics.

Bobby Ologun

In terms of gaijin tarento, 2006 was the year of Bobby Ologun. A Nigerian native came to Japan initially as a buyer of Japanese products for his father’s import business. He married a Japanese woman and was working at a restaurant when he was spotted on the street and asked to give his view of sumo for a segment of a popular television variety show, サンマのスーパーカルリテレビ (Sanma’s Super Trick Television). Because his broken Japanese made his explanation of sumo so funny, the show’s host and a popular comedian Akashiya Sanma made him a regular on the show. His role on the show was to learn different aspects of Japanese society and culture as apprentice/novice. Confusions arising from his inadequate language skills made the skit extremely funny and popular among the viewers. Since his rise to stardom, Ologun has appeared on numerous television programs, hosted his own variety show Viking, published a book Bobby Dato Omoimasu (I think I am Bobby), and played a role in the popular movie series 銚子ハカ日誌 (The Diary of the Obsessed Fisherman). What is more interesting and important is his entrance into K-1. According to his book, it was not his choice but Ologun was forced to try various combative sports and eventually had his first K-1 fight on the New Year’s Eve, 2004. Ologun won the fight by three round decision and was dubbed by mass media “最強の素人 (the strongest amateur).” Although he stated that he would not fight again during the interview after the fight, he faced a former sumo grand champion Akebono on the ring one year later.

Ologun’s reluctant entry into K-1 reflects the stereotype that associates Black manhood with physical strength, athletic abilities, and violence. It was unfortunate that Ologun unwittingly reinforced this stereotype when the news media reported that he allegedly hit the president of his agency due to a dispute over payment. Although he denied the allegation and was never formally charged, the incident tarnished his image to the extent that he was banned from the entertainment industry for three months.

Hapa

While the Japanese public was preoccupied with Yon-sama and Bobby Ologun, Hapa Japan was created by a young Caucasian/Japanese man who called for interested hapas to join his list serve. Those who joined the list serve met in person for the first time in June 2004 and this meeting confirmed to those who were present that the dub was here to stay. Hapa Japan is
primarily a social club. Since the first party in June 2004, the members have had a party on regular basis. Although the on-line forum was created, the members use the list serve predominantly to plan for a next party, to exchange various information, such as job opportunities and roommate search, and to chat. During the first two years of its existence, the club grew considerably and the number of people who attended a party also increased. Since these parties were not restricted only to the members at first, the Japanese began to come with their hapa friend. This started a discussion on the list serve regarding the eligibility of the Japanese. Many felt that the Japanese wanted to make friends with hapas, thinking they would learn and practice English. Thus, they decided to exclude the Japanese from the main party. The Japanese were allowed to join them after the main party was over. Similarly, the members discussed the eligibility of returnee children (returnee children) who spent a major part of their lives overseas. Even though these returnee children were bilingual and bicultural, the club decided, membership was not extended to them in order to protect the identity of the club.

Needless to say, identity is a major issue to the people of mixed racial background. The issue has been discussed on the list serve several times during the past four years, usually triggered by a newspaper or magazine article a member found concerning hapa. Hapa Japanese members include those who grew up in Japan and others who grew up overseas and later came to Japan on their own will. As hapa, both groups more or less experienced discrimination while growing up. While they are not certain whether discrimination is harsher in Japan or the U.S., both groups agree that they will forever remain gaijin in Japan. Their experience in Japan makes it clear to them that, regardless of their language skill and cultural competency, they will never be accepted as one of them by the Japanese. Interestingly, one member wrote that gaijin was a firmly established identity and it was better than not having any identity as he experienced in the U.S. It seems that his view represents the feeling of other hapas who chose to live in Japan.

