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Cross Cultural Reporting: Australian Foreign Correspondents
And The Ghosts Of Colonialism

By

Alan Knight
Cross cultural reporting:
Australian foreign correspondents and
the ghosts of colonialism.

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Do colonial perceptions still shape the way Australian foreign correspondents report on Asia?

Australia seeks to influence Asian views, culture and business through its media. The free to air, satellite delivered television and radio news services. Australia Television and Radio Australia claim to have more news bureaux in south east Asia than any other international service and hope to increase their Asian audiences. The national newspaper, the Australian, has initiated an Asian business section in an attempt to attract advertising as well as stimulate business. Meanwhile, Australian press reports about Asia can be instantly available throughout most of ASEAN, via the Internet.

Increased interest in the region reflects Australian government policy which sees Australia as part of Asia. Yet are correspondents' reflections being distorted by cultural assumptions which predate the new technology? Do these views inhibit the news gathering process?

Australian foreign correspondents learn their journalism practices and priorities within a Western journalism culture which tolerates if not encourages criticism of governments, corporations and prominent personalities. Within Australia, this freedom of expression can be tempered by near monopolies of media ownership, commercial considerations, and state and federal government interventions as well as defamation, contempt of court and security legislation imposing “D” notices.

Yet earlier generations of foreign correspondents, who wrote about relatively powerless Asians, were by and large unhindered by such restrictions. They were free to portray their subjects in “Orientalist” stereotypes, secure in the knowledge that most of the people and governments who they reported on, would never learn what was being said about them. However, rapidly rising affluence and education standards in south east Asia, combined with increasingly sophisticated satellite information systems, have empowered regional governments, corporations and even citizens to receive and analyse these foreign correspondents' reports within hours, if not minutes of their stories being filed. Australia Television, which began broadcasting from Darwin via Indonesia’s Palapa satellites in 1993, can now be reached throughout most of the region. It is seen by governments in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and China which have developed their own media philosophies and which do not encourage Western style media censure. As a result, Australian journalists abroad swim in an increasingly informed and articulate sea of critics.

Colonial Correspondents

Historically, many Australian correspondents have identified closely with Western political and cultural interests in Asia. George Morrison (of Beijing and the London Times) was the first Australian foreign correspondent to achieve an international reputation. While seeking to explain the complexities of “Oriental” societies to Western audiences, Morrison supported and reported to imperial Britain as it sought to subjugate and partition China. He was also a racist. Consider his views on Chinese people:

We cannot compete with Chinese; we cannot intermix or marry with them; they are aliens in language, thought and customs; they are working animals of low grade but great vitality. The Chinese is temperate,
Trugal, hardworking, and law evading, if not law abiding - we all acknowledge that. He can outwork an Englishman and starve him out of the country - no one can deny that. To compete successfully with a Chinaman, the artisan or labourer of our own flesh and blood would require to be downgraded to a mere mechanical beast of labour....

Through his journalism, Morrison provided justification for the now abandoned White Australia policy. His informed reporting from a Western perspective, responded to Victorian curiosity about Asia. He contributed to a view of the “Orient”, already firmly established in fictional writing; an imagined place of sexual adventure, danger, fear and ultimately a source of conflict. According to former Australian journalist, Alison Braiowski, this genre was rooted in pre-colonial values and attitudes. She argued that Australians’ acceptance such negative stereotypes distorted Australians’ perceptions and ultimately relations with our near neighbours:

Instead of becoming the best informed of English speaking peoples about the Asia Pacific region, as they were well placed to do, settler Australians sheltered from the challenge, accepting Europe’s Orientalist constructs as substitutes for knowledge. Because they failed to identify with their geography, Australians accepted that their own region was the Antipodes, and that the West (the ‘podes’) was the centre from which the East was ‘far’. They adopted the Spice islands, Tartary, Barbary, Serendip, Shangri La, and Xanadu as places on imaginary maps as Europeans did. Cathay was the fantasy land of silk and porcelain; Zinpu was the land of lacquer, and the same unpinpointable Indies had the same impossible picturesqueness for literate Australians as for Europeans.

