

Japanese and American News Coverage 50 Years after the War

By Takahama Tatou

Why do the two sides sling negative images at each other?

Fifty years after World War II, how has Japan's coverage of the U.S. and American reporting on Japan changed? If there are aspects that have not changed, what are they? Finally, how have the perceptions and the reporting and editing techniques of the reporters and editors engaged in news coverage changed?

Interestingly, when these issues are addressed the focus is always on the question of why the media in both Japan and the U.S. cover nothing but negative aspects. Moreover, when this discussion comes up, U.S. reporters stationed in Tokyo unfailingly point out that "the Japanese media's coverage of the U.S. is always nothing but crime, drug addiction, racial discrimination, and Japan bashing. There is very little coverage of the good side of American society."

Come to think of it, recent stories about the U.S. in the Japanese media other than those about Japan bashing have been quite narrow in scope. Leading newspapers such as *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun* once carried extensive features on the U.S., but feature articles on the U.S. have declined considerably of late. Conversely, the economic daily *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* has enthusiastically continued reporting on American social phenomena. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* has pointedly been covering the underside of U.S. society with sensational headlines such as "America: Kingdom of Crime" and "Report from the U.S.: Will the Gun Society Change?"

Reports on Japanese utterances and behavior in American society have also stood out in the Japanese media's news coverage for the past several years. As best represented by Los Angeles Dodgers' Nomo Hideo, tremendous coverage has been devoted to "superior"

Japanese who are active in the U.S. and American opinions of them. Others who fall into this category might include the astronauts Wakata Koichi and Mukai Chiaki or Sugihara Chiune, the diplomat known as "Japan's Schindler" who helped Jews during the war.

However, articles covering the bright side of American society itself have become quite few in number. What receives coverage is the "foreignness" of U.S. society as seen from Japan; bizarre murder cases, divorce proceedings, and incidents of racial discrimination, for example, or, conversely, social phenomena that appear in the U.S. before they do in Japan such as sexual harassment suits or the no smoking movement. However, one does not encounter many in-depth analyses of U.S. society.

Critiques of American culture by U.S.-based Japanese pundits occasionally appear in culture pages. I recently spotted a piece in *Asahi Shimbun* evening edition of June 14, 1995 on "Anti-Japan Sentiments in the South" by Louisiana State University professor Kamo Yoshinori, who aided the family of Hattori Takefumi, the exchange student who had accidentally been shot and killed. The author posits, "If you visit the U.S. countryside people do not even know the difference between Japan and China, but offer sweeping criticisms of Asians." Doubtless, this sort of racial bias still exists in some parts of the South. However, one has to wonder whether Southerners' generous hospitality and friendliness can all be negated by one scholar's experience. First off, why did the paper have this teacher write about the South, instead of the correspondent it has posted to the U.S.? Jurisdictional disputes between the international and culture sections were apparently behind the decision not to have the *Asahi's* correspondent write the article for the culture page. Moreover, this complacent argument that "it's still the same old American

South today" is evidence of culture section editors' anti-U.S. sentiment.

On the subject of extensive negative coverage the U.S. receives in the Japanese media, a major American newspaper's Tokyo correspondent notes, "By providing readers with the image that 'America is a crime-ridden, dangerous country' they are pointedly promoting the impression that their own country is so safe and comfortable." In other words, this has an undertone of "Japan First" nationalism.

Even so, if, for example, you asked 100 Japanese if Japan or the U.S. was safer most would probably answer "Japan." If you asked those same Japanese whether they wanted to visit the U.S. in spite of this, most would undoubtedly reply, "Of course I'd like to visit." It follows, therefore, that the Japanese media now hardly needs to "promote" the crime and racial prejudice in the U.S. American movies and television dramas that invade Japan are more likely to plant the fixed idea that America is a dangerous and scary country in the minds of Japanese.

Viewing Perry Mason or *Kojak*, which Japanese enjoy watching, enhances the impression that the U.S. is a "scary" country, rife with crime and lawsuits. In my own personal experience, I thought of *Kojak* more as a human interest story when I watched it in the U.S., but saw it as nothing more than sensationalized violence when I watched it in Japan.

