

A comparison of the media systems in China and Japan

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Abstract: Most people's views of other countries are shaped by the media they consume. That is particularly true of the way the Chinese regard Japan. For decades, Chinese propaganda has highlighted past conflicts, especially incidents such as the invasion of Mantura and the so-called Rape of Nanking. However, recently there has been a significant improvement in the Sino-Japanese relationship at the diplomatic level and a change in tone in the Chinese press. In this article, Duncan Bartlett, an experienced journalist, compares the media's approach in Japan and China and explains profound differences in the way the press operates.

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Thoughts inspired by China constantly fill the minds of Japanese people. Whenever they cast their eyes upon a printed document, such as a newspaper, book or even a calendar, they encounter written symbols known in their language as kanji. When asked to translate that word into English, they respectfully explain that these are “Chinese characters”.

This entwinement of the languages occurred more than 800 hundred years ago, when Japanese scholars took their brushes to China to learn the skill of writing from the world's intellectual superpower. Now Chinese-looking words fill every page of sophisticated Japanese publications and serve as a reminder that the cultural links between the countries run deeper than the relatively recent disagreements over territory and ideology.

In this essay, I shall concentrate on a sphere of the written word which fascinates me as a journalist – the media – as I compare Japan and China.

I have been an international journalist with the BBC and have worked in Tokyo and Hong Kong. I am now the editor of a monthly magazine, *Asian Affairs*. Even though I normally write for TV, radio and magazines, it is another type of media – newspapers – which have a special place in my heart. Indeed, my first job, at the age of 16, was to help the journalists on my local newspaper report on

car accidents, fires and minor crimes. I still like to buy a paper everyday although I struggle to complete even the simplest of crosswords! I am delighted that the internet has delivered to my door news written by journalists all over the world. I never tire of reading stories about either Japan or China.

Although newspaper circulation is diminishing, I believe that papers can still guide us on how countries see their role in the world. To get an expert perspective on the Chinese press, I asked Xiangqun Chang, Honorary Professor of University College London, to invite her academic friends to send me feedback on some of the themes Chinese media is covering in terms of international relations. I also spoke with newspaper editors and journalists in Tokyo about their experiences, both in reporting China and covering global news and domestic affairs.

Professor Chang and her colleagues have shown me that phrases such as ‘friendship’ and ‘mutual benefit’ feature heavily in many of the recent articles about Japan in the Chinese press. This is particularly significant, given the rapid economic growth of China and its ever more important network of alliances through the Belt and Road initiative.

The President of China, Xi Jinping, reminded people of the purpose of the media in August 2018 when he hosted a national conference on propaganda and ideology, at which he called for greater efforts to ‘unify thoughts’.

Among such ‘thoughts’ is an attempt to strengthen ‘the party’s absolute leadership’ and the ‘absolute loyalty’ of citizens. Another role for the media is to encourage the people to follow core Socialist values, especially patriotism.

There are some who feel that the Chinese media has overemphasised the patriotic messages. For example, Xu Zhang Run, a professor of law at Tsinghua University, has openly expressed concern that China’s propaganda stoked fears in the United States that provoked a trade war.

Although the international media reported this trade war with enthusiasm, Chinese news outlets were restrained in their criticism of Donald Trump. This at first seems surprising. After all, the Chinese government has responded with robust counter-measures against American tariffs. But China’s media is attempting to continue a narrative through which it presents itself as a nation that avoids conflict and humiliation. To take a stridently anti-American position would not fit in with that narrative. An editorial published in the newspaper *China Daily* in September 2018 struck a tone in accordance with the official line: ‘if the US really wants to end the trade conflict, it should show more sincerity and adopt a down-to-earth, problem-solving approach.’ It then added: ‘the trade conflict will not force China to succumb to US pressure.’

Professor Li Wenqian, a director in the BBC’s Chinese Department and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Journalism at Hong Kong Baptist University, says: ‘in this atmosphere, it is not surprising that Chinese official media are friendly to Japan. 2018 marks the fortieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the countries. I believe that the Chinese government will take this opportunity to present its relationship with Japan in a good

light. Also, the trade war between China and the US has encouraged China to seek new alliances in Asia.’

In September 2018, *The Economist* magazine reported that the popular Chinese tabloid newspaper *Global Times* has ‘ignored orders to downplay tensions with America and its allies’ and has been running articles critical of the US. In searching through its recent issues, I sought evidence of this. I uncovered a rumble of discontent about the United States but nothing to suggest much disagreement between China and Japan. Instead, I found an upbeat report which claimed: ‘China and Japan have the responsibility together to safeguard the multilateral free trade system from which they have both benefited.’

Other experts, such as Professor Lixing Chen from the Department of Sociology at Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan, concur that the economy and especially the Belt and Road initiative offer both sides potential benefits.

There could be other reasons why the Chinese media are moderating their tone towards potential international rivals. Patriotism is a virtue but they also prize socialist values such as civility, harmony and friendship. Friendship with Japan is thus valued from both a diplomatic and an economic perspective.

The friendship was expressed through a handshake between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2014 and since then Sino-Japanese relations have improved significantly at the official level. It was notable that neither the Prime Minister, nor any other Japanese cabinet ministers, visited the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo in the Summer of 2018 to mark the anniversary of the end of the war.

The shrine commemorates people who died in battle but this includes a number of soldiers who were convicted of war crimes in Asia. In the past, visits by Japanese politicians to Yasukuni provoked resentment in the Chinese media. Mr Abe has not been there for five years.

