The Media on Japan, Asia: Accurate or sensational?

Tom Reid

Tom Reid was the Tokyo bureau chief for The Washington Post from 1990 to 1996. His coverage of east Asian affairs for the Post has made him one of the nation's best known foreign correspondents. Fluent in Japanese, he has written six books, four in English and two in Japanese. His newest book, "Confucius Lives Next Door," will be published in the spring 1999 by Random House. He was recently named London bureau chief for The Washington Post.

During the late eighties, early nineties, you couldn't pick up a newspaper or magazine in the U.S. without feeling that the Japanese were about to take over the world.

JAPAN INVADES HOLLYWOOD, roared a Newsweek cover story about Sony's purchase of Columbia Pictures, and Mitsubishi's purchase of Universal Studios.

Headlines like these are what Tom Reid calls "journalistic shorthand," which strive more for attention than for accuracy. "Japanese investors buy Hollywood studios" would be more accurate, but would not sell as many papers as "Japan invades Hollywood."

If you decided to read past the headlines, you would find alarming news about Japan's continuing economic conquests. And you'd begin to fear that the country that whipped us at Pearl Harbor was again making America take a beating:

- "America is slowly ceding its economic destiny to Japan."
- "The international microchip industry is a case of Japanese success and American failure."
- "In 1988 alone, Japan bought about $16.5 billion worth of American real estate."
- "The Japanese are selling over $50 billion more in goods to the United States than America is exporting to Japan."

Mistakes made

No doubt the media makes mistakes, said Reid. "A couple of the bigger mistakes that the U.S. media have made have involved economics and social transitions in Asia over the last decade."

Why the rush to judgment on the part of the media?

According to Reid, the Japanese believe it's because America is a country of racists. When German, Dutch or Canadian investors buy major pieces of real estate, their purchases do not rate howling headlines or sad-faced commentaries by news anchors.

Yet, at the same time the Japanese were buying up real estate in key American cities and getting bad press, they were only the third largest foreign investor in the United States. The United Kingdom was number one, and the Netherlands was number two.
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Same cases, different take

By late '92, Japan's financial foundations had crumbled, and the media had a different take on Japanese investments in the U.S. "Suddenly, the same cases that had proven we were ceding our economic destiny to Japan became proof that smart and wily American investors had snookered these stupid Japanese into paying too much."

Reid told of a Japanese investor who had bought the Pebble Beach public golf course for $1.2 billion, planning to convert it into a private club with memberships priced at $350,000. But the county government nixed the plan, and the investor unloaded the property for barely half of what he had paid for it four years earlier.

And this scenario played out again and again with other Japanese investments, such as Intercontinental Hotels and the Rockefeller Center.

"Four years before, these deals proved how smart the Japanese were; now, according to the media, they proved exactly the opposite," said Reid.

"We overreacted to Japan's economic success, and I believe we have overreacted to their financial troubles," said Reid.

Other views

Some of the Board members present expressed their views:

"When people read stuff like this from a respected journalist and see it on '60 Minutes,' it's not unrealistic for them to think that Japan is an economic and social threat. That doesn't make us racists."

"When two of the United States' major entertainment industries, which are icons of Americana, are acquired by foreign owners, especially given the phobia about Japan, I don't think it's unrealistic for journalists to write about it and for a lot of people to overreact and say they're buying up America."

"People were convinced that Japan was taking over economically; therefore, every purchase the Japanese made in this country was proof of what they thought in the first place."

"The best way out of this dilemma is to have journalists write nothing until the end of the world. That way, they never get it wrong. I don't think these people are necessarily insincere."

"Just because something gets put in the press, doesn't necessarily mean that's the consensus. This is a pretty diverse country, so I think the Japanese view that we're racists is not a good view."

Reid made a case for responsible journalism. "I have a lot of faith in our readers. I think they would read an accurate story and they would pay for it."

The paper with the biggest circulation in the United States is The Wall Street Journal. "That's a pretty serious newspaper," said Reid, in support of his belief that the media does not have to rely on sensationalism to sell papers.

"And in most cities, if there's a newspaper war, the good newspaper wins."
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Reid admits that newspapers have a tough time figuring out how to stay afloat in a competitive industry. "Do you compete by splashing a red Japan threat on the cover, or do you compete by trying to print serious news?"

Just a blip

Perhaps the Japanese are not rushing to mend their system because they do not think their circumstances are as bad as what they read in the world press. To them, it may be just a blip, part of an economic cycle.

And life goes on.

"The people are beautifully dressed, and they all have new cars."