Even saying that the Japanese media's coverage of the U.S., with its particular fondness for American society's murders, family breakups, drug problems, and such, is odd and that correspondents' negative reporting should be fixed, there is no sign that this can be changed overnight. For one, there are not a few sections for which they have no responsibility. Editors in Tokyo like these themes and want to have their reporters cover them. Admiration for the U.S. or pro-Americanism is terribly

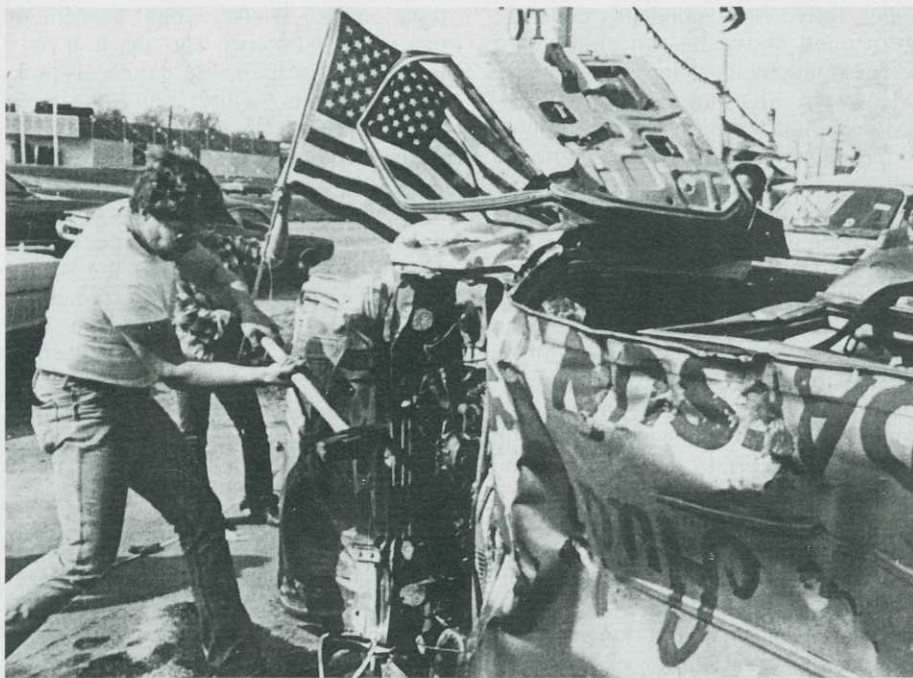


Photo: Kyodo News Service

Sensationalized scenes like the man above bludgeoning a Japanese car were typical fair in reporting at the height of Japan-bashing in the background of Japan-U.S. trade friction.

unfashionable among Japan's pseudo-intelligentsia. This sort of editorial posture is probably linked to the nationalistic tendencies that have sprouted in Japan in recent years, but also undoubtedly a backlash against the tendency to fawn over the U.S., a phenomenon that washed over intellectuals for a time following World War II. There was a sort of tendency among Japanese journalists who had been baptized in the anti-Security Treaty movement and anti-Vietnam struggle to wear anti-Americanism as proof of their intellectual credentials when they entered the world of media. The vestiges of this still remain today and, commenting on that situation, a reporter for a leading newspaper says, "Nowadays if you suggest doing a feature that paints the U.S. in a favorable light you get the feeling that the other people in the newsroom are going to call you stupid."

Naturally, many instances of this type of coverage of the negative can be noted in American reporting on Japan. Japan-based American correspondents also appear to tend to have a fondness for covering Japan-style bullying, par-

ent-child suicides, death from overwork, disrespect for women, yakuza disputes, and other darker aspects of Japanese society. Neither do editors at the headquarters of U.S. media like favorable portrayals of Japan and if reporters want to see their articles receive much play they have to write pieces that suit their editors' tastes.

These trends became even more striking around the late 1980s, after Japan had emerged as an economic superpower and had begun to "invade" the United States. That is, regardless of whether the media preferred it or not, they ended up as the "storm troopers" for Japan bashers. Not a few editors considered it their duty to criticize and devote exaggerated coverage to the closed nature and foreignness of Japanese society.

U.S. coverage of Japan wins in both quality and quantity

However, with the collapse of the "bubble" economy and the U.S. economy on the upswing, this sort of coverage of Japan became unfashionable. The American media's reporting on

Japan has improved in both quality and quantity over the past several years. The contrast is particularly favorable when compared with the quality lacking in Japanese media coverage of the U.S.

Especially when perusing reports on last year's Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, the subway gas attack linked to Aum Shinrikyo, the housing loan company problems, and other issues, one notes that features with bird's eye view analyses and delineation of the issues outdid Japanese coverage. A deficiency of the Japanese media is that, the bigger the story the less they are able to paint the whole picture. American reporting also surpassed the Japanese media on this point. Put differently, in its coverage of the Hanshin earthquake, the U.S. media quickly reported on the government's inept response and the heartwarming aspects of city residents' spirit of mutual cooperation, accurately pointing out issues that the Japanese media hesitated to cover. This could also be seen in coverage related to Aum and the housing loan companies.

Recently, some American Japan researchers have expressed criticism of *The New York Times* Tokyo correspondent's series of pieces on Japanese society. Others have come to his defense, though. The discussion regards whether *The New York Times* should devote such extensive, full-page coverage to articles by "a newly-arrived reporter who doesn't know much about Japan and doesn't speak Japanese" about the same trite topics that American correspondents based in the capitol unfailingly take up while stationed in Tokyo—pieces on "office ladies," children's cram school hell, the Dow problem, Japanese of Korean ancestry, new religions, and so on.