This fantasy world was shattered by World War Two which brought a modern Asian military power to white Australia’s doorstep, introducing an end to the colonial era. The war also brought a new generation of Australian journalists to the region to their near north; reporters who sought to make the transition to reporting their side in a war to reporting Asia for their country. As citizens of Australia, which itself had suffered from colonialism, many of these former war correspondents thought they could more easily understand the aspirations of the new emerging powers. Yet with a few notable exceptions such as the pro communist Wilfred Burchett or his intellectual successor, John Pilger, most relied heavily on contacts with the lingering Western establishment in Asia.

In many ways, former Sydney Telegraph journalist and long time Hong Kong correspondent, Richard Hughes, provided the model of the stereotypical Australian correspondent abroad; a heavy drinking, bar frequenting gambler with a claim to inside knowledge on Asia. Yet, Hughes saw himself as a consummate outsider; in his own words a “foreign devil”:

Alien Western newspapermen do not feel that they are always foreigners in Western foreign countries. But like all Westerners - they know they are foreigners, and remain foreigners in the East. And foreign devils to boot. This doesn’t mean that they are necessarily unpopular or unwelcome -outside communist states - or that they don’t make and keep good friends among the Asians. On the contrary, (if they are lucky they can win enchanting lovers and proud wives). But they remain foreigners, outsiders, barbarians, devils - meaning alien, not necessarily satanic intruders.

Beneath his cynical and self consciously comic baroque style, Richard Hughes displayed many of the stereotypes employed by earlier Australian writers about Asia. Westerners were “aliens” to the Oriental “other”. The male newspapermen were seen as “foreign devils” by superstitious and implicitly inferior natives. Asia was characterised as the “East”; an imaginary location dictated by its position in relation to European concepts rather than its geographic proximity to Australia. Western journalists could make friendships there; but “if they are lucky” their relationship could be expressed sexually, with an implicitly subordinate native lover or wife.
Hughes defended the practice of Australian correspondents who traded the information they gathered with Western intelligence agencies, giving credit to authoritarian regional governments’ beliefs that foreign correspondents were also Western spies. He became a character in adventure fiction set in Asia; serving as a model for journalists who were also spies in novels by Ian Fleming and John Le Carre.

The Foreign Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, Louise Williams, claimed that too many of Hughes’ successors persisted in acting as if they too were characters in a colonial adventure novel about the “Orient”. She cited to a male dominated foreign correspondents’ culture, which still revolved around “girlie” bars. Williams contended that the treatment of Asian women as available sexual objects implied a racist world view. She said that she frequently encountered hostility from her predominately male colleagues. As a woman, she felt excluded from a “boys club” where journalistic adventures were planned and executed. As a feminist, Williams found this behaviour offensive and actively sought to team up with women reporters. She claimed male correspondents’ reporting was constrained by their “macho” lifestyles, immersed in sexual fantasies fed by “subordinate” Asians:

If you looked at any expatriate community in Asia, there is still an enormous hangover of colonial dominance. You find that in wives who go out there who have never had a maid in their lives and who in four weeks start complaining about servants. This sort of attitude must be reflected in the way people report on a country. If they think it’s OK to go into a country and handle women in a bar and boss the housekeeper around and have a driver and all the other trappings of colonialism from the era of the safari suit and speaking English very loudly [to the natives], they must have an underlying sense of Western superiority which must reflect in their reporting.

Contemporary Practices

So how do contemporary Australian foreign correspondents report on Asia? As part of my continuing research, I asked them. So far I have conducted more than forty interviews with correspondents, editors and other journalists. I prepared a seven page questionnaire which was completed by most of the Australian correspondents operating in southeast Asia in 1992/93.

The response to the questionnaire showed that most Australian correspondents based in Asia still preferred Western sources of information. They favoured diplomats or second hand news from Western style newspapers, agencies or magazines for the background information which helped frame their reports. Most claimed to speak no Asian languages and relied on interpreters or the English language press. Yet in response of open ended questions, many of the correspondents themselves were critical of Australian reporting of the region, which they often saw as selective and flawed.