Reid checked out a major electronics store on a Sunday afternoon. "There were so many people in the store buying software; you couldn't get to the cash register.

"Japan does not look like a society that's in its eighth year of the worst recession since World War II," said Reid.

Long memory

Reid recalled how in 1998 the Chinese turned down his request for a visa three times before finally approving it. He is convinced this is because they have a long memory. "They know every reporter whose paper has ever wronged them, and they hate The Washington Post."

Five years earlier, in 1993, Beijing was competing with Sydney, Australia for the Olympics in the year 2000. The Third World countries supported the choice of Beijing. The U. S. and the rest of the Western world favored Sydney, as a protest against China's dismal record on human rights. The vote was close and China lost.

After the vote, Reid was in Beijing attending a rally at Beijing University, where students were blaming the loss of the Olympics on American's hatred of the Chinese people. Reid struck up a conversation with an articulate English-speaking student. The dialogue went like this:

Student: Why do you hate us? Why do you wage this huge war to deny us the Olympics that we've earned the right to have? They already had one in Australia.

Reid: We don't hate you. We're trying to send a message to your government to straighten up your human rights record. If you do, you'll get the Olympics four years from now.

Student: I hear this all of the time. What do you mean, human rights?

Reid: For example, 15 feet away from us that guy in a dark suit is videotaping this interview, because you are talking to a foreign reporter. They're going to put this in your dossier, and it will be there forever.

Student: They do that all of the time, that's not a human rights violation.
Reid thinks it was because of such reporting by The Washington Post in China that he had such a hard
time getting a visa in 1998 - even though the purpose of the trip was for an article he was writing on
farming and food production for National Geographic, a politically neutral publication.

"What bothered me (about the Olympics vote) is that the Japanese, who have a pretty good human rights
record, sided with China all the way. Their argument was: Get out with your stupid Western values, we're
Asians."

Free markets cause free political systems, Reid said, adding that this has not happened - yet - in China.
"China definitely has a free market in many areas; but they're still ruling with the cattle prod, and they
have thousands of people in jail for saying the wrong thing."

**Kudos for Cuomo**

Tom Reid was in Japan in 1991, shortly after Mitsubishi had bought Rockefeller Center. For Americans,
this was further proof that we were ceding our economic destiny to Japan.

New York's then-Governor Mario Cuomo and Reid crossed paths when Cuomo came to Tokyo to try to
get a buyer for a failed rubber company in upstate New York.

After a speech that Cuomo made to the American Chamber of Commerce, Reid asked Cuomo:
"Governor, you're here pleading with the Japanese to put money into New York State, but when
Mitsubishi bought Rockefeller Center, they were denounced by everybody for invading America. Are you
willing to defend the Japanese if they buy another Rockefeller Center?"

According to Reid, Cuomo answered, "Oh, I'm delighted that they bought Rockefeller Center. They put
$100 million into the city and they haven't moved that building one inch."

Then he added, "Today I got these people to buy this factory in Chippewa Falls, and 600 people are
going back to work. I'll take it any way I can get it!"

"He was fantastic," said Reid.

**Standard of living in China improving**

Ten years ago, Ho Li Jun's family, which lives in a farming community in southeast China, was able to
buy meat only two days a year. They had meat on the Chinese New Year at the end of January, and
again on August 15th, the day the Chinese welcomes the return of their ancestors' spirits.

The meat was always chicken, according to Tom Reid, who met Ho Li while visiting China to research a
story on food production for National Geographic.

Today, Ho Li Jun, who is 27, does not have to wait for a special occasion to put meat on his table. And it's
not just chicken. Pork and hamburger are part of the daily menu.

"His life is much better now," said Tom Reid, and fairly typical of what's been happening in China,
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"Ho Li just bought himself a car to become a cab driver, and he's just bought the land for a house. He's the first son in three or four generations of his family who is going to move out of the family home and build his own house."

With three TVs, a VCR, telephone, hot and cold running water, there is no doubt in Ho Li's mind that his life is better than his father's; nor does he doubt that his son's life will be better than his.

Ho Li has a ninth grade education; his two-year-old son is already in public school five days a week. "And Ho Li is definitely going to send his kid to college."

Reid contrasted Ho Li's story to an encounter he had with a family in Kenya. The mother saved for a year to be able to enroll her 11-year-old child in first grade. The tuition was 30 Kenyan shillings, which is $8. But on the first day of school, the child was sent home because he did not have a uniform.

It will take the mother another year to save up money for the uniform.

This would not happen in China, said Reid. "They would never turn a student away from school. It's just not acceptable, because they have a culture that says we're going to educate everybody."