

International Media Scream 'Yellow Peril'. Race and sensationalism in coverage of Japan's Hawker, Blackman murders

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Days after the broken body of British teacher Lindsay Hawker was discovered in a fourth-floor flat in Ichikawa, Chiba Prefecture, when the media feeding frenzy was at its most intense, a newspaper editor called me from London.

"Are there any new developments in the case?" he asked. "It's simply impossible to overestimate the degree of interest there is in this creature, with his fascination for white women."

Journalists get used to the sometimes cynical demands of editors struggling to keep mass-selling modern newspapers afloat. This story brimmed over with the best front-page ingredients: a violent crime with a hint of salacious color, a beautiful victim and a poisonous, clever villain who got away. It also had one other, more troubling component: race.



Lindsay Hawker

The oddly dehumanizing word "creature" was one warning sign; another was the way suspect Ichihashi Tatsuya came to stand in many stories for the creepy Japanese male, casting sly looks at the unattainable Western fantasy female.

To prove that underneath the stiff salaryman suit of everyman Japan lurks a slaving fantasist, several foreign journalists were dispatched to interview white hostesses in Roppongi, Tokyo's "social hub," as it was described in a British newspaper. After explaining that Hawker had been "repeatedly beaten over several hours" in a flat owned by Ishihashi (sic) Tatsuya, The Daily Mail said that many of the hostesses were also worried about

"weird" Japanese men.

"While some British women described the attitude of the men they encounter here as strange, uncomfortable and unpredictable, others talked of the awe and mystique Western women hold for the Japanese male," the reporter wrote.

The "taller" and "more liberated" British women have to "constantly put up with unwanted male attention — such as the endemic groping on trains."

"They want you to belong to them, but there is a frustration there because they know they can't have you," said one hostess. "The Japanese are so very different to us that I wonder if we will ever really understand them," said another.

Step carefully through the minefield of racial clichés. The devious, inscrutable Japanese man too cowardly to come out and ask for what he really wants: to have sex with an Englishwoman. And ask the obvious questions: Why visit a club district to investigate the life of a language teacher; why should a place designed to exploit and magnify sexual fantasies for money yield honest insights into racial relations; and what did the men think? We don't know because the reporter never bothered to interview a single Japanese person.

In contrast, when local news agency AFP-Jiji interviewed male patrons, their explanations of how they thought cash gave them license to behave badly were illuminating.

"There is no country that has the same high demand for hostess girls as Japan. Even if they are not smart, they can make a lot of money as long as they are a bit cute," said Ota Tomio. "You have to keep in mind, they are from a country where they would get one-tenth of what the yen gets them."

The helpless British woman all alone in a terra incognita of silent, menacing Japanese was the subject of another story in the Mail. Sharon Flaherty described how she was stalked by a man with "cold black eyes" while teaching English in Tottori Prefecture, where the men "ogle all the Western women and wouldn't look away even when they were obviously not enjoying the attention." Again, no Japanese voice is allowed to interrupt the sinister narrative.

In the weeks after Lindsay Hawker's murder, similar sentiments were common. "Japanese oddball Ichihachi (sic) Tatsuya" with his "perversions" in The Sun; being hidden by "a Mafia group, Japanese Triad gang or some other criminal group" in The London Paper, and the widely reported statement that the British teacher planned to leave Tokyo because she was uncomfortable around Japanese men. A group of agitated Japanese bloggers dubbed this "Japan bashing." A less kind description might be racism.

The pop tabloids are easy targets, but "quality" news organizations are not immune from the oddest assumptions when covering Japan. CBS flagship documentary 60 Minutes recently also traveled to Roppongi to investigate the murder of British hostess Lucie Blackman. Among the "millions of Japanese men" looking for "the love of a young Western girl" the CBS reporters chose loony cannibal Sagawa Issei to guide them through a piece dubbed "Predators in Tokyo."



Lucie Blackman

"They're beautiful, especially young white girls," slavered Sagawa as the camera lingered lovingly over the smorgasbord of untouchable white flesh around him. Sagawa famously copped an insanity plea in 1981 for killing and eating a Dutch student. In the background, the reporter solemnly intoned: "The frightening thing is, he's not alone. In Tokyo tonight, the predators will be on the prowl looking for young Australians."

We await insights from Jeffrey Dahmer in future murder cases involving foreigners in the U.S.

Erika Gondo was one viewer who did not buy the producers' argument that they were "only trying to warn" women. "At best this is sensationalism in its lowest form. At worst it's racist fear mongering," she wrote to CBS, which later denied paying Sagawa \$800 for the interview.



Sagawa Issei

For every one woman who comes out of Tokyo hostess work with an understandably jaundiced view of her customers, those intrepid reporters could find 50 to tell them that Japan's urban streets are by some margin safer than most of the cities from where they were dispatched. There are just 1.75 reported rapes per 100,000 people in Japan compared to 16.50 in the U.K. and 31.77 in the U.S. Statistics for gun crimes, murder and serious assault in Japan are well below rates in other industrialized nations. The most shocking crimes here take place not between strangers, but among families.

