

Communication Gap Between Japan and China: The Role of Their Media

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Over the past several years sporadic incidents involving Japan and China have erupted to rankle, irritate, or infuriate the people of one country regarding the other, but 2003 was definitely the worst. It was the *annus horribilis* of Sino-Japanese incidents. Among the major ones, China's plan to import Japanese Shinkansen technology to build a bullet train between Beijing and Shanghai was met with unusually wide and well-organized opposition within China. What was startling in this case was an Internet campaign that gathered tens of thousands of signatures to block the plan. Then in August, in the town of Qiqihar in Heilongjiang province, some local people came upon chemical weapons containing mustard gas left buried there by soldiers of the former Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. At least forty people were injured, including one who died.

In September 2003, in the southern Guangdong city of Zhuhai, a large group of Japanese businessmen-tourists scandalized the nation when news got out that they had gathered dozens of Chinese prostitutes and brought them to their upscale hotel for an alleged three-day sex orgy. Hot on the heels of that outrage, in October, a small group of Japanese students at Xibe University in the western city of Xian performed "lewd and offensive" dances at a party at the university, setting off a string of disturbances in Xian. According to reports, incensed Chinese students beat up two unrelated Japanese students, and a Japanese restaurant was looted, among others. To cap the year, in late November the Toyota company, getting ready to put new model cars on the market in China, released advertising that critics claimed was insulting to the country and its people. As the word spread, Toyota was so inundated with complaints and invective that, hounded into retracting the ads, in early December it issued an apology and went back to the drawing board.

Big or small, it seemed that almost any event involving Japan was blown way up in the Chinese media. At the root of those reactions is a widely-felt, sometimes acute, antipathy toward Japan that is stoked by repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine by Japan's prime minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro. This shrine,

which honors Japanese war dead and nationalist heroes, particularly because of its association with the Pacific War symbolizes the magnitude and intractability of the so-called history question—the different treatment in China and Japan, especially in school textbooks, of World War II and related historical events. Many point out the influence of the media in turning something routine and local into a full-blown diplomatic issue between the two nations.

Problems of this sort needed to be squarely addressed, and so in 1998 a group of scholars, journalists, and businesspeople from both countries set up the Japan–China Communication (JCC) Workshop. A two-day JCC international symposium held in Tokyo on December 20 and 21, 2003 was intended to present research and analyses that would help both sides to understand, and to find ways to resolve, communication problems. This essay reviews some of the relevant issues that came up during the symposium and notes the main points in discussions of media reporting in China.

Destructive Power of the Internet

In China (as well as in Japan), the Internet is having an increasingly wide and fast-acting influence on how people think and feel. There is no question that it has played a large role in the spreading antipathy among Chinese people toward Japan. As of the end of November 2003, China had about 78 million Internet users, over a hundred times more than six years ago, which makes it now second in the world in number of World Wide Web users. A growing number of privately operated websites offer a “news corner” or other sources of information, and pages called *luntan* (“forums”), which work something like chat rooms. Anyone in China with Internet access can join in these chat-room discussions on almost any subject in a way that, for a communist country, is comparatively unconstrained.¹

One topic that kept coming up at the December 2003 symposium was the emotional “Japan-bashing” edge that observers had been noticing in many Internet exchanges and comments in China. Liu Zhiming, head of the Media Research Center of the China Academy of Social Sciences, also identified a pronounced rise in anti-Japanese feeling on the Internet in 2003, and cited the examples of the Zhuhai incident and the Toyota advertisements to demonstrate how powerfully online communication is affecting that trend.

At this point, let us recall what happened. As to the first incident, in

¹ For details, see the essay by Yamada Ken'ichi, “Chugoku no nettojo o nigiwasu ‘genron no jiyu’” [“Freedom of Speech” Captures the Web in China] in the April 2003 issue of *Hoso kenkyu to chosa* [NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research].

September 2003, a large contingent from a two-hundred-member group made up mostly of Japanese businessmen staying at a hotel in Zhuhai were reported to have brought Chinese women back to the hotel and engaged in highly compromising behavior even in the public areas, including the lobby and elevators. After the Chinese press published the story, the local police ordered the hotel closed for business. They arrested fourteen Chinese involved, including some of the hotel management (two were sentenced to life imprisonment), and they issued a warrant and tried to get international help in tracking down and arresting three Japanese men, whom they charged with having made the arrangements for the whole unsavory weekend. (China and Japan have no extradition treaty.)

