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The China Beat editors would like to introduce a new feature: China Around the World. We have asked scholars, journalists, and graduate students working outside China and the US to tell us how China is being covered in the local media they read. This is the first installment—from Japan.

By James Farrer

My knowledge of Japanese media coverage of China is largely limited to print media, and mostly as a regular consumer of the major liberal daily Asahi Shimbun. Despite this relatively narrow window, several features of Asahi’s China coverage strike me as noteworthy.

One obvious difference with American newspaper reporting is a far greater focus on historical features. During the past year, Asahi ran an excellent series on turning points East Asian history, that included essays on Japan’s colonial expansion in Korea, Taiwan, China and other parts of Asia. One series of articles compared the way these events were described in Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and PRC textbooks. In general the articles were insightful and well-documented and did not back away from Japan’s historic aggression in Asia. At the same time, they discussed subjects that would not have been covered by Americans including the lives of Japanese in former colonial possessions.

These progressive elements aside, Asahi, also chases the scandalous China stories that other major Japanese outlets chase. This bias towards dramatic and/or violent events is not so different from the West, particularly US television, but the proximity and greater human resources of Japanese media in China mean that headline events there produce a huge volume of reporting in Japanese media outlets.

This year these media circuses included the Tibet riots, and the “frozen dumpling” incident in which Chinese-manufactured frozen dumplings were found to have agricultural poisons on the surface of the packages. The dumpling incident, in particular, was front page news for days, even though no fatalities were involved.

The cumulative effect of this kind of reporting is to portray China as a scary and unreliable neighbor (and also one with a great deal of ill-will toward Japan). To some extent this front-page coverage is balanced by a large quantity of more careful and neutral daily reporting, but it is these big “incidents” that seem to leave the greatest mark on public consciousness.

One minor, though progressive, feature of Asahi’s China coverage, is a regular Sunday column by a Chinese columnist based in Japan for over 20 years, Mo Bangfu, who writes short breezy essays on China-centered issues. This column is significant, because in a country with a relatively small immigrant population, a regular column by an ethnic Chinese resident of Japan is perhaps a small sign of the opening up of Japanese media not only to overseas perspectives, but the perspectives of foreigners living in Japan.
While we are at it, I would like to comment on media reporting on China on the other side of the planet. I am a regular consumer of the German magazine *Spiegel*. I find *Spiegel* China reporting to be a bit like *Newsweek* and *Time* on steroids, with alarmist reports of impending economic collapse, alternating with hyperbolic stories of China’s march to global domination. Despite the occasional positive story, the tone is generally very skeptical of China’s social progress. For example, the story this week reads “China Inc. is running out of air,” warning German firms in particular not to rely too much on the China market.

*James Farrer is an associate professor of sociology at Sophia University in Tokyo and author of* Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai.