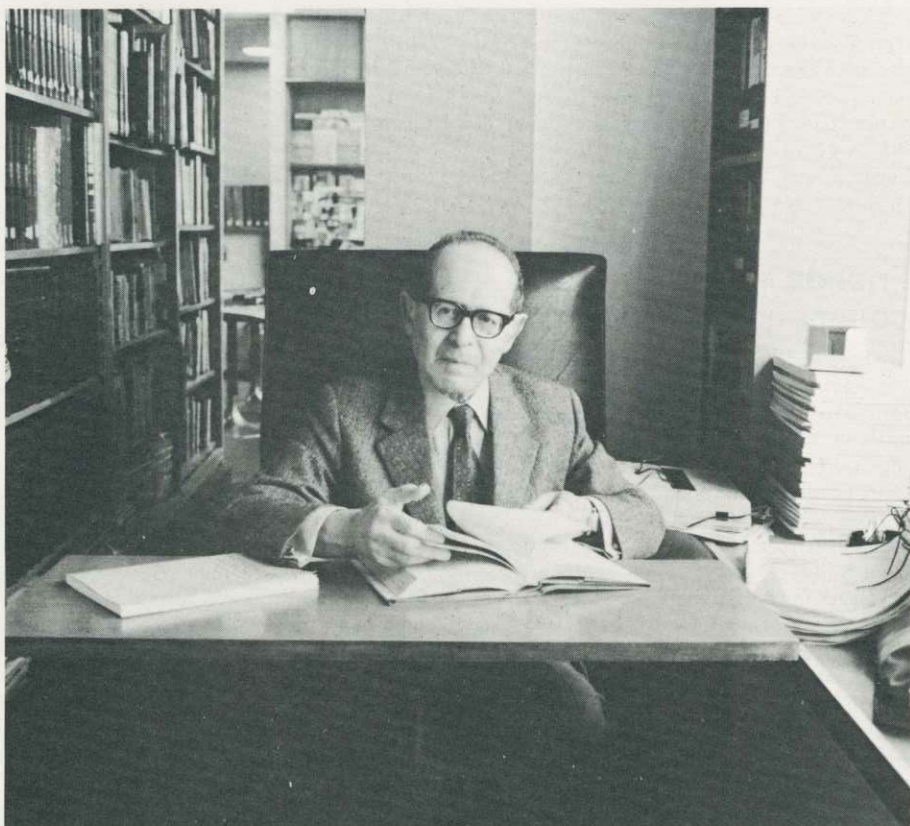


# The Foreign Press in Japan: Changing Perceptions

By Alfred Smoular



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## A choice assignment

For obvious reasons, the foreign press corps in Tokyo has become the largest and the most important in Asia since the end of World War II. All kinds of news media are represented in Japan, and there is the usual complement of freelancers and drifters who

come to this hospitable land with great hopes for the future.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the post of Tokyo correspondent for a publication which can afford the expense is a much sought-after job. Still, most Japan correspondents are on temporary assignment, though a few manage to return for second

and even third tours. The high rate of turnover is mainly due to the widespread assumption that a journalist who spends too much time in the same post will lose the fresh approach of the newcomer who is apt to describe what he finds with the superficial vividness and happy inattention to accuracy that is considered sufficient for the fabled Kansas City milkman.

Also, editors do not want their overseas correspondents to become too much like the "natives," so acclimatized that they lose their "objectivity": a criterion which too often means criticizing one's host country according to standards one does not apply to one's own society when dealing with the same issues.

Nevertheless, there is a handful of correspondents in Japan who are long-term residents by choice, not having abandoned their own country but preferring to change their professional affiliation rather than transfer out of Japan. I happen to be one of them, having arrived here during the Occupation, at the beginning of 1951, a few months after the onset of the Korean War.

## Five decades of bicultural life

My direct association with Japan and the Japanese is actually longer than the 34 years which have elapsed since then; it spans more than half a century. For more than five decades, I have moved back and forth between France and Japan, living partially in a Japanese milieu when in France and a French milieu when in Japan. Living overseas tends to sharpen one's sense of nationality; in my case, it has fostered an equal

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pride in France and Japan. I have had no trouble leading a bicultural life, and it has not precluded a deep interest in other cultures. I have always found it more profitable to learn to appreciate the best of any culture, including my own and that of my host country, than to allow myself to get caught up in unreasonable psychological and social complexes. No country is perfect, yet each has something worthwhile to offer.

My attraction toward Japan stems from what Goethe would have called an "elective affinity." For as long as I can remember, I have had a strong interest in Japanese art and literature—especially *ukiyo* and poetry—and the spiritual values they express, in much the same way that the 19th-century Nabis artists of Paris were enthralled by their contact with Japanese culture.

