

## **Asia in the New Zealand Media: Will Money Buy Us Love?**

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### **Introduction**

The Asia:NZ report "[Preparing for a Future with Asia](#)" stresses the importance of better reporting on Asia through broadly two arguments driven by economic motives.

The most obvious is the economic importance or future dominance of the Asian region in the global economy. 'Prepare for a Future with your Asian Overlords, Europlebs,' I like to say. Jokingly, of course.

The second is about serving the growing NZ "Asian" demographic's actual interest in the region. "Asians" in New Zealand are up to 10% of the population, highly literate consumers of news media, who are forced to go outside mainstream print and television media for their information about countries they have a stronger personal interest in than the UK, Australia or the US. Again, the imperative to improve is commercial – talk to us or lose us.

Beyond noticing the obvious economic imperatives behind what countries are relevant to New Zealand's survival and why, there's something else that the media is meant to do when reporting international issues: report international issues so that the public can be informed about the world, as a public service for the betterment of our intellectual development. This is, perhaps, idealistic. Certainly, the commercial imperatives are undoubtedly the best way to get the mainstream media to lift its standards and report more on Asia. But I'd like to touch on a couple of pitfalls or implications of this approach.

### **Old Peril, New Peril**

Even though media culture is increasingly dealing with issues about Asian economic development, rising economic power, and closer contact with the West, some things have remained exactly the same.

The lenses through which we view "perils" from the East have changed, but the trope of "threat" remains – from the old Yellow Peril imagery, to contemporary US representations of the threat of China's military power, or even of avian influenza and SARS as being associated with Asian invasion. The lesson is that the "othering" of Asia, or any other group or region, can always move with the times and adapt to circumstances. Understanding that Asia has a huge economic impact on New Zealand won't necessarily change that.

Let's have a look at some old tropes about Asia and their 21<sup>st</sup> century

equivalents:

1. Asia as incomprehensible, “mysterious,” “inscrutable.” This trope is still active in, for example, reportage on political leaders as an explanation of why a journalist doesn't know what the leaders are going to do, or indeed know anything about the situation.

2. Asia as a hive-minded and disaster-ridden part of the Third World. The idea of the anonymous teeming mass is expressed through portrayals of Asia that lack human relatability. They are also expressions of latent hysteria about automatization of society which is, in a sense, an expression or reflection of Western people's anxieties about maintaining their own humanity, individualism and living standards in the global economy. Treated as massed victims, particularly notable in conflict and disaster reporting, Asian subjects further lose their status as subjects, and become objectified – there's a reason they call it “disaster-porn.” Which leads to:

3. Asia as an R&R zone full of whores. From “Love you long time” to “Monsoon Poon,” not much has changed – except maybe prices have gone up.

Those are just a few of the new takes on old ideas. But Western perceptions of Asia's new economic power and rapid development has also generated new stereotypes and ready-made lenses through which to view or relate to its “boom.” These new angles are also tied into various old tropes too.

1. Asia will take over the world and destroy it with pollution, pandemics, and cheap consumer goods.

2. Tired of feeding us, Asia will also wreak its revenge by eating the world.

3. But you will learn their inscrutable ways, young grasshopper, and get rich along the way.

These newly formed stances, although often born out of an actual effort to be understand contemporary reality, are still often based on relationships of fear, competition, or exploitation. They are about relating to the foreign, that which is outside of us.

One of the most important points made in the Asia Knowledge Working Group report is that New Zealand's institutions have yet to acknowledge Asian identity – internal ethnic identity, and wider regional identity – as part of New Zealand identity. It's not accepted that “Asia” is not a place we might go, but a place we have to get used to becoming.

Despite the tendency to fall into these stereotypical traps, the economic imperative has produced some advances, and it is at least the fashion to promote the concept of needing to engage with Asia – although the emphasis on China, and general confusion about what an ‘Asian’ is, has often led to the media forgetting about India and other parts of Asia that are far more

practical places for certain elements of the NZ business and media sector to engage with.

### **Are Asians Human?**

Despite these advances and opportunities, as someone whose primary priority is not having Asian countries take over the world as long as New Zealanders can make a buck along the way, but having people in Asia take control of their countries and further the cause of true self-determination in the global economy, I have to point out that the new media focus on Asia is missing a crucial component. What we're missing is not just important to my values, but is also the only way all those tropes and stereotypes *can* be meaningfully defeated.

On the whole, it does seem that the best Asia correspondents we have in the mainstream are business writers, and that we're getting increasing information about Asian business and Asian economies in the mainstream media. But we aren't getting an equivalent level of knowledge about what's going on in politics or society.

This isn't to blame the business reporters – they're the only ones actually doing their jobs; but in the economic imperative mode, “Asia” and “Asians” remain objects for you, the New Zealand subject, to obtain value from, or protect yourself from. The economic imperative mode does not place equal human value on the life of an “Asian” person and any white person in that virtual media space. Within the media, Asians in Asia (let's not even get in to Asians in New Zealand), are not fully human.