Billy Blanks

The summer of 2007 was the time for a boot camp for many Japanese who were, thanks to the mass media, increasingly made conscious of metabolic disorder that would result in life-threatening diseases. A well-known martial artist and the founder of Taebo, Billy Blanks has marketed his exercise videos and DVD's in the U.S. and the rest of the world. One of his DVD sets, Billy's Boot Camp, was first introduced to Japan via commercials on cable television in mid-2006 and caught the attention of health-conscious Japanese through the Internet. Subsequently, the sale of the DVD set continued to grow throughout the first half of 2007. Although numerous diet and exercise programs were readily available in Japan where women could never be too thin, Boot Camp was different from all others in that it used a boot camp style
led by “Drill Sergeant” Billy Blanks which was new to the Japanese consumers. With the rising popularity of his DVD set, Blanks came to Japan accompanied by his step daughter Shelly in June, holding two work-out sessions entitled “Billy Blanks Live in Japan” with 800 participants at Tokyo Dome City and appearing on TV as often as he could. His brief visit, needless to say, further fueled the sale of his DVD’s. By the end of July a million sets had been sold despite its rather expensive price tag of 14,700 yen. 7

The images of Blanks on the exercise DVD’s conformed to those of non-Japanese analyzed so far. Sergeant Blanks tries to push the viewer through the hard exercise with his harsh words but just when the viewer is ready to give up, he offers the encouraging words with the calm voice. Thus, he plays both the so-called bad cop and good cop. In other words, he is threatening and kind at the same time. While he may not be characterized as “cute” as Sapp, he presented two sides which characterized other Black gaijin tarento as well.

While Blanks was enthusiastically greeted by the Japanese fans, his visit shed light on an interesting aspect of the Japanese perception of non-Japanese persons. Seeing Shelly in person during the live event and on TV, many Japanese questioned why Shelly was white. Because the divorce rates are still relatively low and the combined families are not common, many Japanese could not comprehend why African American Blanks fathered white Shelly. This attests to the Japanese ignorance or naivety as to the issue of race.

Jero

Enka is a genre of popular music which in the popular consciousness is associated with a traditional style. It is often compared to the country and western music in the U.S. Although the two types of music are different in many ways, they share the conservative images popularly attributed to them. Therefore, it caught the Japanese by surprise when a young African American dressed in hip-hop fashion debuted with an original enka song “Umiyuki” in February, 2008. What surprised the Japanese public and thus caught their attention was the way Jero sang – he sounded just like a Japanese singer would. Partly aided by his uniqueness, “Umiyuki” ranked fourth on the Oricon singles chart, the highest place ever achieved by a debut single by an enka artist, and eventually sold 250,000 copies. 8

Jero whose real name is Jerome White, Jr. grew up in Pittsburg, listening to enka which his Japanese grandmother was fond of. He taught himself the Japanese language so that he could sing the songs for his grandmother. He said, “Enka is something that connected me to my grandmother and connected me to Japan.” 9 Upon his graduation from the University of Pittsburg, Jero moved to Japan in order to fulfill his promise to his grandmother – to become a professional enka singer. He won NHK’s Nodogijin within two months of his arrival and
participated and won in karaoke contests as often as he could until he was finally signed up by Victor Entertainment, Co. After two years of voice training, Jero debuted as the first African American enka singer in the history of Japan.

What makes Jero attractive to the Japanese are his mannerism which indicates his understanding of Japanese cultural values and his respect and love for his family which is valued in Japanese culture. He uses honorific words effortlessly while the younger Japanese are often criticized for their misuse or ignorance of them. There have been few non-Japanese enka artists before Jero because enka songs which often relate to the Japanese mind were difficult to sing. The way Jero sings “Umiyuki”, however, leaves little doubt in the listener’s mind that he understands the feelings expressed in the song. In his interviews, Jero never failed to mention his indebtedness to and his love for his grandmother who taught him not only enka songs but Japanese culture and who unfortunately had passed away without seeing his success. When the news of a child murdering the parent or grandparent is becoming frequent, Jero who says, “If it wasn’t for enka and if it wasn’t for my grandmother, I wouldn’t be here”10 is a reminder of the family value deeply rooted in Japanese culture. All of this makes Jero “more Japanese than the Japanese” as often voiced by other musicians, including Uzaki Ryudo and Wada Akiko.11

