

## **Covering a Non-Democracy: A Japanese Coverage of China and Implications for Media Balancing<sup>1</sup>**

JING SUN

University of Denver

This paper analyzes Japan's top two newspapers' coverage of China at a transformative moment of diplomacy. I contend that their reporting patterns demonstrate an effort of double balancing. Internationally, Japanese journalists make "quid pro quo" balancing arrangements with their authoritarian Chinese hosts in order to minimize their loss of autonomy. Domestically, they adopt a bifurcated business strategy and use editorials to counterbalance their largely neutral image as disinterested transmitters of information. I further argue that the two balancing acts may become intertwined, as editorials also influence the levels of difficulty that Japanese correspondents have to deal with back in China.

This paper examines two major Japanese newspapers' patterns of reporting of China, Japan's biggest neighbor and also a non-democracy. Features in their reporting patterns, I argue, disclose how journalists from a democracy deal with and are dealt with by two distinct actors: a massive readership at home and a foreign, non-democratic host abroad. As a case study, I choose the *Asahi Shimbun's* and the *Yomiuri Shimbun's* coverage of China in the latter half of 1998 – a watershed period in Sino-Japanese relations.

The common thread that links these two papers' interactions with the domestic and international actors is their effort to balance. When dealing with the inhospitable and non-democratic Chinese host, balancing takes the form of a grand compromise: i.e., the Japanese media help Beijing save face by nominally accepting its "One China" principle in exchange for the Chinese government turning a blind eye to critical reports. This type of balancing may be referred to as passive and involuntary. Domestically, balancing takes the form of the media maintaining a combination of largely neutral, matter-of-fact reporting with a dose of individualism expressed through editorials.

This type of balancing is more active and voluntary. The double balancing in these two arenas jointly produces a self-fulfilling two-stepped process: while the international balancing helps the Japanese

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank David Leheny, Edward Friedman, Katherine Cramer Walsh, Ellis Krauss, Priscilla Lambert, and an anonymous reviewer for valuable comments and suggestions. Akichika Ozeki and Meiqin Rui offered me invaluable research assistance in completing this piece.

Jing Sun: [sj11306@gmail.com](mailto:sj11306@gmail.com)

Date submitted: 2007-03-05

media survive in a foreign and inhospitable setting, the domestic one helps them thrive in what is allegedly the world's most saturated media market.

### Case Selection

The first questions that need to be clarified are the following: Why choose Japanese newspapers for such an analysis, and why choose their coverage of China? Japan is probably the world's most newspaper-saturated society. In contrast with the popular fear in the United States that print media is facing an inevitable decline, newspapers continue to take a central position in the heavily competitive Japanese media market. According to a survey conducted by the *World Association of Newspapers* in 2005, the top five largest dailies in the world are all Japanese. The country's per capita newspaper circulation, 581 copies per 1,000 persons, is the highest in the world -- more than twice that of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

There has been a decent amount of scholarship produced in the English language on the Japanese media. What these different strands of arguments have in common is that the empirical evidence has been predominantly domestic. Scholars examine media-state relations in Japan by analyzing media coverage of domestic issues ranging from political reform to exposing scandals and citizen movements (Feldman, 1993; Pharr, 1996; Freeman, 2000). Analysis concerning Japanese media reportage of foreign countries is scant. This is problematic, for reporting international happenings has been a crucial component of mainstream media's daily business (Cohen, 1963). This is especially true of Japanese newspapers as they allegedly have the most extensive coverage of foreign countries and are so widely read. In the official annual survey on Japan's foreign policy conducted by the Japanese Cabinet Office in 2003, more than 80% of the Japanese said that they garnered knowledge about foreign countries from newspapers.<sup>3</sup> The lack of academic attention being paid to Japanese media's international reportage implies that it follows the same logic as domestic coverage. But this implication has an apparent flaw: Japanese foreign correspondents do not always operate in a democratic environment as do their domestic colleagues. To believe that covering a non-democracy deeply suspicious of foreign journalists would be a process identical to covering a democracy is, to say the least, intuitively difficult.

How do Japanese journalists, coming from an established democracy, operate in an authoritarian regime? Specifically, do they have to rely totally on official sources, and are thus stripped of all meaningful journalistic autonomy? Can they report on their non-democratic host government in a critical tone? Is there any intra-media variance on international coverage and, if so, what does this imply? This paper attempts to answer these questions by analyzing Japan's top two newspapers' reporting patterns of China.

---

#### Notes:

<sup>2</sup> Circulation numbers of the world's 100 largest dailies can be obtained from the website of the World Association of Newspapers at <http://www.wan-press.org/article2825.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The survey results are available in Japanese at <http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h15/h15-gaikou/3.html>, accessed on May 27, 2007.

Intuitively, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the *Asahi Shimbun* (henceforth shortened as the *Yomiuri* and the *Asahi*) are apparent candidates for analyzing Japan's major newspapers. After all, these two are the world's top two largest newspapers. The *Yomiuri's* circulation stands at more than 14 million per day. To put this number in a comparative perspective, the 2005 circulation numbers of *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*, when combined together, are only 55% of the circulation level of the *Yomiuri*.<sup>4</sup> The *Asahi* also has a daily circulation of 12 million. Their massive circulation numbers are indicative of these papers' tremendous influence on the Japanese media market.

Their predominant market presence notwithstanding, the pair is also chosen for comparative purposes. Reaching out to as many readers as possible does not necessarily mean homogenization. The *Yomiuri* is popularly known as a conservative-leaning newspaper while its main competitor is widely recognized as liberal (Miyoshi, 1972; Kim, 1982; Krauss & Lambert, 2000; Komori 2005). Is this difference perceptible or reflected in their coverage of China? Or should one reject a blanket characterization as such and ask where they differ and where they concur? Is there a functional differentiation between their routine reporting and editorials? The pair offers an opportunity to answer these questions.

Finally, why select their coverage of China? Even to a casual observer of international relations, the importance of relations between China and Japan, respectively the world's second and third biggest economies, is largely self-evident. These two countries are also each other's biggest trading partners. However, the sizes of their economies and high interdependence are not the only justification for my case selection. After all, given China's reputation for becoming the "World's Factory," the portions of China-U.S. and China-E.U. trade in the global market are also remarkable. But to Japan, China is different: it is not only the biggest overseas market but also a country with which it has shared so much history, good and bad, for 2,000 years. Generations of Japanese politicians with varied ideological backgrounds have admitted that China is their country's most crucial neighbor, and that the importance of Japan-China relations is second only to Japan-U.S. relations (Green, 2001; Tanaka, 2005). Not surprisingly, Japanese media have shown a high level of interest in covering China (Ono, 2000). As a piece of telling evidence, more than 30 Japanese media outlets have placed long-term correspondents in China, far exceeding the number of Japanese correspondents in any of Japan's other neighbors. This paper selects coverage of China for its conspicuous weight in Japanese media outlets' international reportage.