Whether this is right or wrong, I believe that the Americans have unmistakably shifted the focus of their reporting on Japan from economic and political issues to social phenomena and society's structure now that Japan-bashing tendencies have begun to subside. At a glance one might think that this is a regression to the good old post-war era, but in fact American reporting on

Japan, which had reached an extreme of anti-Japanese criticism, has now entered something of a lull. It could also be significant if this were a process of mutually recognizing and supporting the good points that exist in both societies in coverage of social phenomena.

Stereotyped images

Up to this point I have reviewed the transitions in the focus on negative images in news coverage in both Japan and the U.S. That is, I have examined how Japanese and American reporting has changed as time has gone by and in accordance with both nations' positions and standing at particular junctures in the bilateral relationship.

There is another facet to Japanese and American news coverage. This is the way, unaffected by the passage of time, that each has continued to stereotype the other. Truly, the general public in both nations has continued to nurture deeply ingrained, difficult to eradicate images of the other.

The Japanese and American media cannot completely ignore these; on the contrary, the media are strongly inclined to depend on and amplify them. Reporters who are the least bit honest would have to be somewhat concerned about reconciling the realities of that country they are covering and their own country's facily accepted, fixed notions regarding that country that bind them. Also, editors who are honest should be twice as worried as the average person about how to have reporters cover the actual situation in that country, which the editors cannot themselves investigate, and the angles that articles should have. They have to decide what the topics will be and from what viewpoint they will be presented, how long the articles will be, communicated under what sort of headline, and moreover, if only to ensure sales, package them as sensational, as well as sexy, "products." Here there is doubtless competition with rival papers and TV stations to detect cutting edge, new phenomena and even if there is popular appeal both sides have nagging scholars and experts. Indeed, the debate surrounding the propriety of *The New York*

Times Tokyo correspondent's coverage mentioned above has an element of petty carping by these Japan specialists.

However, what newspapers and television should be most concerned about is the deeply rooted, widely believed stereotypical images of "that country" and "that nationality" held by the average person in both countries.

According to "Understanding and Enhancing the Image of Japan in the United States," a 1995 study by the EBR Inc. Communications Planning and Evaluation Laboratory commissioned by the Japanese embassy in Washington, D.C., the general public in the U.S. has certain deeply ingrained perceptions of Japan. For this survey, interviews conducted with Americans from Washington, D.C., Detroit, Seattle, and other regions of the U.S. and focus groups served as raw data that formed the basis of an investigation into perceptions regarding Japan.

According to the study, most respondents, when asked which Japanese person's name came most quickly to mind, many offered three names with difficulty: Bruce Lee, Godzilla, and Yoko Ono.

When asked why they mentioned Yoko Ono, the only actual Japanese among the three, many replied that she was "an oddity" and "an extremist" or that "she lives in the past, stuck in the 60s." Further, when the researcher countered that Godzilla was "a cinema creation" many offered the counter-argument "it doesn't matter if they are not Japanese. They *are* Japanese." It can be seen here that they have a deeply ingrained, stereotypical image of Japanese. That is, they mention "Japanese as invaders" and the image of "sneaky," "aggressive" people, or the Pearl Harbor metaphor, comes to mind.

Naturally, the general Japanese public's perceptions of the United States also include stereotypical images of Americans. These occasionally crop up in the media as though they were accepted truths. I believe that when Japanese blurt out "that's so American," "cheerful," "free-wheeling," and other positive images are accompanied by opposite, negative images such as "rude," "smug," "shameless," and "seg-

regationists." It also cannot be denied that when journalists who are, to a certain extent, responsible carelessly use words such as "whitey" and "bastard Americans" it is an indication of a unique love-hate relationship with Americans.

There is apparently a lively, ongoing debate among some Japan specialists regarding the credibility of the study cited above and the reasons surrounding these stereotypical images of Japan. The point is whether or not the media bear a responsibility for the creation of these kinds of images. This is not in the slightest an inference that the American media are solely responsible. It may also pose very important questions for Japanese media. Restated, this is not simply the media's responsibility; politicians, bureaucrats, and the average citizens of both countries are charged with important roles in changing these negative stereotypes on each side through their speech and behavior. When a Japanese politician belittled the educational level of Americans or an American politician smashed a Japanese appliance with an ax and they received play in the news, to what extent did it encourage the general public's preconceived notions of the other country? Even if the media were able to gauge in advance what the results of their newscasts might be they must cover the news. If only because they are not like some communist states or dictatorships, the Japanese and American media have an obligation to report the news.

It goes without saying that a major premise is that reporters, editors, and producers employed in the Japanese and American media should have superior journalistic sensibilities and strenuously strive to pursue the truth. Over 50 years, Japan and the United States have developed the type of relationship that makes this possible. ■

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