In the case of the Toyota ads, at the end of November 2003, when the company was preparing to launch three new models in China, the company employed a Chinese PR firm to create ads, which they placed in newspapers and magazines. One of the ads depicted stone lions, which are often taken as a cultural symbol of China, bowing and saluting the Toyota car. This raised the shackles of the prickly Internet constituency—the Chinese netizens—who complained that the ads were a national insult because they implied Japanese superiority. Another ad showed a Toyota SUV pulling a large truck that resembled a Chinese military vehicle up a hill with a chain. Protests ensued, claiming that the ad deliberately portrayed China's trucks as inferior to Japan's cars. Toyota withdrew the ads and held a press conference in early December, where a spokesman read a statement of apology.

The Zhuhai incident was first reported in a local Guangzhou newspaper. The next day it appeared in the news headlines of Sohu.com, a huge network portal with ten million regular visitors, and from there other newspapers picked it up and published it. So the news traveled from newspaper→Internet→newspaper. As for the Toyota ads, initially a small number of critical reactions were posted on the Internet, where a group of newspapers spotted them and took up the thread in print, supplying more information about the ads, which was then posted on still other websites. A new group of newspapers proceeded to take that information from those websites and report it without even checking for accuracy. The route of proliferation in that case, then, was Internet→newspapers→Internet→newspapers. In other words, through collaboration between the new medium of the Internet and the established medium of the papers, the issue snowballed into a giant national item.

Respondents in a survey conducted by the Media Research Center were asked to identify the medium from which they learned about these and other such incidents; the most frequent answer was newspapers, followed by,

“Someone told me,” and third, the Internet. Television took fourth place. These days in China all kinds of people post their opinions on the Web as soon as they learn of something happening, and, as in the instance of the plan to build a high-speed train, the Internet has proven to have a rapid and wide impact.

Polarization of Established Media

The ensuing discussion at the symposium concerned how newspapers, an established medium in China, have changed. Professor Takai Kiyoshi of Hokkaido University proposed that the papers increasingly are divided between government mouthpieces, or propaganda sheets, the best example of which is *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), and those with a strong commercial bent, the popular press. In a typical example of the effects of this trend, Takai noted that the Renmin Ribao Company now issues three times a week a mass-circulation tabloid called *Huanqiu shibao* (Global Times).

According to Takai’s report, a leading front-page headline in the November 24, 2003 issue of *Huanqiu shibao* blasted out in huge bold letters, “Taiwan’s leaders should not underestimate our determination to use force.” The article underneath stated baldly that any move toward independence on the part of Taiwan would, if necessary, be blocked by military force from the mainland. Sideheads proclaimed belligerently, “China’s national integrity is its most vital interest. Can we allow our sacred land to be divided?” and “Get out of Taiwan, all you ‘independence’ freaks! But don’t you dare take a spoonful of the land our forefathers left us.” There were more like that. Takai described a large color photo accompanying the article, showing gun-toting soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army in parade formation. Professor Takai said that he looked in the November 24 issue of *Renmin ribao* to see if it carried the same article, but the front page news was just as it always was, focused on the comings and goings of the nation’s leaders, and there was no article of any kind about using military force to obstruct independence moves in Taiwan. In other words, the same newspaper company puts out several papers and they can be completely different from each other. This phenomenon occurs in Japan, too.

Takai pointed out that the same kind of division could be seen in treatment of the Japan–ASEAN summit held on December 11 and 12, 2003 in Tokyo. While the Chinese foreign ministry issued a formal statement, beginning, “We wish to extend our greetings and felicitations,” the Shanghai paper *Xinmin wanbao* (Xinmin Evening News) printed a barbed commentary by an opinion leader that stated, in part, “Japan hasn’t fully made up for its disgraceful acts in Southeast Asia during the second world war, when it invaded and occupied

the region. Japan's present attempts to expand its influence in this region, therefore, only bring back memories of the crimes of the Greater East Asia Economic Sphere. Second, Japan's political shift to the right combined with its ambitions to political and military great power-dom are sounding warning bells among intelligent people around Southeast Asia. Finally, Japan's decision to send military troops overseas and its move toward phasing out the three nonnuclear principles [of not producing, possessing, or letting others bring in nuclear weapons] make the ASEAN countries more uneasy than ever about Japan's remilitarization and their own security."

That kind of article, Takai averred, "contains completely groundless observations that simply heighten uneasiness and apprehension about Japan among the Chinese populace." He also pointed out that mass-consumption newspapers have been around in China for only ten years or so, and in all likelihood these papers, almost none of which have special correspondents stationed in Japan yet, will mature and improve in the future.