Another reason for selecting coverage of China is that the country is not a democracy. It is well known that Chinese secret police tap foreign correspondents' phone lines and follow their whereabouts.

---

<sup>4</sup> Circulation numbers of the world's 100 largest dailies can be obtained from the website of the World Association of Newspapers at <http://www.wan-press.org/article2825.html>.

The normal right to interviewing and gathering information in a democratic setting often becomes an irrelevant luxury for foreign correspondents in China (Komori, 2005). Hence, the Chinese case is most relevant to this paper's subject of inquiry; that is, how reporters from a democracy cover a deeply suspicious yet important non-democracy.

### **Latter Half of 1998: Watershed Moment in Japan-China Relations**

The collected number of China-related articles in the *Asahi* and the *Yomiuri* is immense. To make the project manageable, this paper chooses the latter half of 1998 as the temporal space from which data is selected. This timeframe is notable because it offers an opportunity to analyze the pattern of international coverage at transformative diplomatic moments. The latter half of 1998 was a watershed period in Japan-China relations. In July, Bill Clinton, the then American President, visited China for an unprecedented period of nine days. Upon his return to America, Clinton complied with the Chinese request of not making a transit stop in Japan. This move broke a tacit yet long-established norm in the U.S.-Japan alliance. By making a presidential stop in Japan and briefing to Japanese counterparts, America made manifest that it placed its alliance with Japan above its relations with China. This time, however, Clinton's non-stop flight between China and America left Japanese elites struggling to understand Japan's place in America's new global strategy. A new thesis of "Japan Passing" began to emerge in Japanese media discourse (Tanaka & Tahara, 2005).

Only a few months later, Japanese nerves were hit again, this time directly by China. In November, the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin paid his first state visit to Japan, yet it turned into a diplomatic disaster. Despite much anticipation, the Japanese public was dismayed at seeing a visiting foreign head of state repeatedly bash the Japanese host for "harboring wrong views toward history." Unable to pressure the Japanese into including a written apology for Japan's invasion of China during World War II in a joint statement between the two states, Jiang made no secret of his displeasure: he refused to sign the document. In retrospect, this visit launched Japan-China relations into a new era, just as the Japanese media had predicted. However, Sino-Japanese relations were launched in a worse, not a better, direction. This new era marked the nadir of Japan-China relations, and the latter half of 1998 was the beginning of this comprehensive process of deterioration. This paper examines the reporting patterns of these two key Japanese newspapers at this very crucial period in Japan-China relations.

Even with a clearly defined temporal space, the data pool for China-related stories is still immense. After all, on a daily basis there are multiple stories about China on different pages of the two newspapers. The presence of Japanese correspondents in China is quite impressive. The *Asahi* alone has six branches under its General China Bureau (*Chuhgoku sohkyoku*) – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang, Hong Kong, and Taipei. Overall, there are more than ten reporters and staff members dealing exclusively with coverage of China. The *Yomiuri* also has five branches in the Greater China Area. As one *Yomiuri* reporter told me, although there is no fixed quota, a key reporter is "expected" to write at least

10,000 words on a monthly basis.<sup>5</sup> Given the number of reporters and bureaus in China, the number of China-related stories produced over six months would be mind-boggling.

Methodologically, this paper replicates a data selection process employed by existing scholarship on a similar project, namely Ellis Krauss and Priscilla Lambert's analysis of the *Asahi's* coverage of Japan's administrative reform (Krauss & Lambert, 2000). Like Krauss and Lambert, this paper's data does not come from original Japanese newspapers. Rather, it comes from the monthly microprint accumulation of the *Asahi* and the *Yomiuri*. These publications, called *Shokusatsuban* in Japanese, code articles into thematic categories to reflect their proportional distributions in the overall coverage. Most China-related stories are listed under the categories of "China" and "Japan's Foreign Relations." The former category is further broken down into a number of sub-categories such as politics, economy, society, law, China-Taiwan relations, etc. Likewise, under the category of "Japan's Foreign Relations" there is a specific sub-category termed "Japan-China relations."

Given that microprint publications are already coded data, Krauss and Lambert randomly selected 4% of the articles within the category of "administrative reform" to detect the *Asahi's* reporting pattern on this issue. China coverage, like administrative reform, is a thematic category populated by coded articles. Hence, this paper replicates Krauss and Lambert's method of data selection but expands the proportion of selection up to the two papers' monthly averages of China-related stories. A count of articles in these two categories collects 662 China-related stories in the *Asahi* and 256 articles in the *Yomiuri* for the latter half of 1998. Instead of the four percent threshold, I choose their approximate monthly averages for analysis. Since the two newspapers have different total numbers of China-related articles, in practical terms this means 110 coded articles from the *Asahi* and 43 articles from *Yomiuri* are randomly selected from the two papers' coded microprint publications.

One concern that may come from readers more familiar with western media is whether some of the chosen stories could have actually come from Associated Press, Reuters, or other wire services. It is important to explain that Western wire services are not used in Japanese media coverage of China. To begin with, Japanese reporters write in Japanese, so even if they had to rely on English wire services, which turns out not to be the case as I will explain later, they would have to translate English into Japanese. Yet, as a veteran Japanese correspondent to China pointed out, many Japanese correspondents in China majored in Chinese while in college. In fact, a majority of them graduated from either the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies or Osaka University of Foreign Studies (Komori, 2005). One cannot assume that they could comfortably engage in the work of translating English into Japanese on a frequent basis. In fact, none of the randomly chosen stories came from any wire service. Not even one reference to wire services could be detected in these stories. In other words, all the randomly chosen stories were written by Japanese reporters and acknowledged explicitly so.

---

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with a *Yomiuri* journalist, July 23, 2004.