Another disputed point is whether Japan has sufficiently apologized for its actions in the middle of the 20th Century, including an invasion and occupation of parts of China. I asked a Japanese foreign editor who has lived in Beijing for many years for his view. ‘Japan has apologised many times,’ he replied, ‘But the Chinese choose not to listen to, or remember, the apology.’

This is partly because the Chinese Communist Party draws some of its sense of legitimacy as defenders of the country who expelled the Japanese invaders. They have told a story, that has been repeated endlessly in propaganda, which frames Japan as the imperialist enemy.

As a person born outside the region, it makes me sad that East Asians often fixate on this dark period of their history. As a journalist, I often struggle to understand the debates that take place at scholarly conferences about history. I am more interested in the current agenda of the media. Yet I recognise that in China, history is often woven into the pages of the newspapers and into the contemporary political writings of leaders such as Xi Jinping.

President Xi believes the party’s propaganda helps to establish trust in the relationship between citizens and the government. Professor Rana Mitter from

Oxford University challenges that assumption. He says: ‘understanding that taking criticism well is a sign of strength, not weakness, is vital if China is to have a chance of taking a global role.’

So what of the Japanese media? It is also a tool of propaganda by the government?

Ask people in Japan that question and the answer is almost always no. They point to the range of views expressed in newspapers, magazines and social media. Some are fiercely anti-government, some are enthusiastically pro. One set of newspapers and websites sing the praises of Prime Minister Abe and the LDP, while others condemn him. The media also have divergent views on international affairs, including China.

Generally, the newspaper editors and journalists I met in Tokyo are of the view that the mainstream media in Japan is independent but not beyond the reach of political influence. For example, I was told that allies of Prime Minister Abe sometimes threaten to withdraw government advertising from publications which do not support their position.

In addition, journalists told me that people with a reputation for criticism do not get invited to some press conferences or private briefings by government officials. But on the whole, they say a robust and open media environment exists in Japan. No reporters have been expelled, arrested or imprisoned. Politicians and civil servants do their best to answer questions and no-one, including the Japanese Communist Party and far right politicians, can say that their freedom of expression is repressed.

It is clearly a different story in China. Censorship there has enraged two groups of professional people who are highly influential in sharing ideas about China internationally: journalists and academics. Foreign journalists who are impacted by this state censorship are keen to inform their readers of the restriction whenever they have the opportunity to do so. This often means that as soon as they are beyond the reach of the censor, they unleash their pent-up frustration in a series of complaints about China’s constraints upon freedom of speech, rather than any hints of praise for its remarkable society.

It is sometimes similar with academics. Sinologists often encounter barriers to gathering information freely about their field of study, especially if touches on politics. When invited to speak at international events, the restrictions on their freedom is often the issue which rises to the top of the agenda.

Professor Rana Mitter from the University of Oxford has noted that: ‘historical topics that were fine to write about just a few years ago can’t now be published. Contemporary political issues, such as potential flaws in the Belt and Road project, aren’t being debated in the media, even if they are the subject of furious discussion offline.’

I have had several conversations with international journalists who are extremely frustrated by the Chinese government’s attempts to block their news reporting. If you are based in Beijing or Shanghai, it is shocking that you cannot

easily read what you have just written on your computer because the government has censored your words.

In Tokyo, I met a Japanese journalist who was based in Beijing for many years. He told me that it was common for the police to interfere with his meetings. He believed his phone was tapped and told me that his Wechat social media messages were monitored by the authorities.

He then explained that he regards censorship as a challenge. Rather than restricting what he writes about China, it motivates him to question the party line whenever he can.

Writing in the *South China Morning Post* in September 2018, the newspaper's former editor-in-chief Wang Xiangwei described China's propaganda machine as 'massive but ineffectual'. He also noted that breaches in the 'Great Firewall' of censorship, which tries to restrict the information people can read, are becoming more difficult.

A similar point of view was expressed by the former BBC China Editor, Carrie Gracie. She believes that Chinese propaganda actually tarnishes the country's image.

She told the British Association of Chinese Studies at King's College London in September 2018 that: 'the job of a reporter is to tell people what is true and what is not true but that is not easy in China now. We've often got no idea what's really happening. We are bombarded with official stories about things like a record grain harvest but we are often left wondering, is this a distraction? Are we being told about this to distract us from the things that really matter?'

Ms Gracie continued: 'The view of Xi Jinping is that the foreigners and domestic journalists should tell China's story well but that is only according to their formula of what the story is. Under President Xi the boundaries set for reports are contracting.'

In Japan, there is a different issue that dominates thinking about the media: how to make money in a highly competitive commercial environment.

When international experts on Japan gather at a meeting, they normally do not spend a great deal of energy citing the media's failings or complaining of barriers to finding news or information. But, as one person told me: 'the media here can be awfully dull and deferential.' Looking at Japan's old-fashioned newspapers, I can understand their view. The papers are on the whole boring to look at, with an outdated approach towards design and photography.

In many cases, the papers are delivered to customers' homes, where sadly I have often noticed them laying on doormats, neglected. Young people regard them as irrelevant anachronisms. This is a shame because Japanese newspaper companies employ many bright and creative graduates to help them gather the news. Some ambitious reporters are lured to work on well-funded and widely-read weekly magazines which specialise in gossip. They are often irreverent towards powerful people and institutions. They are also uncensored and barely constrained by any laws on libel or defamation.

I believe the mainstream media in Japan should reconsider its approach to content, design and delivery if it is to continue to be relevant and interesting.

For China, the most profound question is not whether the papers can survive in a choppy media climate. The press there is capable of changing its format in response to new technology. But China faces a deeper question: how can it establish trust in the relationship between the state, the media and its citizens, under the constraints which are currently applied?

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