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*Philippine Studies* vol. 54, no. 1 (2006): 82—110

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

## **The Wakaoji Abduction and the Roppongi Property Sale: Perspectives from the Philippine Press**

Helen Yu-Rivera

*The Wakaoji incident and the aborted sale of the Philippine property in Roppongi, Japan, were two of the most celebrated cases in Philippine media during the Aquino administration. From the point of view of the Philippine press both cases reflected the Aquino administration's ineptness in handling sociopolitical crises. Although unrelated, both incidents reflected irritants in Philippines-Japan relations that affected the social, political, and economic dimensions of this bilateral relationship. The two cases engendered mutual negative images of the Philippines and Japan, which were encouraged by powerful media machineries. Both cases also highlighted the glaring disparity between a powerful Japan and a weak Philippines.*

KEYWORDS: Wakaoji, Roppongi, Aquino, kidnapping, public dominion, Philippine press

Articles written on the relationship between the Philippines and Japan during the Aquino administration (1986–1992) tend to explore macro perspectives of historical, political (e.g., Takahashi 1988; Jose 1998; Villacorta 2001) and economic issues (Tan 2000). They usually deal with policy issues, highlighting the state-to-state relationship. Osteria (1996) and Ballescas (2001) have dealt with the specific topic of Filipino migration to Japan but both have viewed the issue within the context of demographic trends and patterns. As such, rarely have popular views and opinions been solicited. During this period, two cases involving the Philippines and Japan—the Wakaoji kidnap incident and the Roppongi

case—hugged the headlines in the Philippine print media. Surprisingly, however, despite the controversy surrounding these celebrated cases they have rarely been treated in analyses of relations between the Philippines and Japan. Except for Ballesca's (1988) article analyzing the ramifications of the Wakaoji kidnapping, the incident has been cited only briefly in an article by Lim (1988) as an example of political instability in the Philippines that caused severe repercussions on Philippines-Japan relations.

Although it is not within the purview of this study to chart readers' responses to the Wakaoji incident and the Roppongi issue, it works from the assumption that the press both reflects and charts the direction of public discourse. The increasing role of mass media as conduit of public information and their ability to affect international relations cannot be downplayed. While previously diplomacy between nations had been a closed affair, with information hidden from public view, policy making in the information age is no longer the sole domain of politicians, bureaucrats, and diplomats (Okamura 1998, 20). Okamura (*ibid.*) writes:

Public participation, transmitted through the media via print, audio or visual means, has the potential to shape and change the course of international relations. Despite attempts to the contrary, governments are no longer able to suppress all pertinent information and the media has an important role in the transmission of the public's will.

In this connection, this article aims to present issues surrounding the Wakaoji kidnap incident and the Roppongi case as viewed by the Philippine press and how these defined the sociopolitical and economic parameters of the bilateral relationship in question. Through the use of news articles, editorials, and opinion columns in major Philippine periodicals, this article seeks to study Philippines-Japan relations from a popular point of view.

### **Wakaoji's Abduction, 15 November 1986**

After the successful people's revolt centered in EDSA that toppled the Marcos regime in February 1986, Corazon Aquino came to power as the

Philippines' new ruler. The early years of the Aquino administration were racked by a series of attempted political and military coup d'état that threatened to unseat her. The Philippines was also suffering from economic problems that were viewed as vestiges of the former regime's mismanagement and products of the climate of uncertainty and instability projected by a new government. It was during this unstable political and economic climate that President Aquino embarked on a state visit to Japan from 10 to 13 November 1986. Aquino's trip was meant to drum up investments, loans, and aid for the economic recovery of the Philippines.

Two incidents marred Aquino's state visit that would become some of the severest tests of her administration's capability. Two days after her departure for Tokyo, murdered Philippine labor leader Rolando Olalia's corpse and that of his driver were discovered. The Philippine government and the press believed that the murder was part of a plot by a small dissident group to destabilize the administration. Although then Press Secretary Teodoro Benigno did not clarify whether members of the group were part of the government or the military, a Malacañang palace official was quoted to have said that most "cabinet ministers had 'strong suspicion' that a faction in the military associated with a coup plan reported earlier might have been responsible for the Olalia killing" (*MC* 1986, 1). To exacerbate the situation, another tragedy hit the Philippine government that would have severe repercussions on Philippines-Japan relations. On 15 November 1986 Wakaoji Noboyuki, the 53-year-old head of the Philippine operations of Mitsui and Company, was abducted by five men on his way home from the Canlubang Golf and Country Club in Laguna. This incident put a damper on the then concluded agreements with Japan regarding aid and investment that Aquino had negotiated in Tokyo just a few days earlier.