The non-use of Western wire services itself can be an interesting phenomenon. This, of course, does not mean that Japanese reporters do not make use of secondary sources. As I will explain later in Table 2, most secondary sources are in the Chinese language, attesting to Komori's observation of Japanese correspondents' language preferences due to their educational backgrounds. Furthermore, even for Chinese sources, Japanese reporters would either reinterpret or reframe them. By doing so, the reporters change them into their own stories. Complete or unedited usage of other sources does not exist in the Japanese media's coverage of China.

### Key Features of Coverage Pattern

#### (1) Seasonal Nature and Function of Banal Journalism

To identify the two papers' patterns of reporting on China, I first examine the weight of China-related stories compared with stories about other countries. Are Japanese politicians' perceptions of China's importance reflected in news coverage? Do China-related articles appear consistently or boom and burst in irregular cycles, following the breakout of actual happenings? Table 1 presents a numerical summary of the *Asahi's* China-related articles, compared with summaries of articles about five other key countries to Japan: namely, the United States, Russia, South Korea, North Korea, and Taiwan. Chart 1 shows the monthly trajectories of the *Asahi's* articles about these six countries.

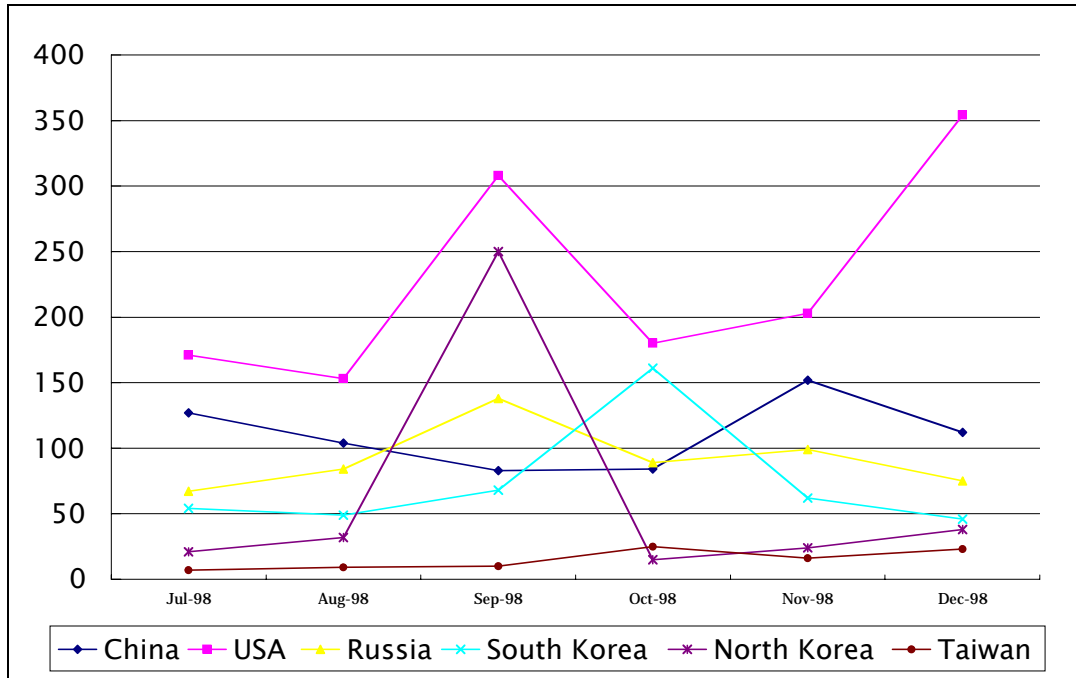
Table 1.

The *Asahi Shimbun's* China-coverage Compared with Five Other Countries  
(July – December 1998)

Country	Total Number of Articles	Average Median	
China	662	110.3	104
The United States	1369	228.2	180
Russia	552	92	89
South Korea	440	73.3	62
North Korea	380	63.3	24
Taiwan	90	15	10

Chart 1.

Number of the *Asahi Shimbun's* China-related Articles  
Compared with Five Other Key Foreign Countries (July – December 1998)



A number of findings about reporting patterns can be drawn from the table and the chart. First, China ranks as the second major source of foreign news for the *Asahi*. At a total number of 662 articles over six months, coverage of China is a distant second, roughly half the number of the *Asahi's* articles about the United States. Russia ranks third, followed by South and North Korea. This pattern confirms the unambiguously central position of America for Japan – there is little discrepancy between what the Japanese government sees as Japan's most important foreign relationship and what the *Asahi* journalists perceive.

In quantitative terms, China is the second most important country, which reflects politicians' recognition. But its edge over other countries becomes more debatable, as the gaps among China, Russia, South, and North Korea are markedly narrower than the one between China and the United States. As Chart 1 shows, over a period of six months, there are occasions when stories about Russia, South Korea, and North Korea surpass stories about China. But the number of stories about the United States remains unsurpassable. September is most illustrative: Pyongyang's missile test sent the *Asahi's* North Korea

related articles into a record high of about 250 articles. But Bill Clinton's Lewinsky scandal and America's responses to the North Korean missile test joined together and secured America's dominance in foreign coverage. Of the six countries compared, Taiwan is only a minor supplier for international news, tracing the previous five with a huge margin.

Second, China-related stories, like stories about other countries listed in the table, have their high seasons. One can observe at least two in the Chinese case: in July when American President Clinton was still in the last three stops of his state visit to China, and in November when Jiang Zemin came to Japan. Similarly, the sudden increase of Russia-related stories in September was triggered by Boris Yeltsin's new political drama of appointing Yevgeny Primakov as the new Prime Minister after the Russian Duma blocked his first choice of Viktor Chernomyrdin. The swift surge of the *Asahi's* attention to South Korea in October was because of Korean President Kim Dae Jung's state visit to Japan. But once again, it is the unpredictable North Korea that most significantly reveals the seasonal nature of foreign coverage. The test firing of the Dae Po Dong-I missile in September led to a skyrocketing of articles about the country. The *Asahi's* vigor, however, did not last long. The peak was soon followed by a steep decline back to its normal monthly output in the coming month and stabilized for the remainder of the year.

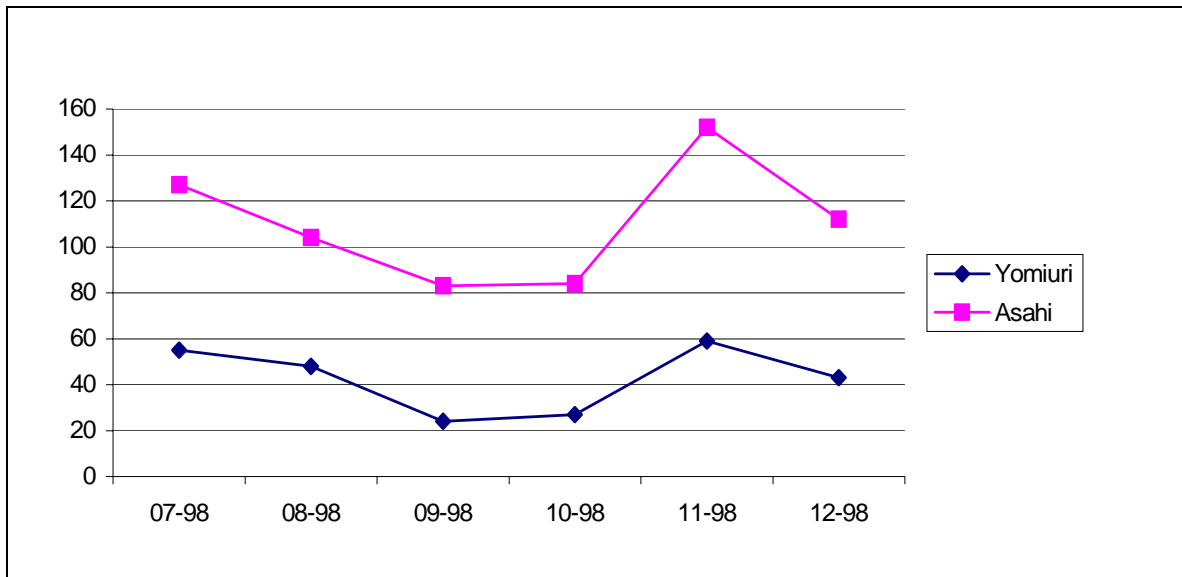
However, the seasonal dimension of foreign coverage must be followed with an important note: articles about these foreign countries, with the exception of North Korea, do not oscillate wildly. This is especially the case for coverage of China. The gap between its monthly average and median is only six articles. The *Asahi's* China coverage surely has its "high seasons," but other periods should be characterized more appropriately as "regular" than as "low" seasons. China is always a major and stable supplier of a variety of articles for the *Asahi*. The similar minor gaps between the median and average articles for the United States, Russia, and South Korea also point to the same finding: i.e., there is a constant flow of information about these countries from the mainstream media to the public. A Japanese reader may sense a sudden increase of stories about these countries due to unpredictable events, but the subsequent decline is more of a return to the normal output than fading into obscurity. Stories about these countries are never "out of sight" for the *Asahi* readers.

Is the weight that the *Asahi* assigns to its coverage of China unique? An analysis of the *Asahi's* main competitor, the *Yomiuri*, over the same period of time demonstrates a strikingly similar trajectory of China-related reportage (Chart 2). It attests to the oscillation between regular and high seasons for covering a key country. The only major difference is that the *Asahi* produces more China-related stories, but China's relative importance is consistent for both.



Chart 2.

The *Asahi Shimbun's* and the *Yomiuri Shimbun's* China-related Articles Compared  
(July – December 1998)



In their insightful study of the *Asahi's* coverage of two hot button issues, namely political and administrative reforms, Krauss and Lambert contend that the *Asahi* is, more often than not, following trends rather than initiating agendas (Krauss & Lambert, 2002: 57-78). The aggregate quantitative data of the *Asahi's* and the *Yomiuri's* China coverage, while adding new evidence to this recognition, also points to new findings about Japanese newspapers. China-related articles do ebb and flow. However, one also needs to recognize the constant flow of China-related news into the international world constructed by these two papers.

This finding reveals an under-explored part of international reportage: i.e., banal and routine stories about China that appear in the two papers most certainly on a daily basis. These stories are there, not because they are all interesting (unless one thinks otherwise about a short brief on the change of Party Secretary for Hunan Province<sup>6</sup>), nor because they are all significant – after all, how much did the Japanese readers really care that the former Police Chief of Hong Kong emigrated to Australia?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The *Asahi Shimbun*, "shokini yoseibushi kiyo" (Yang Zhengwu Assigned Post of Party Secretary), October 7, 1998.

Many of these stories, like those about the routine briefings by the Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokespersons, are not there because of their unexpectedness. In fact, the opposite is true. In the milieu of the hasty pace of news selection and production, China becomes a reliable supplier of information for the Japanese mainstream media. As dull or trivial as some news stories are, the contexts that editors assign to them, such as Hong Kong's return to China or personnel reshuffle of the Communist Party, are the magical touches that supposedly capture the "essence" of these otherwise banal stories. In other words, newspaper editors use titles to categorize these routine stories into popular or familiar "subjects." The result is that the Japanese readers are constantly informed that something is *always* happening in issue areas like Chinese politics, China-U.S. relations, human rights, China's economic rise, new trends in Chinese society and culture, etc.

## **(2) Distribution of Subjects: High-Politics Issues Not Dominant**

This finding leads to a new question about reporting patterns: How are China-related stories distributed among different subjects? Chart 3 presents the numbers of the *Asahi's* China-related articles categorized by month and subject. Articles about Chinese politics, economy, society, and foreign affairs are the usual components of its China coverage. During the time period under examination, Chinese foreign policy arguably constitutes the biggest component of China-related news stories. But one should not jump to the conclusion that diplomacy or other "high politics" issues are natural winners on a monthly basis. This finding, in fact, highlights how a seasonal nature is at work: as the chart shows, Jiang Zemin's visit to Japan in November gives a decisive boost to the number of articles in this category.

Moreover, stories in the category of "society," many of which are human-interest articles about various aspects of cultural and social lives in China, outrun stories about "hard news" issues like politics, economy, and trade. They even beat foreign policy stories three out of the six months under consideration. The societal dimension of the *Asahi's* coverage of an authoritarian state should not be neglected.

