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Japanese media and 9-11 aftermath

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Ever since the attacks of Sept 11, 2001 (9-11), catchwords such as "patriotism," "unity," "grace of God," and "America's pride" have become popular throughout the United States. In an extension of this national trend, American mass media, especially television, implemented "patriotic broadcasting."

According to the Wall Street Journal, Walmart sold 88,000 American flags on Sept 12 in comparison with only 6,400 flags on the same day one year before. Annin & Co, one of America's largest flagmakers, had produced 30,000 flags per week before the 9-11 attacks; however, it has dramatically increased its production pace to 100,000 flags per week, but still cannot fill all orders promptly. The United States now has the largest demand for American flags since World War II.

The 9-11 attacks were also a commercial bonanza for the mass media. An endless flow of information, film footage, and reports on the attacks provided moneymaking opportunities for broadcasting, publications, and electronic media. Not only professional journalists and freelance writers, but entertainment media and scoop hunters flocked in large numbers to New York City, Afghanistan and Pakistan from all over the world.

Japanese commercialized mass media also dealt with and made sense of the attacks in a similar manner. Their primary goal was to achieve highly profitable performance: commercialized TV stations aimed at increasing their viewing rates and newspapers and publishers strove to sell as many of their publications as possible. The successful mass media utilized their understanding of Japanese nationalism to strike a sympathetic chord with the Japanese people. Consequently, analysis of Japanese commercialized mass media reveals characteristics of Japanese nationalism.

After the attacks, the Japanese mass media, especially tabloids, popular magazines, and publishers used this disaster for their own commercial purposes. They broadcast, reported and published whatever images and arguments would capture the attention of ordinary Japanese people. They first reflected on the rise of American nationalism to denounce the terrorists and expressed their understanding of American anger toward Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaida. However, as the United States started its military retaliation against Afghanistan, they gradually began to point out the immaturity and barbarity of U.S. behavior and to expose the danger of the mounting American nationalism.

Japanese mass media dealt with a variety of subjects, but in the end, the media coverage converged into one major bone of contention: What role, especially what military role can Japan play in the context of the U.S.-Japan alliance? After the United States began its military attacks against Afghanistan, the Japanese mass media almost exclusively focused their attention on issues related to U.S.-Japan relations. Especially dominant among these were the questions of whether or not Japan should dispatch its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) abroad, and whether or not Japan should alter the war-renouncing clause of its constitution.

This transformation of mass media narratives following the events of 9-11 demonstrates the ambivalent feelings of ordinary Japanese toward the American people: They are able to identify with individual American sentiments and emotions while at the same time, as Japanese citizens, reacting sharply against American policy. While their alliance with the United States is seen as essential to national security, anti-American tradition is also firmly rooted in Japanese society.

There may not be a clear-cut conflict between these two positions. One person may simultaneously have both feelings. Ordinary Japanese are ambivalent about the United States and its people. They are able to empathize emotionally with Americans during their crisis, while simultaneously seeking to shape their own national identities by reacting sharply against American policy. A study of the Japanese mass media reveals this ongoing, contradictory process by which the Japanese people continue to construct their identities.

The Japanese people appreciate American insistence on the adoption of Article Nine, the war-renouncing clause in the Japanese constitution, yet, at the same time, they feel Japan is caught in its grip and is unable to make any independent strategic decision without acting in concert with the United States. The Japanese people were able to pursue an economy-first approach during the postwar era because the United States has been providing Japan with military protection; however, the continuous presence of American military forces in Japan no longer seems appropriate and is regarded as a violation of Japanese sovereignty. By accepting the unconditional surrender and cooperating with the U.S. demilitarization process during the occupation, the Japanese people believed they had completely broken away from their militarist past and developed as a reborn country in the postwar era.

It is shocking to hear the Americans insensitively using "Pearl Harbor" or "kamikaze" to describe insidious and dirty tricks such as terrorist suicidal attacks without consideration of the effect of such terms on the Japanese people. As a result, the Japanese people now have complicated and equivocal sentiments toward Americans.

Japanese mass media represents an indication pointer of Japanese feelings toward the United States. Japanese mass media's coverage of the 9-11 attacks and their aftermath confirms this trend.

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