As an “Asian” person, I can't help but feel odd about these forms of “othering” – whether they portray “Asia” as a peril or a goldmine. From my perspective, Asian countries are not just ‘economies’ – they are societies. They are civil societies, they are political societies, and they have power dynamics, labour relations, social movements and cultural innovations that are just as important for us to know about, perhaps even more important, than those in Australia or America or the UK.

Without this kind of information, “Asians” aren't human in our media. Their lives simply aren't accorded the same level of value. We need to become connected to those human spaces we can relate to in which people in Asia aren't just hive-minded consumers, wailing victims, or a competing labour market. These spaces can be found and communicated to us by better reporting on social and political issues, and also through pop-cultural media like cinema and music, rather than just the economic and financial reporting that is currently in the mainstream vanguard.

### **Media Solutions: Using What We've Got**

A second problem for overemphasizing the economic imperative for better

reporting on Asia, is that it glosses over the imperative for providing better reporting of international news full stop. Our international news coverage is embarrassing and provincial. Everyone who's ever left the country knows that.

So what's the solution? The Asia New Zealand Foundation, the Journalists Training Organisation, and even myself in one cultural training session for the *New Zealand Herald*, have provided a range of recommendations about how to acquire more Asian journalists in mainstream newsrooms, how to give them better support, and how to report more responsibly on Asian issues in New Zealand.

However, departing entirely from homegrown journalism completely, an alternative one could also put forward is that there doesn't even really need to be better reporting on Asia (rather than Asians in New Zealand) from New Zealand journalists. If news services have the will to air better reporting on Asia, they could just cut their losses, slash all in-house foreign correspondent budgets, admit that our international reporting – not just Asian international reporting – is substandard and just make better use of international network feeds. Would life be so bad if they did? If you witnessed the recent work of TVNZ correspondents in Gaza or East Timor, you would be forgiven for thinking that sending golden retriever puppies to file those reports would have been more cost effective.

The low standard and ethnocentric focus of New Zealand's international television news is largely influenced by the structural laziness of our networks' dependence on news feeds from the UK, Australia, and the US. This biases our international news towards stories from those countries, no matter how pointless and trivial. Obviously, it is not just "Asia" that is ignored in our media and education system, but nearly everywhere and everything. Even the French are not as "human" to us as the British, Aussies and Americans – although the tropes they are subjected to are perhaps not as harmful (unless they are "Muslim").

The case of the *NZ Herald* is quite a good example of the rapidity with which the atrophied wing of international news coverage can be re-energised. There have been multiple levels of diversification and internationalization of the *Herald* in the past few years, but probably the easiest step has been to just run more international news about a better spread of different countries, nearly all of which are reprinted from other international publications or newswires.

Here's the irony: the problem of New Zealand's ethnocentric reporting on international issues is that it is so Anglocentric and Anglophone – but at the same time, the best sources of international news our papers and stations run, if they run them, are often from the UK. There are few complaints about the quality or volume of international news in the Guardian, or the Observer, or the World section of the BBC website.

At the same time, regional English language news sources are also underutilized. There is undoubtedly scope for developing network and

newspaper relationships with English-language media in, for example, India – the largest and most democratic media centre in the Asian region, and the largest national population of English speakers in the world. Compared to the reach and resources of many regional Asian newspapers and TV networks, the New Zealand media pool is rather a backwater.

Ultimately, if international news media content is like a digestive system, New Zealand's media is very far down the production chain – what it airs is, well, a very refined, processed product. What we see is the most narrow, chewed over selection of the biggest, most self-centred news stories produced by the biggest networks of our three biggest source countries, rather than a lot of the better international footage those countries are producing with their ample resources. This is most obvious when we get, for example, three straight days of reportage about some place in the American Midwest having a few snow days.

In a parallel of that same filtering effect, you can also see an intensification of news narrowness in the way mainstream content is reproduced in the Chinese language media in Auckland – where again the biases of the mainstream are replicated and increased, to the point that, for example, the Maori voice is minimized and practically distorted into oblivion – despite the importance for new migrant Chinese to understand Maori perspectives and for both groups to improve their relationship in the interests of their mutual survival.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, New Zealand as a whole cuts itself off from better reporting about Asia and the rest of the world. Like our most linguistically isolated Asian communities in New Zealand, New Zealand in Asia is the minority ghetto population, unable to engage with a three-dimensional view of where we are because of our failure to make smarter use of existing news media sources.

## **Conclusion**

The new awareness of an economic imperative for Asian reporting presents great opportunities for a shift in the New Zealand media mindset. However, there can be no adequate understanding of business reporting or even “crisis” reporting without labour, social, environmental, political, and cultural reporting. It is only through giving us the full picture that Asian populations can one day stop being elephants, dragons and tigers in the New Zealand media, and become human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Liu, “Chinese Language Media – Views on the Treaty & Maori,” presentation of MA thesis at *The Treaty of Waitangi and Asian Communities Symposium*, Auckland University School of Asian Studies, November 2005.