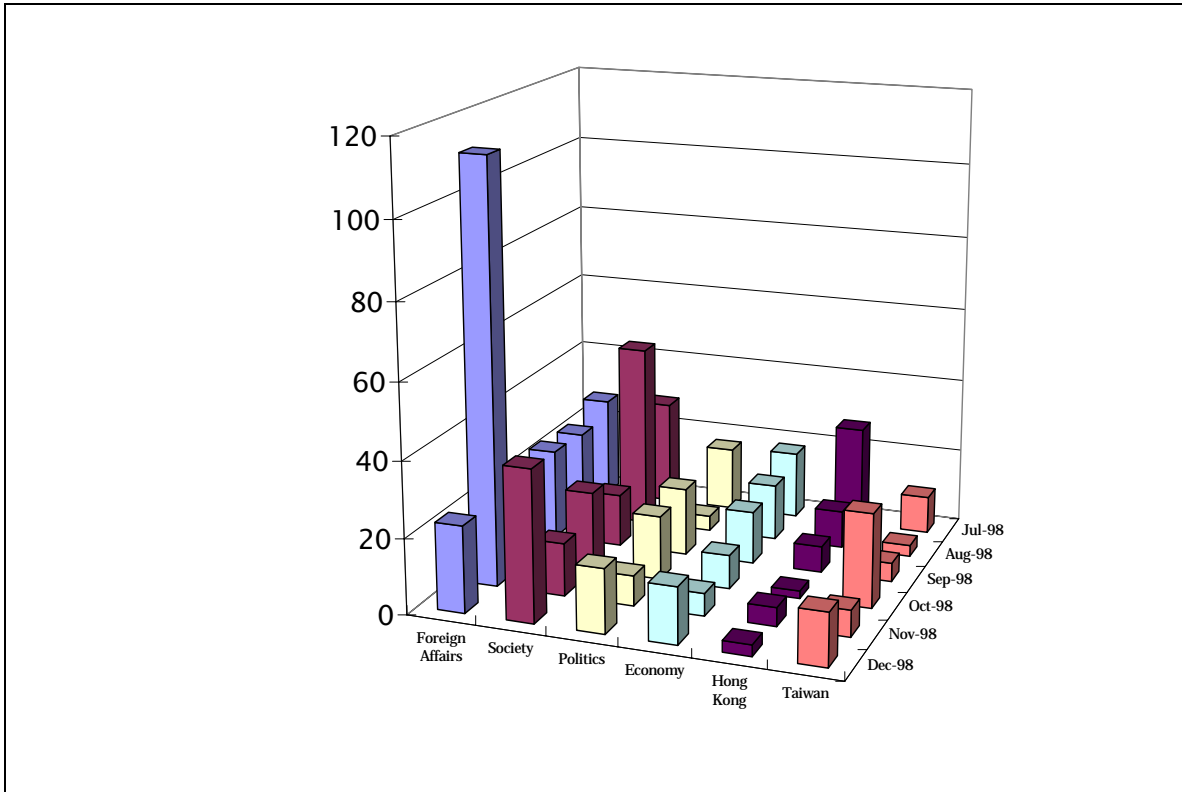
Among all the categories, the gap between monthly average and median is smallest in economic stories (monthly average 12.8 articles versus median of 14 articles), suggesting that economic news experiences the least fluctuation compared with news stories in other categories. Therefore, economic reporting can be regarded as the most stable component of the two papers' coverage of China.

---

<sup>7</sup> The *Asahi Shimbun*, "Shigoto shizurakku? Gonisaru" (Tired of work? Heads to Australia), September 1, 1998.

Chart 3.

The *Asahi Shimbun's* China-related Articles by Month and Type  
(July – December 1998)



Is this thematic distribution China-unique? An analysis of the *Asahi's* America-related stories shows that stories about foreign policies are also the top one component, largely due to the Korean missile crisis in September and the bombing of Iraq in December. However, unlike the coverage of China, social news about America takes a back seat. In other words, the reporting on America is markedly "harder" than its Chinese counterpart in terms of subject. With monthly averages of approximately 67 articles on the American economy and 49 articles on American politics, the "non-state" or "unofficial" side of America is noticeably dwarfed in the *Asahi's* coverage of the United States. The same cannot be said about its Chinese coverage.

### (3) Reliance on Official Sources

The first two features of the Japanese reportage pattern offer us a largely descriptive picture of China's weight in international coverage and its distribution of subjects. But how do Japanese correspondents deal with their deeply suspicious Chinese host? Specifically, how much autonomy do Japanese correspondents have in reporting on China? In studying media autonomy, one key criterion that scholars use is whether journalists have diversified resources to use as they pursue stories (Freeman, 2000; McChestney, 2003). A high degree of dependency on official sources often creates leverages for the state to employ over the media. It tips the balance of information disbursement toward the state's preferences and the result is less autonomous media. If this is true in the Chinese context, foreign correspondents will be transformed into mouthpieces for the ruling Communist Party. But do Japanese journalists rely heavily on Chinese official sources for collecting information? Are there any alternative channels? If there are, how frequently do journalists use them for gathering information?

The sample articles can be put into three categories based on the criterion of their sources. First, official sources include information obtained from routine briefings by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, official meetings that allow the presence of foreign press, or press conferences by bureaucratic agencies. Secondary sources are those stories that Japanese journalists gather by reading other Chinese or foreign newspapers and wire services or by watching broadcast news programs, and then either recapitulate or re-interpret these already known facts. Finally, independent sources include stories that Japanese journalists write by conducting individual interviews with average citizens or other non-official sources, as well as stories whose sources are not explicitly identified as secondary or official.

Table 2.

The *Asahi Shimbun's* and the *Yomiuri Shimbun's* Correspondents' Autonomy Judged by Sources of Information (the *Yomiuri's* data in brackets)

Subject	Official	Secondary	Independent
Foreign Policy	18 (7)	5 (4)	10 (7)
Economy	11 (1)	6 (2)	5 (2)
Politics	10 (0)	9 (2)	3 (2)
Taiwan	4 (2)	2 (1)	3 (0)
Hong Kong	2 (2)	1 (0)	3 (3)
Society	3 (0)	3 (1)	12 (7)
Sum	48 (12)	26 (10)	36 (21)
Percentage	.44 (.28)	.24 (.23)	.32 (.49)

Table 2 reveals one major difference between the *Asahi* and the *Yomiuri* correspondents judged by the sources from which they obtain information. 44% of the *Asahi's* stories come from official sources, much higher than secondary and independent sources. The *Yomiuri*, by contrast, gets only 28% of its stories from Chinese officials. For the *Yomiuri*, independent sources are its most important information channels.

The *Yomiuri's* marginal dependence on the Chinese state, as I will explain in detail later, is largely a result of Beijing's deeply entrenched suspicion toward its right-leaning ideological stance. Since the Chinese state takes only a minor role as an information provider, it may be implied that Beijing has only limited impact on curbing the *Yomiuri's* autonomy from this aspect. This difference certainly adds to the strength of the popular image back in Japan that characterizes the *Asahi* more or less as a "pro-China" newspaper. But one needs to be careful not to take this image too far. As Table 2 illustrates, even for the *Asahi*, the Chinese state provides less than half of the total amount of information, far from taking a monopoly. Literally speaking, the *Asahi* correspondents are still more than "half free" from their controlling host.

There is also one major similarity shared by the two papers, and it reveals how foreign correspondents' adapt to the hostile environment imposed by an authoritarian government. Stories of secondary sources, i.e., stories based on reporters' reprocessing of already known facts, are significant sources for both papers. In fact, second-hand information occupies roughly equal weight for both: 24% for the *Asahi* and 23% for the *Yomiuri*. The Chinese government's tight control imposed upon foreign journalists does not offer many interviewing opportunities other than routine press briefings by the Foreign Ministry. This unfriendly environment compels Japanese journalists that are constantly starved for leads to form a habit of reading other Chinese or foreign newspapers, magazines, and wire services in search of information or for perspectives. This is especially the case in stories about Chinese politics, a subject matter deemed by Beijing as most sensitive and thus least open to media monitoring. If foreign correspondents do not want to become mouthpieces for Beijing, they must learn to read between official lines in the *People's Daily* and to hunt for inspirations by following what other media outlets are saying. Making good use of secondary sources becomes a means of survival under an authoritarian state.

#### **(4) Reporting Tones**

Reporting tones are another criterion for judging journalistic autonomy. This criterion is especially relevant in the Chinese context. The Chinese government has explicitly ordered its own journalists at major news outlets, for example the *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*, to reflect social realities from an overwhelmingly positive perspective. Progress and achievements by the party should always be the "central theme" of coverage. This mentality spills over into the government's interactions with foreign correspondents as well. Because of this, there is fear in Japan that Beijing's heavy-handedness may intimidate Japanese correspondents into self-imposed censorship so as not to offend the Chinese host. If

this allegation is true, one will expect few critical stories about Beijing's sensitive issues like human rights violations or the Communist Party cadres' corruption cases.

Reporting tones can be evaluated by placing sample articles into three categories: neutral stories are coded as those that do not have any thematic interpretation. In other words, "neutral" does not mean "objective" in any simple or naïve sense. But by using "neutral," I mean that the style of writing does not call attention to larger themes of progress or competition, and that they do not consciously emphasize a context of Chinese repression, or Chinese development, or Chinese competition with Japan. Typical examples of neutral stories are short briefs. Positive articles are those that have rhetorical inclinations that reflect progress or development, and negative stories are those that contain rhetorical inclinations that expose problems.

Table 3.

Reporting Tones of the *Asahi Shimbun's* and the *Yomiuri Shimbun's* China Coverage (the *Yomiuri's* data in bracket).

Subject	Neutral	Positive	Negative
Foreign Policy	20 (10)	8 (5)	7 (3)
Economy	17 (3)	3 (1)	3 (3)
Politics	10 (1)	1 (0)	11 (3)
Society	8 (2)	7 (5)	3 (5)
Taiwan	7 (3)	2 (0)	1 (0)
Hong Kong	4 (2)	0 (0)	2 (3)
Sum	66(21)	21 (11)	27 (17)
Percentage	.58 (.43)	.19 (.22)	.23(.35)

Table 3 reveals a number of findings. First, more often than not, neither the *Yomiuri* nor the *Asahi* articles voice any positive or negative inclinations. Overall, 58% of the *Asahi's* sample articles and 43% of the *Yomiuri's* sample articles are simply factual descriptions. This suggests that on foreign coverage, both papers first and foremost assume the role of neutral transmitters of facts rather than opinion-molders.

Of the opinionated stories, on an aggregative level, there are more negative stories than positive ones for both papers. Japanese journalists, even when in an authoritarian setting, tend to chase problems rather than to praise progress. The “bad news makes good news” tendency is still at work in an inhospitable environment. Judged by subjects, there are more opinionated stories in areas where official sources become less prevalent. Noticeably, on subjects about which Beijing is most sensitive, namely Chinese politics, if the *Asahi* and the *Yomiuri* articles voice any rhetorical inclinations, they are prevalently negative. Human rights violations and corruption are two popular normative frames for the majority of opinionated articles about Chinese politics. By contrast, on the subject of social news, an area least guarded by the Chinese government, positive stories beat negative ones by more than two to one for the *Asahi* and break even for the *Yomiuri*. I therefore conclude that the fear that Japanese journalists have been driven by Beijing into appeasement is not substantiated by the data.

## Implications

### (1) International Balancing: A Quid Pro Quo Deal between Reporters and Beijing?

Before discussing the implications that this paper has to offer, it is necessary to acknowledge its limits: it is a case study of two main Japanese newspapers over a relatively short period of time (six months). One needs to realize that there is a plethora of players in Japan’s heavily competitive media market. In addition to the “Big Five” newspapers,<sup>8</sup> there is also the public broadcaster *Nippon Hoso Kyokai* (NHK), a number of increasingly active private stations, as well as peripheral media outlets like the weekly and tabloid magazines. The “media” are not a monolithic entity and intra-media differences may exist. Despite these caveats, this study can offer some tentative findings about international reportage.

First, it offers a more nuanced picture of media autonomy in a foreign and authoritarian setting by shedding light on that which the media concedes, as well as what it sustains. In essence, it is an act of balancing. To begin with, some compromises happen outside the newsmaking process. For example, all the major Japanese media outlets have complied with Beijing’s “One China” demand by making their Taipei offices a “sub-bureau” (*shikyoku*) of their “General China Bureau.” Of the “Big Five,” only the smallest player, the *Sankei Shimbun*, had resisted this demand for more than 20 years before it finally caved in the late 1990s. It turns out that a rapidly ascending China is simply too important to be ignored, and apparently, the *Sankei* could not afford to be further marginalized by its competitors in covering this country.

This administrative measure to gratify Beijing is a sacrifice of media autonomy. However, the Japanese concession is neither unique nor the worst. Some media-related international businesses have gone even further to please the Chinese government. One needs to look no further than the filtering engines installed by *Yahoo!*, *MSN*, and *Google* in their Chinese versions to fend off politically sensitive

---

<sup>8</sup> Namely, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Asahi Shimbun*, the *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, and the *Sankei Shimbun*, ranked by their circulation numbers.

terms. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch also courted Beijing by forming a business alliance with a Chinese military officer-turned-businessman in order to enter China's tightly controlled satellite television market (Curtis, 2005). Further still, Murdoch agreed not to publish books that would offend Chinese officials.

When one comes to the actual news content, however, the picture of autonomy becomes more mixed. Beijing has actually demonstrated a higher degree of tolerance with the Japanese media's critical reports. The Chinese government used to expel any foreign correspondent deemed as "unfriendly," and this approach has yet to be totally abandoned, but an increasingly open China is also becoming more realistic in acknowledging how far its control can reach. As it is becoming increasingly difficult to oppress even its domestic audience, it has abandoned the Maoist passion of converting non-Chinese readers.

The robust existence of critical reports and the managerial compromise identified above, when combined together, signal that a "quid pro quo" arrangement is emerging. The Japanese media made important yet largely symbolic concessions in their administrative structures to help Beijing "save face" on its most sensitive Taiwan issue. In exchange for this compliance, Beijing has seemed to be complacent, turning a blind eye to critical reports filed in a foreign language to satisfy a foreign readership. Chinese government officials may find the overwhelmingly negative cast of Chinese politics annoying,<sup>9</sup> but they have refrained from using deportation as a means of dealing with foreign correspondents. As long as critical voices do not penetrate into China's domestic media market, Beijing has become more forgiving. Concerns about harsh censorship are not substantiated by the data. Seen from the side of the Japanese media, although such balancing is largely involuntary, it is deemed a necessary and tolerable price to pay in order to maintain their presence in China.

## **(2) Domestic Balancing: Editorials and Bifurcated Business Strategy**

Neither newspaper is an agenda-setter on the issue of reporting on China. They both tend to follow rather than to trigger trends (Table 1). The two also have similar distributions of neutral, positive, and negative stories (Table 3). These two similarities reinforce the mainstream scholarship's argument that fierce competition has made key players in the Japanese news market identical (Flanagan, 1996; Freeman, 2000). Paradoxically, however, they also invite an intriguing question: If these two papers are so alike in daily reporting trends, why are they perceived as distinct and different by the Japanese public? After all, any average Japanese newspaper reader would have no difficulty in identifying the *Asahi* as being liberal and the *Yomiuri* conservative. Where does their main difference come from and what does it imply?

To answer this question, one needs to understand the functional differentiation between routine, non-opinionated reporting and editorials. The implications for balancing in the domestic arena of these two kinds of articles are that the former helps newspapers maintain an "objective" reputation whereas the latter targets readers with specific ideological preferences. This functional differentiation requires us to

---

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview with a senior Xinhua News Agency editor, May 3, 1998.



have a more nuanced analysis of the Japanese media's bifurcated business strategy. By American standards, income and educational inequalities in Japan are minor. The majority of the Japanese public perceive themselves as "middle-class" and "*chudo*" (middle-of-the-road) ideologically (Hayes, 2005). This means that the two national dailies are competing for essentially the same vast readership (Westney, 1996). Thus, neither one can afford to go to ideological extremes, for alienation of any societal segment would be a tremendous business loss. Sensationalism is also dismissed as lowbrow and unfit for such a huge readership. Instead, the most secure way is to become a "quality" paper with a matter-of-fact style reporting (Krauss & Lambert, 2000). Thus, for both papers, the majority of their daily routine coverage has a neutral tone and a rather staid writing style, and coverage of China is no exception.

Mainstream scholarship on the Japanese media often stops at this level of recognition. But to answer the question of why they are perceived to be different ideologically, one has to look at the specific function that editorials carry for Japanese national dailies. Although this paper is not an exhaustive analysis of editorials, suffice it to say, the editorial is the realm where a newspaper's personality shines, and that editorials are the beacons that reckon with ideologically responsive readers. Given the massive circulation numbers, editorials also carry the potential of preaching to readers to encourage them to harbor certain attitudes and policy stances that are preferred by the editorial boards.

It is in the editorial pages, for example, that the *Asahi's* liberal and internationalist stance is most vividly manifested. For decades, the *Asahi* has been calling for a more sincere apology from the Japanese side to its Asian neighbors for World War II invasion and colonization. It has also been a defender of Japan's pacifist constitution, in which Japan renounced its sovereign right to wage wars as a means to defend itself. Even after President Jiang's disastrous visit that irritated the Japanese public, the *Asahi's* editorials continued to call for more repentance from the Japanese side.<sup>10</sup> The *Yomiuri's* editorials, on the other hand, are known for their nationalist and conservative stances. One especially significant event was its publication in 1994 of its own constitutional draft, which triggered a national debate about whether the current pacifist constitution was "outdated" and should be revised. The "*Yomiuri Constitution*" turned a new page in Japan's postwar political development and triggered a debate that is still going on today (Hayes, 2005).

From a business point of view, editorials counter-balance the two papers' largely neutral image as disinterested transmitters of information. They cater to a niche market of ideologically sensitive readers. For most Japanese readers, while reading editorials is probably not a top priority, the difference between Japan's top two papers is quite clear. Mainstream scholarship's recognition that "all Japanese newspapers are alike" has failed to take editorials seriously as a crucial balancing mechanism and thus neglects the bifurcated nature of the Japanese papers' business strategies.

---

<sup>10</sup> The *Asahi Shimbun*, "minorityutaka toha ienaiga" (Although not a "fruitful visit"), editorial, November 27, 1998.

When one combines domestic balancing with its international counterpart, the analysis becomes more complete, as both efforts serve the common commercial purposes of securing an information base and solidifying readership. The double balancing works in tandem to help the Japanese media survive in a hostile foreign soil and thrive in a heavily competitive domestic market.

### **(3) Domestic Balancing Meets International Balancing: Particular Importance of Editorials in China Coverage**

The two papers' editorials also matter tremendously to a different audience, namely the Chinese government. Here, domestic balancing and its international counterpart become intertwined. Traditionally, editorials have been a crucial propaganda tool for the Communist Party (Zhou, 1993). The traditional significance associated with editorials also spills over into Chinese officials' thinking about foreign press. Beijing uses editorials as thermometers to gauge how "friendly" or "hostile" different foreign media outlets are toward China, or more exactly, toward the Chinese government (Miyoshi, 1973; Komori, 2005).

