

Lead, not Feed

—How media should improve the impression between Chinese and Japanese

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The two months I spent in Japan was quite meaningful and I got to know a Japan which I did not know before. What shocked me most was how limitedly people in China and Japan know about each other. I kept on thinking the role and mission of media, especially what media should do to improve the impression between Chinese and Japanese. The two countries are close neighbors and share similar appearance and food, yet, they are so strange to each other, somehow making lapse into the vicious circle of mutual misapprehension.

Compared with other countries, Chinese people hold the most complicated and divergent feeling toward Japan. Some people travel to Japan at least twice every year and buy everything from Japan, even rice, soy source, and toilet seat cover. Others may declare that they will never travel to Japan because it is not a friendly country that owes China a serious apology about the invasion in World War II. A British friend who worked in China said the top three questions he was asked in China were: Can you speak Chinese? Are you married? And how do you think about Japan? He is quite confused why Chinese people care about his attitude toward Japan.

Similarly, people in Japan often hear the sarcastic and emotional tone of editorial about China, like Chinese people are rich rednecks and too rude; those products made in China are not trustworthy. I have interviewed some Japanese businessmen in Nanjing and they told me that their Japanese friends persuade them to give up the opportunity of working in China. What they worry about are the serious air pollution, the severe corruption in bureaucracy, the anti-Japan protest, etc. which are exactly the main portrait of China in Japanese news media. Those negative parts surely cannot represent the current China. In JING Forum 2017, students in Tokyo University concluded that “media looks down and judges China as an underdeveloped country.”

According to the latest survey conducted annually by the Genron NPO and China International Publishing Group,¹ while the Japanese public's “unfavorable” impression of China has slightly improved from last year (from 91.6% to 88.3%), this percentage still remains in the 80% range. On the other hand, the Chinese people's “unfavorable” impression of Japan decreased from last year (from 76.7% to 66.8%) to the 60% range for the first time in 5 years. In a few words, the majority of people in two countries hold negative impressions about one another. Where do negative impressions come from? The survey also gives a clue: an overwhelming number of

¹ *The Results of the Japan-China Annual Joint Opinion Poll 2017*, published on December 14, 2017.

Japanese obtain their information on China from Japanese news media while over 80% of Chinese people cite domestic news media as their source of information.

This statistics is impressive. Media really did not play a glorious role in the opinion forming. As an actor in journalism, what should I do? In journalism, are there any ways to improve the impression between the two countries?

Do something from myself. I created a column on our newspaper, trying to deliver different images of Japan. What I do is to focus more on ordinary Japanese people who rarely become leading-actors of news coverage, through them to read current Japan.

In Osaka, we met Mr. Arimura, Director-General of the Kamagasaki Community Regeneration Forum. I was impressed by him and what people in the community have done for disadvantaged people. Mr. Arimura sincerely wanted us to know every detail about the Kamagasaki area. In this special place, no one talks about past; everyone can find a proper way to make a living. I asked Mr. Arimura what is the motivation for him to do the job for 40 years? He was surprised by this question. The answer was quite simple: "because this is my job."

In Mie, we met Ms. Ozaki, a local *Ama* (woman free diver) who has been diving for more than 40 years. "Why will I retire? I like this job. Every night when I think that I will go diving tomorrow, I feel excited," she told us. We believe she has true love for diving and the blue sea. Similarly, Mr. Hayami is in awe of the mountain. As the ninth-generation head of the Hayami Forest, he seems to know every tree in the mountain. What he is thinking of is the sustainable development for the next 2000 years. 2000 years? We thought we misheard. He repeated, "Yes, 2000 years." They have discussed with a temple in Nara about a business 2000 years later.

Devoting ourselves single-mindedly to our job is supposed to be a precious traditional value in China. But with the rapid economic development, a lot of opportunities have distracted people and some of them have lost patience to focus on their jobs and to perform perfectly. This is why I am touched by those devoted and hard-working Japanese. This is an example why I hope Chinese should learn from Japanese. Of course, I am not suggesting Japan is perfect. We also know there are hate speeches in Japan and not all the Japanese are punctual as we heard before.