By accident and luck, one of my very first friends when I became a philosophy student at the Sorbonne in November 1929, was a Korean, Chang Kil-Fong, then holding a Japanese passport (Korea had been annexed by Japan in 1910). Chang left Paris in 1940, to return after the war as a representative of the newly formed Korean government before his untimely death in the 1950s. To the Japanese community in Paris, at least, Korea was an integral part of their country, and I remember noting that, whatever might have happened elsewhere, they did not treat Chang in any way as anything other than a fellow Japanese.

What I learned from Chang and his friends about Japan was complemented by the lectures on Japanese art and civilization given at the Sorbonne by Serge Elisseev—former pupil of Natsume Soseki at the Tokyo Imperial University—which I attended while pursuing my "serious" studies in sociology and ethnology.

## France-Japon

It was Chang who introduced me to the Yomiuri correspondent in Paris, Kuninosuke (Kuni) Matsuo, who collaborated with E. Steinilber-Oberlin on many valuable French translations of Japanese literature and poetry which were retranslated into other languages such as Italian and Hungarian. From 1934 to the beginning of the war, Matsuo and I edited a magazine called *France-Japon* produced under the auspices of the South Manchurian Railway and the Nichifutsu Doshikai (French-Japanese Committee of Tokyo).

The South Manchurian Railway was much more than a railway company. A huge conglomerate, something like the East India Company of yore, it had virtual control over Manchuria and was powerful. Still, in France, Japan's incursions into China were of little concern except to extremists, and Japan was not viewed as a potential enemy. Thus, there was no stigma on those of us intensely involved with the Japanese community in Paris.

There was no editorializing in *France-Japon*. We printed original articles on various subjects, translations of literary works, information about Japan, and interviews with prominent and interesting people, including Japanese visitors to France and Europeans who had visited and written about Japan. Our contributors represented a wide range of opinions, but political and economic concerns were not the most important.

We also helped to organize a wide range of activities to promote cultural ties between our two countries. These included presentations of Noh films, shown for the first time to a French audience; a competition for posters for the South Manchurian Railway; and occasional meetings of the Japanese news correspondents in Paris—in a room of the Café de la Paix—which gave the Japanese correspondents an opportunity to meet and listen to some interesting French and other Western speakers who had been to Japan and who were outspoken in its praise or criticism.

There were also three Korean visitors for whom we organized different events, with the sponsorship of the Japanese Embassy, which were highly successful: the famed dancer Cho Taik Won who gave a recital at the Opéra-Comique, the painter Paik Unsong, and the dancer Choi Seung Hee (well known in Japan as Saishoki).

## Friends in the Japanese community

There were few Japanese living in Paris in the years preceding the war and they did not form a tightly-knit community; while everyone knew everyone else, they were all outgoing individuals who mixed well with the local French community.

*France-Japon* shared an office on the Champs-Élysées with the South Manchurian Railway, and though we were not involved in tourist activities, we were a favorite gathering place for local Japanese residents and visitors from Japan, as well as non-Japanese who wanted to learn more about Japan. I made many Japanese friends during those prewar days who were later to become well-known figures. Among them were the poet and novelist Toson Shimazaki; writer and painter Ikuma Arishima; haiku poet Kyoshi Takahama; essayist Minoru Kida (Yoshihiko Yamada); painters Tsuguji Fujita, Takanori Oguiss and Taro Okamoto; scholar Masaharu (Chofu) Anesaki; Buddhist priest and scholar Entai Tomomatsu; and actor Sesshu Hayakawa.

My prewar association with the South Manchurian Railway and the Nichifutsu Doshikai provided me with the opportunity to play an active role, if only for a brief period, in furthering French-Japanese ties, and firmly cemented my friendship toward Japan. This experience has put me in a

unique position to compare prewar and postwar perceptions of Japan.

## Double standards

The Pacific War is supposed to have changed Japan radically, but just as interesting are the changes, or perhaps I should say lack of changes, in Japan's image abroad and the way in which Japan is presented to the world by the international press.

Before the war, it took several weeks to reach Japan from Europe or the U.S.—during my prewar years in Paris, the Japanese newspapers and other publications I read took 15 days to arrive via the Trans-Siberian Railway—but there is now a constant influx of tourists, businessmen, politicians, and others who can come here in only a matter of hours. Modern technology allows instant communication throughout the world, yet it is doubtful whether these tremendous technical advances have led to a better understanding of Japan abroad.

Few of the old prejudices concerning Japan and the Japanese have disappeared. They continue to exist, cloaked in new garb, and are being compounded by new prejudices as competition in the international forum intensifies. Pascal compared knowledge to a circle: the more it expands the more contact it has with the unknown. In the case of Japan, the pattern seems to be the more that is known the more misinformation is likely to be transmitted, either consciously or unconsciously.

The most notable change between prewar and postwar days is that, abroad, the Japanese language is no longer thought to be nearly impossible to learn. Today, many media correspondents are conversant and able to read and write in Japanese. But contrary to what is generally assumed, knowledge of the language does not necessarily impart a feeling for the country. Nor does Japanese language proficiency necessarily negate the vague superiority complex so many foreigners have toward Japan. Too often, a foreign reader of the questionable products of Japanese yellow journalism assumes he has discovered the "secrets" of Japanese society. Language is a tool of communication and does not in and of itself provide instant knowledge.