Another assumption behind so many of these stories — that Japan is addicted to smut — turns out to be more complicated than it seems. The U.S. is far and away the biggest producer of pornographic material and South Korea spends far more per capita on smut than Japan. China produces more revenue from porn than any other country in the world. And the truckloads of Asian-themed porn produced in the West should cure any illusions that only Japanese men fetishize the apparently exotic and unattainable.

Japan's media don't escape charges of racism. When they weren't ignoring the worst of Roppongi's excesses in the '80s and '90s, the Japanese press was colluding with it in magazine articles that were little more than

guides to the best spots. After the horrific story of Blackman finally broke, Social Democratic Party leader Fukushima Mizuho was one of several who pointed out that Asian women had been disappearing for years. "All of a sudden it was news when a white girl disappeared," she told Time.

Kodama Miiko, a professor at Tokyo's Musashi University specializing in the media and women's studies, says Japanese perceptions of race and beauty also play a role in which victims get coverage.

"The average Japanese believes Caucasian (women) are more beautiful," said Kodama. "A person's humanity is the same regardless of nationality. But on TV, image comes first and gets prioritized. Ratings get involved. With magazines, too, if a (white woman's) face appears on the cover or above an article, publishers believe readers will buy copies."

All the same, even Blackman's death might have been a non-issue had her family not waged a relentless campaign to draw attention to the case and pushed the police to arrest Obara Joji. This time around, the local media has been quicker off the mark. Some combed the bars of Ichikawa and nearby Gytoku after Hawker's murder looking for evidence that she and Ichihashi were romantically involved, subsequently publishing titillating stories that angered her friends. One was titled "Ekimae Nampa," as though Ichihashi was a common skirt-chaser instead of a dangerous stalker.



Obara Joji

The magazines are, however, tame compared to the xenophobic ranting of the "blogosphere," where rightwingers discuss how long it will take to reveal that Ichihashi, like Obara, is Korean.

It is of course pointless to hope that race can somehow be made to disappear when a crime this tragic and brutal grabs the public imagination. But perhaps one day when the case is wrapped up and Ichihashi is behind bars or dead, his passport will be irrelevant and we will be able to see him for what he apparently was: a preening, spoiled man with a lethal temper.

And there is no shortage of them, anywhere. Ewe've been had

Heard the one about the great pet-poodle scam? Thousands of gullible Japanese dog-lovers were fleeced of up to 150,000 yen for heavily coiffed sheep disguised as poodles. The scam was rumbled when one owner of a sickly "toy poodle" that refused to bark took it to hospital. There the doctors delivered the bad news: the malingering pooch was in fact a lamb.

The story was taken up by media around the world, including U.S., Australian and New Zealand broadcasters. Britain's Sun said that entire flocks of lambs had been shipped over from Britain and Australia by an Internet firm called Poodles as Pets, based in Hokkaido. A cop was quoted as saying: "Sadly, we think there is more than one company operating in this way."



Japanese fleeced in poodle scam

The Sun alleged that up to 2,000 wealthy women had bought lambs for poodles. "One couple found out the truth only after a dog beautician told them that she could not trim their poodle's claws — because they were hooves," said the story.

It looked like the latest, if improbable, entry in a long line of heartless Internet fraud stories, except that the details were, well, woolly. For a start, lambs don't act or look like poodles, even in tabloid newspapers. The allegation printed in

one story that Japanese people "don't know what lambs look like" might have been convincing anywhere but Hokkaido, heart of Japan's sheep trade.

And why was the Japanese media — which loves novelty stories — so suspiciously silent? Local reporters failed to track down any swindled owners, irate cops or record of a company called Poodles as Pets. But they did find film star Kawakami Maiko. Stuck for a yarn on a TV show she had told a version of the story after overhearing it "from a friend of a customer" in a beauty salon.

"I was amazed to see what I'd heard reported all over the world," she said recently. "I don't even know if it is true."

It clearly wasn't, but the story, complete with fake quotes and alleged "police investigation," has since been discussed on daytime TV here as an example of globalization, falling media standards and even racism. "The foreign media are making fun of the Japanese," said one TV host.

Japan is certainly on the receiving end of its fair share of colorful, often half-true stories: Porn-reading salarymen on commuter trains (now rare); geisha (down to their last few hundred); mass whale-eating (less than one percent of the population); and robot bartenders (nonexistent). All are regularly dragged out of the dusty journalistic closet marked "weird Japan."

Japan can play this game too. Over the years, Japanese TV viewers have been treated to stories on the MI5 murder of Princess Diana, Jack the Ripper and his links to Queen Victoria, and the "faked" 1969 moon landing. And then there was the story of yakuza conspiring with the Russian secret services to alter America's weather. The gangsters apparently launched a weather war against the U.S. after leasing a "weather-control" system from the Russians.



Now that one pulled the wool over everyone's eyes.

Japan Times writer Eric Prideaux contributed to this report.

This is a slightly revised version of an article that appeared in The Japan Times on June 12, 2007. Posted at Japan Focus on July 6, 2007.

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