Since the economic boom of the 1980s, the number of non-Japanese living in Japan has continued to increase. Some of these people came to Japan to study the language and new technologies. Some came for job opportunities even though most available jobs were menial labor. Others came with the hope of a better life, thus coining the term “Tokyo Dream”. When a recession set in, it did not stop the influx of non-Japanese, for the demographic change – an increase in senior population coupled with the dwindling birth rates – necessitated it in recent years. The governments on multi levels from national to municipal have adopted new policies or changed the existing ones to accommodate non-Japanese residents. Consequently, the presence of non-Japanese has become the fact of life to the Japanese throughout the country. In Shinjuku Ward where the Tokyo government office exists, for instance, 20% of the residents are non-Japanese. Almost four thousands (3969) registered foreigners lived in Nagahama city where two five-year olds were killed at the end of December, 2005 due to the internationalization program adopted by the Shiga prefecture government.12 Willingly or unwillingly, for the first time in history, the Japanese are learning to live with others of diverse cultural backgrounds. This change is reflected in the popularity of Bob Sapp, Bae Yong Joon, Bobby Ologun, Billy Blanks, and Jero. According to the Japanese traditional view of non-Japanese, Caucasians were unquestionably ranked on top of the totem pole and Blacks and Koreans occupied the lowest rank. Thus, gaijin tarento were
exclusively Caucasian merely a decade ago as seen in the video Japanese Version.

The popularity of the recent *gaijin tarento* is certainly a welcome change to those who are critical of *Nihonjinron*. Japanese people seem certainly more open to the presence of others but have their view of themselves and others really begun to change? One of the most popular and best known *gaijin tarento*, Dave Spector, compared *gaijin tarento* giant panda bears in that both appeal to the Japanese, being cute and cuddly (just like the penguins in the movie *Madagascar*). As seen in the preceding analyses, Bob Sapp, Bobby Ologun, and Billy Blanks are viewed as such by the Japanese. Sapp is “The Beast” with a nice smile and soft heart. Ologun’s broken Japanese certainly makes him childish and consequently cute and cuddly in the eyes of the Japanese. The alleged assault incident, however, no doubt indicated his menacing side. Blanks presented himself as the drill sergeant who cared on his exercise DVD’s. Incidentally, a Hawaiian former *sumo* wrestler, Konishiki, who now makes a living as *gaijin tarento* is a host of a NHK children’s program (Let’s Play with the Japanese language). On the show, Konishiki who literally dwarfs the regular children on the show with his 600-lb. body dresses in orange and yellow and is called “Koni-chan” (‘chan’ is an honorific that connotes “cuteness”, usually reserved for children and women). In short, he is cute.

Has the Yon-sama boom and the subsequent arrival of the Korean Wave changed the Japanese attitude toward Koreans? According to the *Japan Times* article, residential Koreans “admit that things have improved – a little”. They may not experience overt discrimination like before but discrimination still exists. For instance, they “cannot vote in Japan or take top public service jobs”. Under such circumstances, the younger generations of residential Koreans are increasingly choosing to be naturalized as naturalization is the most preferred method of dealing with residential Koreans by the Japanese government. Clearly, the Korean Wave has not resulted in the changed attitude toward Koreans yet. Besides, a reason for the enormous popularity of *Winter Sonata* that made Bae Yong Joon a heartthrob among middle-aged women was nostalgia for Japan’s own past. It is not really Korean culture that appealed to Japanese television viewers. Similarly, Jero appeals to the Japanese because he possesses as well as respects the traditional Japanese cultural values – he is more Japanese than a Japanese person.