To more closely examine their reporting practices, I conducted a case study of Australian reporting of the 1993 UN sponsored elections in Cambodia. I found that Australian foreign correspondents who went to Phnom Penh to report the election, employed predominately non Cambodian sources to articulate those events. Funcinpec, and its leader, Prince Ranarriddh, who won the poll represented only 8.7% of the press sources quoted. The Cambodian peace movement which was seen by Ranariddh as the most significant event in the election and which was led by Buddhist patriarch, Meha Gossananda, was referred to only once in the Australian press reports studied. Coverage of the election process ran a poor second to reporting an expected resumption of war. Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge who provided the central theme of military threat in 56.4% of the press stories in the two weeks before voting, were quoted only 11 times in 146 newspaper reports. They were more often written about than quoted, freeing some journalists to fulfil fiction inspired fantasies about the Khmer Rouge’s presumed menace.
The UN spokesman in Cambodia during the election period, Eric Fait believed that foreign correspondents came to Cambodia with preconceptions fixed firmly in their minds about what stories they would report. Fait said that the news values and priorities which they brought with them stopped them from seeing and reporting on what he saw as the wider story, "positive" news about an election where for the first time the overwhelming majority of Cambodians cast a free vote. Fait dismissed many of the foreign press as adventurers:

They are filming a movie (in their heads). They filming their own movie. They feel they are in The Killing Fields. But they are not. The Killing Fields are (sic) over and with a little more work it won't happen again. It's very surprising and disappointing because it shows in their reporting. 11

When United Nations predictions that the Khmer Rouge posed no serious threat to the voting proved to be correct, press coverage plummeted and many correspondents left town; before vote counting had been completed.

ABC radio reports on the election failed to dominate Australian bulletins which were more concerned with domestic news. Television news reports relied on a repetition of images which presented a vision of military preparedness and implied threat. A commercial television live cross was almost entirely wrong in detail; pursuing the familiar theme of the imagined Khmer Rouge threat. Only SBS Television, who had a Cambodian born soundman, offered a substantial selection of Khmer voices.

Analysis of individual stories revealed flaws in basic reporting practice. Correspondents who lacked Cambodian language skills travelled in packs, using the same sources who produced different direct quotes. Mistakes in reporting the Cambodian Supreme National Council were reprinted across Australia without amendment, correction or apology.

Prince (later King) Sihanouk was negatively stereotyped when he made an offhand comment about consulting an astrologer to determine the date to appoint a new government. The story was picked up by eight of the nine daily newspapers in this study. All of these reports featured the astrology angle in their headlines.

News Outlet Headline

Adelaide Advertiser Stars set Cambodian timetable
Age Time is not right, stars tell Sihanouk
Australian Financial Review Sihanouk's stargazers tell him to delay his next move
Courier Mail Sihanouk waits on stars to form govt
Daily Telegraph Mirror Stars guide Sihanouk
Herald Sun Sihanouk guided by stars
Mercury Sihanouk sees the answer in the heavens
Newcastle Herald Sihanouk guided by stars

While Australian politicians might rely on the divinations of the pollsters to determine election dates and other critical issues, they would never want to be portrayed as being "guided by stars". In this context, the reference to astrology as the key reason for delaying the formation of a government, represented a little more than what might have been the curious behaviour of the Prince. It demonstrated how unstated Western cultural assumptions could affect news values and through them the public view of Asian political leaders.
Conclusion

Australia continues to identify with Western interests even as it attempts to create new links with the economies, political priorities and cultural concerns of its near neighbours. Under those circumstances, it might be too much to demand that Australian foreign correspondents see Asia through other than Western eyes. After all, foreign correspondents are usually appointed to interpret international news in national terms, so that it can be more easily understood by the home audience. Otherwise, we would merely rely on the generic news produced by the international agencies.

But correspondents who are under increasing international scrutiny must consider their audiences if these people are not to be alienated or offended. This should not mean that Australians be asked to abandon their beliefs in freedom of expression; the libertarian concept of a free market of ideas where consumers can make educated choices.

It does mean however that Australian correspondents and editors have to improve their credibility, by seeking more Asian voices, and by widening their news agendas. They should learn from the theories of development journalism and find stories which show the wider picture which includes agriculture, economics and the arts, as well as political conflict. In short, they must exorcise the ghosts of colonialism which continue to haunt much of their reporting.

References

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Footnotes:
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7 Louise Williams, Personal Interview (9.2.94)
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