China's monitoring of the foreign press's editorials also has a practical reason: it needs to cite what it perceives as "friendly" opinions and include them in the official propaganda so as to create a "pro-China" fantasy. The *Yomiuri's* more nationalist and conservative position, exemplified by its more assertive constitution draft, its call for strengthening security ties with America, and its criticism of Beijing's use of historical grievances as a diplomatic card, makes the newspaper not just "unfriendly" but also "useless" to the Chinese government. In contrast, the *Asahi* is perceived by Beijing as a relatively friendly voice due to its consistent criticism of the lack of historical reflection on the Japanese side and its deeply entrenched suspicion toward Japan's strengthened connection with America.

Beijing's different perceptions of the two dailies, derived mostly from their editorial stances, clearly influences the heights of hurdles that these papers' correspondents have to deal with. One consequence is reflected in Table 2. The higher degree of the *Asahi's* reliance on official sources is partly because the Chinese government is more willing to accept its interview requests. One *Yomiuri* correspondent, on the other hand, complained that during his entire tenure, he could not get a single interview with Chinese officials. He was quick to note that his *Asahi* colleagues got such opportunities a number of times and even accompanied the Chinese officials on their international tours.<sup>11</sup> This confession corroborates Table 2's lower percentage of the *Yomiuri's* articles that have official sources. Lack of access to official sources compels the *Yomiuri* journalists to dig deeper in areas where government surveillance is less effective; namely stories about common or even marginalized segments of society or neglected problems. These are also the areas for which the *Yomiuri* has been traditionally famous among its readers. During the time period under study, the *Yomiuri's* long-running series report on China's rapid environmental deterioration can be seen as an international extension of this time-honored tradition.

---

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with a *Yomiuri* journalist, July 23, 2004.

## Conclusion

Some of the findings identified above are confined to the Japanese context. After all, not every country has achieved an enviable 99% literacy rate and harbored a self-perception of being “classless,” and not every society is as media-saturated or newspaper-centered as the Japanese society. However, the Japanese case can shed insight into some general issues: First, it shows a contextualized and nuanced picture of how reporters from a democracy deal with and are dealt with by an authoritarian government. Both parties make significant adjustments. In essence, this is a process of international balancing on the part of the media. Media autonomy is certainly eroded when the Japanese media outlets are coerced into changing their managerial structure to satisfy Beijing’s “One China Policy” demand. However, Beijing has come to know its limits and has learned to refrain from expelling reporters it does not like. The prevalence of negative over positive stories also warns one against exaggerating the loss of foreign correspondents’ autonomy to a suspicious host. Instead, it is worth exploring where that autonomy is compromised and where it is still at work.

The reporting pattern of the two papers shows more similarities than differences. Despite agreements in general reporting trends, their apparent different images among Japanese readers require explanation. This difference points to the dimension of domestic balancing and a bifurcated business strategy; the largely neutral tone helps attract as many readers as possible. Meanwhile, editorials can strike a chord with a much smaller group of ideologically sensitive readers. Such a functional differentiation between daily reporting and editorials, in a sense, helps Japanese national dailies have personalities without sacrificing their neutral-transmitter images. Unlike international balancing, domestic balancing is more active and voluntary, and editorials are one of the major balancing mechanisms.

The two balancing efforts may become intertwined, as editorials also influence the chances for foreign correspondents to get interviews with Chinese officials. This is demonstrated by the different degrees to which the *Asahi* and the *Yomiuri* rely on official sources. However, with the 2008 Beijing Olympics in sight, the Chinese government has recently dropped two of its especially stringent requirements for foreign reporters. Foreign reporters no longer have to report to Chinese authorities before traveling, and are no longer required to have local Chinese officials accompanying their interviews. The elimination of these two requirements removed major administrative hurdles for all foreign correspondents. Though good news in itself, it is largely a utilitarian gesture to better the Chinese government’s own image. An increasingly integrated China would probably compel Beijing to continue its “turning-a-blind-eye” policy to stories it does not like, and there are many. But as long as Beijing’s “friendly-versus-unfriendly” mentality continues, differential treatment of foreign press is likely to go on.

<sup>12</sup>Like the old Chinese saying goes, “Old habits die hard.”

---

<sup>12</sup> *China News Agency*, “Beijing aoyun caifang guiding gongbu, huo wai guo mei ti gao du ping jia” (Foreign Press Highly Praises Beijing’s Regulation on Interviews during Olympic Games), December 1, 2006, accessed at <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/ty/bjay/news/2006/12-01/830582.shtml> on May 31, 2007.

---

**References**

- Cohen B. (1963). *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Curtis, M. (2005). Murdoch's Dilemma, or "What's the Price of TV in China?" in *Media, Culture & Society*, 27(2): 155-175.
- Feldman, O. (1993). *Politics and the News Media in Japan*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Flanagan, S. (1996). "Media Exposure and the Quality of Political Participation in Japan" in *Media and Politics in Japan*: 277-312.
- Freeman, L.A. (2000). *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Green, M. (2001). *Japan's Reluctant Realism*, Palgrave Press.
- Hayes, L.D. (2005). *Introduction to Japanese Politics, fourth edition*. M. E. Sharpe, pp. 145-157.
- Krauss, E. and P. Lambert. (2000). "The Press and Reform in Japan" in *Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics*, 7(1): 57-78.
- Kim, Y.C. (1982). *Japanese Journalists and Their World*, University of Virginia Press.
- Komori, Y. (2005). *Pekin hodo 700 nichi* (Seven Hundred Days of Reporting from Beijing), Tokyo: Shogakukan, p. 55.
- McChesney, R.W. (2003). "The Problem of Journalism: a political economic contribution to an explanation of the crisis in contemporary U.S. journalism" in *Journalism Studies*, Volume 4, Number 3, 2003, p. 306.
- Miyoshi, O. and S. Eto. (1972). *Chugoku Hodo no Henko o tsuku* (On the Change of Coverage of China), Tokyo: Nisshin Hodo.
- Ono, T. (2000). *Nihon no chugoku hodo*. (Japan's China Coverage), master's thesis at Gakushuin University.
- Pharr, S. (1996). "Media as Trickster in Japan: A Comparative Perspective" In *Media and Politics in Japan*, ed. Susan J. Pharr and Ellis S. Krauss. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Tanaka, H. and S. Tahara. (2005). *Kokka to Gaiko* (State and Diplomacy), Tokyo: Kodansha

Westney, E. (1996). "Mass Media as Business Organizations: A U.S. – Japanese Comparison" in *Media and Politics in Japan*: 78.

Zhou, S.L. (1990). *Xinwenxue Gailun* (Introduction to Journalism), Fudan University Press.

