

News from under the Southern Cross - Edition 24

The mass media 'bridge'

13 August

Today I want to try discussing the role of mass media and the important part it plays in promoting mutual understanding between Japan and Australia.

1. "Just 3 books!"

When I received my notice of appointment to Australia in the first half of spring last year, the first thing I did was make my way to a major bookstore in front of Tokyo Station to spend more than a few bob (!) on books introducing Australia. When I took a look at the corner on the first floor of the bookstore introducing the regions of the world and the characteristics of various countries, its line-up was replete with volumes about the US, China, the UK, Russia, Indonesia, Thailand etc.

However when it came to Australia, there were just 3 books!

For a country about whose importance many people are aware, it was a dismal state of affairs.

2. The important role of mass media

Given the lack of information available in books, this then raises the importance of information obtainable via mass media. In fact, many people probably feel that information gained both day and night via television and newspapers is more 'familiar' than that found in stuffy academic treatises.

Yet among Australia's mass media companies (TV, newspapers etc.), only ABC News maintains a bureau in Tokyo! (more about this later). Conversely, when you examine the bureaus Japanese mass media companies operate in Sydney, you have Kyodo and Jiji representing news agencies, the Nikkei Shimbun representing newspapers, and TV stations NHK and TBS (you also have the long-running local papers NNA and "Nichigo Press", which are well versed in the affairs of Australia).



Picture Source: GYRO-PHOTOGRAPHY/Image Mart (L) AFRO (R)

This is the state of affairs at present, despite the fact that there are around 100,000 Japanese people living in Australia, making it the third largest Japanese community outside of Japan. And in a few years' time this number might surpass the number of Japanese living in China, thereby making it No.2.

3. Re-opening the AFR's Tokyo Bureau

Amongst all this, I received some happy news that Australia's financial newspaper, the Australian Financial Review, is planning to re-open its Tokyo bureau.

Actually, there is a bit of background to this story. The AFR originally covered East Asia from its bureau located in Shanghai. However as a result of a crackdown by the host country and an increase in censorship, the Shanghai bureau was shut down. This then led to the decision to re-open the bureau in Tokyo.

All of the details of what transpired are described in the book written by the last Shanghai bureau chief of the AFR, Michael Smith, titled "*The Last Correspondent*", and so I'll leave the explanation to him.



Australia's major newspapers

4. Words of Farewell

After returning to Australia, Smith was appointed as the Tokyo bureau chief, and so I decided to hold a farewell reception for him at my Residence. It was during this reception that the following three points were raised with the newly-minted Tokyo bureau chief.

- (1) "Stop following the US, EU"

With Japan and Australia sharing such a close relationship, the AFR shouldn't try to follow the stories reported in the Wall Street Journal or the UK's Financial Times. Instead it is expected to report about Japan from an Australian perspective.

(2) “Refrain from taking a condescending tone”

Cover Japan and the Japanese in the spirit of mutual respect and tolerance, and without resort to the “self-righteous punitive enthusiasm” that prominent US diplomat George Kennan railed against when criticizing the nature of post-WWII occupation policies in Japan and Germany.

(3) “Cover the townspeople”

Don’t only cover foreigners living in Tokyo or Japanese people who can speak English, but cover the “people of the town “well” who are the source of Japan’s strength.

5. The presence of the Japanese mass media

One disappointing thing in all this is that despite the advocacy for the importance of the Japan-Australia relationship, there is still only a fairly limited Japanese mass media presence in Sydney. And what’s more, it’s getting smaller.

The main newspapers appear to have given up on their Sydney bureaus and have decided to cover Australia from their bureaus in Jakarta and Singapore. I’ve heard this is because of their financial situations.

Again and again I hear Australians say: “what?!” in response when I tell them this.

An Australian with detailed knowledge of East Asia expressed their feelings about this situation as follows:

“For example, say you were to cover Japan from Seoul, or the UK from Dublin, or the US from Ottawa, how do you think that makes the people being covered feel?”

6. An enthusiastic presence to promote Japan-Australia relations

At the same time, there are those ‘stalwarts’ who have spent 10 or 20 years living in Australia. They then enter Japan’s mass media and tenaciously go about introducing Australia.

Given the rise of SNS messaging, we’re in an age where the subjects of media coverage themselves are increasing their ‘dispatches’. Yet mass media still has a major role to play in advancing and increasing mutual comprehension between the peoples of Japan and Australia through everyday reporting on events and commentary.

The Embassy itself will actively provide all necessary information and other assistance to ensure that the activities of mass media, that ‘bridge’ to mutual understanding, can continue without a hitch.