More Patriotic Than Democratic

Xi Ru, a student from China studying at Hokkaido University in Japan, argued that the media in China are beginning to leave their established role as the government mouthpiece for political propaganda and are becoming multi-functional. Increasingly they seek to convey information, provide helpful services for daily life, offer entertainment—all those things and more. In Xi Ru's view, commercialization and the formation of an industry can be seen now even in China's media, a trend that might well bring greater freedom in reporting.

In Xi's analysis, the media in China do stand up against the authorities from time to time, but such challenges are sporadic and usually random. On the other hand, and much more interesting, an alliance between government and the media is taking shape around two phenomena: the rise of a culture of mass-consumption, and a kind of ethnic consciousness that drives Chinese patriotism. Xi deconstructed recent accomplishments, including the successful bid by China to host the 2008 Olympic Games and China's trouble-free launching in October 2003 of a manned spacecraft, and predicted that, as the media participate more actively in the tidal wave of patriotic feeling that the government is stirring around these events, tensions between media and government will probably relax to some extent. The trouble is—for Japan—that as soon as Chinese patriotism is associated with history, too often it gets translated into anti-Japanese feeling.

Perception Gap Between Japan's and China's Media

Professor Cui Baoguo of Qinghua University in Beijing presented an analysis of reporting by media in Japan and China on a wide range of incidents involving the two countries. His findings revealed large and conspicuous differences between the way news of the same incident was treated in each one.

Cui cited the Qiqihar incident, when long-buried Japanese chemical weapons from World War II were discovered and poisoned a number of local people. The Xinhua News Agency reported the incident on August 8, 2003. The Japanese media were silent on the issue that day. The following day, Japanese news agencies Kyodo and Jiji both reported it. But whereas the Xinhua report described skin ulcerations, vomiting, and other symptoms the victims suffered, the Japanese media turned that section of Xinhua's account into a recitation of low leucocyte counts and other such clinical conditions, which prompted Cui to speculate dryly that perhaps government influence had encouraged the Japanese media, in many cases, to treat a major event as something incidental.²

As Cui went on to say, sometimes the reverse happens under Chinese government prior restraints on the media. The type of events that in China get big coverage and in Japan are given less attention are the Qiqihar mustard gas incident, the Japanese prime minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, and the offensive behavior of the group of Japanese men in Guangdong. The Japanese students' unwise and tasteless antics at Xibei University, on the other hand, were given little publicity in the Chinese media whereas they were much bigger news in Japan. Cui was critical of the way the Japanese media handled anti-Japanese sentiment in China, which, he said, demonizes the Chinese people, but he gave the opinion that the violent reaction by the Chinese students at Xibei University was out of proportion and was conditioned by previous run-ins between China and Japan. If the foreign students in Xian had been South Korean or American instead of Japanese, he said, "the whole brouhaha would probably never have erupted."

Professor Tabata Mitsunaga of Kanagawa University added observations from his research on anti-Chinese positions argued in five Japanese conservative current affairs journals. He suggested that ultimately, at the root of Japanese criticism of China, there is a bottled-up frustration that is vented on China and stems from Japan's long, drawn-out economic recession.

² Jiji's senior reporter flatly denies what Cui was implying. "We wrote up the events on the same day the Chinese media reported on them," he asserted. "We reported that some people had inhaled poison gas and became seriously ill. We did nothing whatsoever to deliberately minimize the news value." The Kyodo staff, also, reject any such suggestion out of hand.

Japan–China Relations on Television

There were no papers at the symposium on how these various “incidents” have been reported on television.³ But one account related to television was the analysis by Wang Bing, head of the Market Information Institute at the Beijing Broadcasting Academy. Wang’s research draws on findings from a previous international comparative study of films and TV dramas to assess what kind of influence, if any, they might have on the images Chinese and Japanese have of each other.⁴

Wang Bing noted that in China all imported television programs are screened, and that China prohibits airing of programs made in other countries during primetime, 7:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M. Even on dedicated film channels, no more than 20 percent of the films may be foreign-made. At least half the foreign films shown on Chinese television are American, but beginning around 2002, there has been a surge in popularity of dramas made in Korea. At present, they are way ahead of Japanese dramas among Chinese viewers.