There are many mistaken assumptions and unfounded prejudices concerning Japan and the Japanese which are based, for the most part, on a double standard which allows the application of stricter standards for Japan than for one's own country. Such stereotyping assumes Japan has a warlike aggressiveness, a lack of individualism, imitative tendencies, and an unnatural dedication to work.

These terms have been applied to the Japanese for so long, that, mistaken or not, they are in many cases believed even by the Japanese themselves.

Aggressiveness and warlike qualities are





France-Japon was issued between 1935 and 1939.

not attractive traits for *any* country, winner or loser, and nearly every country has been an aggressor at some time; it is neither something to be proud of nor something which is unique to Japan. As for the supposed spirit of gregariousness and propensity to imitate rather than create, these accusations no longer hold water—either Japan has become much like the rest of the world or the world is becoming like Japan—how else to explain the prominent role of Japanese designers in fashion or the strong push by advertising in all the industrialized countries to get consumers to “keep up with the Joneses.” Criticism in this vein only serves to expose the ignorance of the critic.

## False images

I think of mathematics when I hear yet another resident foreigner complain of the “inscrutable” Japanese even as he or she embarks on a glib analysis of what is supposedly inscrutable: is it the fault of mathematics if there are people who cannot grasp its theorems and principles?

National and ethnic prejudices, especially those which smolder between nations in close economic and cultural contact, will never disappear completely. Still, it is possible to fight against the creation of an image that may seem probable but is, in fact, untrue. This applies as much to the present—for instance, when the Japanese are accused of being economic aggressors for more successfully applying the same

methods used by their competitors—as to the past.

More than 40 years have passed since the end of the Pacific War, and yet distorted images of prewar Japan persist. Prewar Japan had its defects, but it was not the totalitarian, dictatorial state described in the war propaganda. Nor was it solely responsible for the war's tragedies. World War II was, after all, launched in Europe. I remember how happy we in France were when we learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor—happy because it meant that the U.S. would enter the war on our side, along with Britain which was valiantly resisting Hitler's onslaught.

Too often in the years following the war, Japan has been hypocritically attacked for its “warlike” tendencies, and its past culpability is dragged out again and again to bludgeon Japan into unilateral concessions.

## Reporting vs. sensationalizing

Writing on Japan was generally much more honest before the war than it is now. In the past, Japan was hard to get to, and those who did make the journey had no pretensions to being great thinkers—they simply described what they saw without preconditioned coloration. Since the few foreign journalists who were in Japan did not have to compete for news, they were not compelled to write sensationalist articles or tempted to create an exoticism where none existed, as is so often the case today.

The difference between prewar and post-war reporting is due not so much to a change in the quality of journalists as to the altered nature of journalism itself. Writing on Japan was once meant to either inform or amuse. Today's reporting has changed. The overseas correspondent is forced to work against the clock. He has no time for careful in-depth analysis; if he doesn't get his story in *fast*, someone else will. It makes good copy to stress the differences between countries, and it is much easier to write about differences than it is to write about similarities.

And it would never do to upset one's editor's presumptions about Japan. The reporter is only expected to reinforce existing stereotypes. Despite the aura of glamor that journalism still seems to have for many people, most correspondents are simply salaried workers, often busy with administrative chores—especially when they are directed to sell articles produced by the agency they represent—to the exclusion of good and careful reporting.

As for economic writing—one of the easiest types of writing once one gets the jargon down—it is boringly repetitive and heavily dependent on clippings from local Japanese newspapers and official press releases. A correspondent often distorts the facts by his presentation because he is writing under the assumption that he is an unofficial ambassador for his country and must further his country's interests. This tendency, in many cases unconscious, undermines the correspondent's claim to being an unbiased witness and makes him a perpetrator of both pro- and anti-Japan propaganda.

## Tinted glasses

Making economic forecasts and predicting political proclivities is a favorite pastime these days, and, I believe, a dangerous one. To predict accurately, one must have a secure grasp of *all* the elements of a situation—a sheer impossibility. Irresponsible forecasting can create havoc. Suggestions that Japan is once again becoming militaristic or that it harbors ulterior motives to take over the world economically, for example, imply a single-minded determination that does not exist in Japan any more than it does in any other country. But because data events can easily be found to fit almost any set of predictions, they are believed, and few can see that there are many directions in which Japan can go.

Japan's trials and tribulations as an industrialized nation are common to all the industrialized countries. To acknowledge this basic truth, however, requires removing the tinted glasses of prejudice which we tend to forget we are wearing. Too often, it is not the world which changes, but the emotions which color our perceptions of it. Japan should be understood and complimented or criticized for its own virtues and frailities, not those of the observer. ●