For Chinese people, whether or not they decide that they would not travel to Japan forever or buy everything from Japan, before they make a conclusion, they should at least know who Japanese are. Do not simply reject or accept.

From another perspective, for Japanese people, a truth is that a real China is bigger and more fascinating than they imagine. When Japanese visit China, they are as shocked as I was when I arrived in Japan and discover a new China, which is quite different from the image provided by Japanese news media. The official account of the Japanese Embassy in China on Weibo

(Chinese version of Facebook) forwards an article written by a diplomat (his name is 河邑忠昭 in Chinese) who describes the huge change he has witnessed in China for the last 20 years. The author studied in China 20 years ago and worked in China as a diplomat for three terms. He was amazed by the development of Internet technology in China. For example, nowadays, cash is not necessary because everyone pays online by phone and even street peddlers use QR Code to receive payment. The DIDI, a company similar with Uber, guides tens of millions people who take taxi and free-riding cars orderly and move in a big city through the application of Artificial Intelligence. These pictures are somehow ignored by mass media in Japan. The author sighs with emotion that China could not be defined as a follower, but a leader in technology world.

It is supposed to be a responsibility of media to tell people who Japanese are, as well as who Chinese are. Unfortunately, it is undeniable that there is a big gap between the real picture of the world and the impression of the world portrayed by media. Also, the Japanese media and Chinese media have similar challenges while struggling in the changing society and new technology. In particular, actors in various media outlets—whether they are printed newspapers, news APPs, or social media platforms—are busy coping with commercial or political logic. Feeding the public, or providing the information ordinary people would like to accept, is an easier way to draw attention, and gives media an illusion about their influence.

But do not forget the initiative role of media: to inform, inspire, and educate people. What media are supposed to do is to lead and guide the public opinion in a positive way, not to feed audiences and make them in line with the stereotype. As a media actor, I understand good news is not good news. But how about using more objective titles instead of emotional ones? How about delivering bigger pictures instead of partial ones?

Especially, I believe there are three ways through which media should improve the impression between Chinese and Japanese:

Firstly, if media want to help eliminate the stereotype people may have, journalists themselves should eliminate the stereotype in their own minds. In our first seminar of this program, Professor Takahara Akio reminded us, to always be cautious of stereotypes in our own minds. A narrow mind could not offer reliable coverage. What media actors should do is to open eyes and minds to respect different cultures.

Secondly, news organizations of the two countries should cooperate more and work together in some way. For example, a journalism forum could be held annually between the two countries. Exchanging journalists could also be a good way to learn from each other. These kinds of professional communication may benefit media in finding a proper way to lead public opinion, instead of feeding improper sentiment.

More importantly, it is better for the doer to undo what he has done. To a great extent, the building of mutual understanding relies on the accomplishment of media. Two countries in the same neighborhood are like two persons, and if both two just focus on the negative part of its counterpart, they can fall in utter confusion and make everybody nervous. What media should do is to provide whole and objective pictures to relieve the tension, not highlight it. The more people know about each other, the easier people can put their feet in other's shoes. Furthermore, media institutions should keep journalism on track and always remind themselves of professional spirit. According to journalism rules, there are no spaces for playing down or making fun of other countries, or taking advantage of the public and providing disinformation. Leading public opinion in accordance with journalistic spirit is the inherent responsibility of media, and it is the way media can win real influence.

When we hold a smartphone in our hands, it seems the whole world is just on our fingertips. But such accessibility may help to enlarge the gap in people's mind. To feed people and strengthen the negative impression of others or to lead people to build mutual understanding is not a matter of choice. For the two countries, we share a common world and future. In the process of building mutual understanding, no one is a bystander, to say nothing of media. If people in the two countries just highlight negative parts and care more about the rank of competition, what will happen? As long as media institutions in the two countries strongly keep their original and professional mission to lead the public to a positive direction, the mistrust among the two may fade away and a mutual understanding will be built step by step.