According to other data⁵ from a December 2003 survey of 500 respondents in Beijing, 11.1 percent said they liked Japanese people, and 31.1 percent said they liked Koreans. Those figures may well be an indication of how strong the impact of the Korean dramas has been. The degree of good feeling for Japan was much higher in the 1980s than it is now, and of course that was the decade when the much-loved, tremendously popular drama *Oshin* had captured the hearts of Chinese audiences.

Japan’s entertainment media have in fact influenced China’s television and film worlds for quite some time. As Wang pointed out, even many of the TV dramas produced in China are Chinese remakes of Japanese “trendy dramas” (a kind of soap opera) like *Long Vacation* and *Love Generation*. Chinese also have imitated many other kinds of programs, including variety shows, things like *Ryori no tetsujin* [The Iron Chef], and others. More than half of animation programs are made-in-Japan series; people all over China are familiar with *Chibi Maruko-chan*, *Doraemon*, *Slam Dunk*, and other favorites. Since no human Japanese characters appear in the animations and copycat dramas, those programs convey no particular image of Japan. Rather, as in the proto-

³ The China Central Television, perhaps because it is a state-run medium, did not cover them at all in its main news programs.

⁴ The detailed results of the survey appear in Kawatake Kazuo et al, “Nihon no terebi bangumi no kokusaisei: Terebi bangumi kokusai furo chosa kekka kara” [The International Makeup of Japan’s Television Programs: From the Results of the Survey on the International Flow of Television Programs], in *NHK Hoso Bunka Kenkyujo nenpo* [NHK Annual Bulletin of Broadcasting Culture Research], vol. 48, March 2004.

⁵ Relies on survey data published by CRC Research Center, the survey company affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

typical anti-Japanese film, real Japanese people appearing in films and dramas in China tend to be given roles with an evil or sinister air and to be depicted as short, bespectacled, ugly, and cruel.

Wang's discussion also suggested the emergence of a different element, however, which can be seen in the drama *Yongjiu lianren* [Forever My Love]. The main character in the drama is a "good" Japanese youth who goes abroad to study at Beijing University, where he falls in love with a Chinese girl. The director, who spent some time studying in Japan as a foreign student himself, has that experience to draw on. This kind of drama may well become increasingly important in improving Japan's image in China.

In the area of TV commercials, on the other hand, while advertisements for Japanese manufactured goods appear even in China, most of them try to adapt by using popular Chinese actresses and entertainment idols. So, even if those ads help draw customers to the company, they do not necessarily have much of an impact on the image of Japan as a nation.

Corporate Response to Media Reports

More than 20,000 Japanese companies have established some kind of presence in China,⁶ and trade between Japan and China exceeds \$100 billion. The popular mantra in Sino-Japanese relations goes, "The politics are cool and the economics are hot," but these days the rise of anti-Japanese feeling in China is definitely affecting economic relations as well.

The CRC Research Center is a survey company in Beijing affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. A report prepared by the company under the names of its vice president Yasuda Narumi and the head of its market survey department Jiang Yajie deals with the image of and reporting about Japanese companies in China. The report describes a survey to determine which companies were held in highest regard by Chinese consumers, and in 2003, Japanese companies did not fare badly: Sony placed fifth, Matsushita sixth, and Guangzhou Honda was in ninth place. The kind of reputation that those rankings imply was more or less proportionate to the level of the companies' presence in the country.

Then came the negative reaction in China to Toyota's ads. In December 2003 the CRC Research Center directly polled 500 people in Beijing: 43.7 percent said they knew about the problem, and of those, a large 74.2 percent said, "Those ads were insulting to China." As to whether or not Toyota's image had changed since the ad incident, 55.5 percent said, "No change"; 37.5 percent said, "It has gotten worse"; and 7 percent said, "It has improved."

⁶ CRC Research Center survey data.

Yasuda's assessment was that, "Toyota responded immediately by holding a press conference, where they explained their actions and apologized for the ads. Because of that, Toyota's image did not deteriorate as much as the company had feared it might." According to Yasuda, a basic factor behind the inflated hue-and-cry that ensued when the ads appeared was the anti-Japanese feeling already present in China, and that was exacerbated by the Internet, which demonstrated once again its power in shaping public opinion. Furthermore, the incident coincided with a rise in consciousness among Chinese of their consumer rights, and in addition, an increase in journalistic sensationalism provoked by a new level of commercialization of the media.

On the part of the Japanese companies, on the other hand, Yasuda proposed that such troubles arise because of failings in three areas: (1) The companies do not fully appreciate the importance of good publicity; (2) their responses are late due to systemic factors like the time-consuming process of corporate consensus-building and decision-making (*ringi seido*, the system of circulating a proposal among all the many concerned parties for consultation and approval before action); and (3) insufficient grasp of the nature and working of the Chinese media.