Interestingly, Japanese women are more likely to choose Korean men than any other nationalities as a partner of international marriage in recent years. The Yon-sama boom has unquestionably contributed to this. Korean men are followed by Americans who have been a preferred partner since the end of WW II and *Daalin wa Gaikokujin* helped them maintain their second place. While some look for their future husband among non-Japanese, an increased number of Japanese women choose to remain single. As a result, the number of marriages between
Japanese men and non-Japanese women has also increased because fewer Japanese women are available. This new phenomenon, incidentally, brought the Chinese mother who killed two children to Japan. Although more and more Japanese people get married with non-Japanese, their marriage often ends up in a divorce. Nearly a half of international marriages (one couple out of 2.5) fails mainly due to the difference in values and lifestyle between the partners. Growing up in a pretty homogeneous society, most Japanese people are not exposed to different cultures and therefore prepared for the life with a non-Japanese partner. Japanese women are attracted to the image of gaijin daalin but, needless to say, the image is different from reality.

It has been a while since Japan adopted the slogan of internationalization out of economic and demographic necessities. Has Japan, the country known for its Nihonjinron, changed? A casual look at current Japanese society with the increasing presence of non-Japanese residence, the popularity of gaijin tarento and the Korean boom affirms this question. Such a look, however, is deceptive. Facing the increasing non-Japanese population and the biased media reports on crimes committed by non-Japanese, Japanese people are becoming apprehensive and wary of them. The 2003 government survey revealed that the respondents who answered that “the human rights of people who are not Japanese citizens should be protected to the same degree as Japanese nationals” had gone down from 65% in 1997 to 54%. The comic book entitled Hating the Korean Wave was published in early 2005 and sold over 300,000 copies within months. Later in the year the book Kokka no Hinkaku (The National Style) written by a professor at one of the best women’s universities in Japan got the public attention. In the book, the author reiterates the importance of traditional Japanese values and thus denounces internationalization. Among the advanced nations, Japan remains the country with the “lowest percentages of immigrants and expatriate workers”. The country and her people need to take a serious look at its relationship with non-Japanese if they want to survive the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, there is a movement to change the persistent relationship. Jero said that his goal is to become an enka singer with staying power. He intends to stay in Japan, continuing to sing enka for the rest of his life. At the same time, he hopes to change the way the Japanese people view foreigners as he said, “I would be extremely happy if I can contribute to the change in (people’s) way of thinking, or changing some stereotypes as well”. The most recent gaijin tarento is different from the others examined in this paper in that he is characterized neither as “cute” nor “threatening.” Instead, he is often referred to as “polite” which implies “Japanese.” It seems that he has thus made an initial contribution. Whether he is successful or not to break the stereotypes remains to be seen.
Notes
3. NHK. 7 O’clock News (3/22/06).
10. Ibid.
15. Kanako Takahara, “Koreans here inclined to assimilate to dodge.” The Japan Times 6 August 2005 6


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NHK. 7 O'clock News (3/22/06).


ポブ・サップ、ポピー・オロゴン、ヨン様、ジェロ：

外人タレントにみる日本人の外国人観

桑原 泰枝

要旨
日本人単一民族論が根強く残る日本社会では、「国際化」のスローガンにもかかわらず外国人に対する差別が続いている。唯一その存在が認められた外国人は、明治時代からの日本人の欧米諸国希望の結果である白人だった。1980年代から芸能界で活躍し始めたいわゆる「外人タレント」も白人に限られていた。それ故、過去数年間の黒人タレントや韓国人俳優の異常人気は驚きであり、日本人の外国人に対する見方に変化が起きたことを示唆しているとも思われる。本論文は、ポブ・サップ、ベ・ヨンジュン、ポピー・オロゴン、ビリー・ブランクス、およびジェロの人気の理由を分析しながら、日本人の外国人に対する態度を考察する。外国人居住者人口が増加し続ける中、日本人は以前よりも容易に非白人を受け入れるようになったが、外国人に対する蔑視に変化はみられない。外人タレントが人気を得るためには、エキゾチックで可愛く日本人より劣っていないなければならないことに変わりはない。

【キーワード】非日本人観、外人タレント、黒人、韓国人