A Chinese economic journalist at the symposium elaborated on those points, adding further detail on problems with Japanese businesses in China. Wang Jiangang, a reporter of *Jingji* [Economy], a monthly magazine put out by the Jingji Ribao Co. (publisher of *Jingji ribao* [Economic Daily]), related his own frustrations. "Whenever I try to get material for an article about Japanese companies in China, I almost never even get a foot in the door, no matter what company I go to. It happens almost everywhere." In the case of a Japanese automobile maker in Guangzhou, for example, he started by calling the office in Guangzhou, and he was informed that "you will have to talk to our Beijing office." He contacted the Beijing office, and this time he was told, "Please wait two weeks." He waited two weeks and tried again. Still no response. He called once more and was asked to please "wait a little longer." By that time his deadline for the article had come and gone.

When Wang was sent to the Swiss Bank to research an article, he made valiant efforts to speak English, but the bank's personnel replied cordially in good Chinese. Compared with the problematic responses from Japanese businessmen, they were helpful and accommodating. One reason for the lack of cooperation by the Japanese he contacted, Wang said, may be that, like most Japanese personnel sent to staff their company's offices and factories in China, their rank is usually section chief or middle management, and they hesitate to assert themselves. Even when asked to talk to a reporter, they balk;

they feel unable to respond as representatives of the company. He proposed that such behavior is self-defeating, for Japan's companies need to publicize their contributions. China's people will never know how much those Japanese companies are helping their economy by creating jobs and providing large tax revenues unless the companies themselves make available abundant information about their business and other activities.

Prescription for Better Relations

One part of the symposium was a panel discussion on finding a prescription for improving Sino-Japanese relations. Among the several different approaches that were presented, Shimizu Yoshikazu, an editor at *Tokyo Shinbun* and author of *Chugoku wa naze han-Nichi ni natta ka* [Why Has China Turned Anti-Japanese?], proposed that the problem was "seriously flawed communication at the levels of media, the individual, and the corporation." Concerning the incident at Xibe University, Shimizu speculated that one Japanese student who performed the antics had miscalculated by making some reference to Mao Zedong on a cardboard box that he put on his head. In Xian, a city located in a conservative interior region of China, where the widening gap between rich and poor may be keenly felt, Mao Zedong has become something of an icon. The performance by the Japanese students, besides being vulgar, could have been taken as racist insult. It was an extremely risky venture in parody, Shimizu said.

Feng Zhaokui, an alumnus of the Institute of Japanese Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argued that part of the problem lay in the marketability of news. When putting together the top news for the general public, publishers choose from among three topics prepared by the editorial department, making their selection on the basis of which one will sell the most papers. "The problem is," said Feng, "that Japan-China cultural exchange does not make saleable news, but some troublesome incident does." Feng reviewed the "New Thinking on Japan" debate sparked by articles advocating rapprochement with Japan by Ma Licheng, liberal intellectual and former member of the editorial board of *Renmin ribao*, and Shi Yinhong of Renmin University of China, an advocate of realpolitik. Their work is widely admired in Japan, but in China they have been ferociously criticized as "traitors," and so forth. One position they take is that China could do much to improve relations with Japan by moderating its stance on the history question. Furthermore, Feng insisted, Japan needs to develop its own "new thinking on China."

Associate Professor Sawada Yukari of the Tokyo University of Foreign

Studies and Professor Yabuki Susumu of Yokohama City University stated their position that Sino–Japanese relations involve much more than just the two countries. It is a matter with wider ramifications, relating to building solidarity throughout East Asia and to the place of China and Japan together in the world. Sawada and Yabuki suggest that Korea or ASEAN, both involved in specific and immediate issues for China and Japan, could become the catalytic basis for progressive improvement in relations between the two.

During the two days of discussion it was noted over and over again how much damage was done by media in both Japan and China. The media just kept fanning the flames, making the situation worse. Now, no matter what the topic, whenever the media deal with anything related to Sino–Japanese relations, the discussion inevitably gets caught up again in the sensitive, inflammatory problem of the perception of history, rekindling all the antagonism that subject arouses. That cycle will never be broken unless both sides make efforts. They both need greater concern and empathy in their approach to the other, they need to try harder to understand the other’s position, and move on to more constructive relations.

(Translated by Patricia Murray)