The kidnapping of Wakaoji generated opinions from the Philippine press expressing concern that it would have implications on the attitude of Japanese businessmen toward trade and business in the country. Malacañang and the press also linked the kidnapping of Wakaoji to the murder of Olalia, arguing that these incidents were aimed at destabilizing the administration. More than the expressed link between the two incidents, the Philippine press viewed them as projecting an unstable

government. On 18 November 1986 the *Manila Chronicle* editorialized that, while the Aquino administration promised to do its best to solve the cases, the government was also responsible, to some extent, for the interplay of events that tended to portray it as destabilized (Daroy 1986a). The editorial cited the uneasy relationship between the government, on one hand, and the military and police, on the other. Accordingly, the complaints of peasants concerning human rights violations were said to inhere "from the retention of the vestiges of the deposed dictator's armed apparatus" (ibid.). The editorial blamed Aquino for alternately hardening her rhetoric against the military and, at the same time, trying to accommodate the demands of factions in the Armed Forces rather than compelling them to recognize discipline. The result was that the military and police discovered a new political role and appeared "to be more engrossed with choosing loyalties or playing mysterious about loyalties rather than actively helping solve police problems" (ibid.). The editorial asserted (ibid.):

The failure of the Cory Government to do so has come to define a gaping variance between her rhetoric and the social environment in which such rhetoric is expressed. In the ambiguity which the President's vacillations create, criminal groups could take a ride on the confusion which the strategies of her political enemies would create.

Another editorial in the *Manila Chronicle* opined that the underlying issue posed by incidents like the Olalia murder and the Wakaoji kidnap case was "whether a democratic government in the Third World can govern effectively" (Daroy 1986b).

Two and a half months after his abduction, the Japanese government expressed concern over the continued detention of Wakaoji by his captors. At the end of January 1987 Deputy Foreign Minister Yanai Shinichi gave Aquino a letter from Prime Minister Nakasone but did not disclose its contents to the press, saying that it might jeopardize Wakaoji's life (PDI 1987a, 1). However, he informed the press that he expressed to the president that the Japanese were grateful that her administration was trying to free Wakaoji while at the same time being careful not to endanger his life. He also expressed concern over the fact

that the case had not been solved and that Wakaoji had become very weak psychologically and physically. It was also reported that Japan's most powerful political party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), was planning to send three members of parliament to the Philippines with a second note from Nakasone. A meeting of the three members with Aquino and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Fidel V. Ramos was also planned. Philippine media speculated that the note verbale from the Japanese government was pressuring the Philippines to solve the case immediately.

In January 1987, the Manila office of the Kyodo news agency received a letter allegedly written by Wakaoji's abductors, threatening to kill Wakaoji if their ransom demands were not met. The letter also warned of more kidnappings of Japanese businessmen. Enclosed with the letter was a handprint supposedly of Wakaoji and a cassette tape in which a man sounding like Wakaoji pleaded, "Please help me urgently" (*ibid.*, 10). Aside from the Philippine and Japanese governments, the Mitsui Company also urged the abductors to release Wakaoji unharmed and in the soonest time possible. In an open letter, Mitsui President Eijiri Koichiri told Wakaoji that the company was doing its utmost to secure his release and that Wakaoji's wife, Masako, and daughter were fine and anxiously waiting for his return.

The Philippine and Japanese media gave prominent play to this incident by featuring news reports almost everyday as well as opinion columns and editorials on the subject matter. Well-known Japanese women rushed to the aid of the sorrowing wife and daughter of Wakaoji by placing one-page advertisements in Manila papers pleading to the kidnapers to release Wakaoji and send him back to his family. The signatories included, among many other famous Japanese women, Sato Hiroko, wife of former Japanese Prime Minister Sato, and Mori Hanae, world-renowned designer (*MB* 1987b, 11). The incident also sent hordes of Japanese media people swarming to Manila.

During Wakaoji's captivity, the Japanese media reportedly capitalized on charges of incompetence, ineffectiveness, and corruption among Philippine lawmakers and law enforcers in handling the Wakaoji case (Ballescas 1988, 94). Political instability and weakness were said to have been hurled against the Aquino administration. The backlash was the

continued slump of the Philippine economy as investors stayed away from the country. The Japanese media reported that Wakaoji's kidnapers had warned that more Japanese citizens would be abducted unless a ransom of US\$5 million was paid.

According to an opinion columnist of the *Manila Times* on 5 April 1987, the Philippines was the target of a bitter hate campaign in Japan during Wakaoji's captivity (Bocobo 1987). He stated that this smear campaign by Japanese media had been sanctioned by the Japanese government as reflected by the latter's official moves that prevented Japanese tourists from visiting the Philippines. The journalist added that, aside from the deterioration of Philippines-Japan relations, the case had reopened the wounds of war and caused many Filipinos to reminisce the "bestiality and barbarism of the Japanese military during its occupation of the Philippine for over three years" (ibid.). In his view, the barrage of negative comments on the Philippines had incited some Filipinos to remind the Japanese of their rape and pillage of the country during the Second World War and of the exploitation of Filipino workers by the Yakuza. The author (ibid.) stated that suddenly Filipinos began talking about

a sister raped by the Japanese marines, a brother's eye gouged out in Fort Santiago, a pregnant aunt's genitalia stuffed with rocks by a sadistic *kempeitai*, a baby thrown in the air and impaled by a bayonet with bucktoothed, horn-rimmed troopers of Tojo gleefully looking for other babies, decapitated heads being thrown into the Pasig River at interrogation sessions of suspected guerillas and homes being put to the torch to flush out the underground.

The Wakaoji incident also caused the Japanese government to reform policies and issue sanctions on the Philippines. Nakasone asked an advisory board to devise measures to protect Japanese living overseas from kidnapping and civil wars (*MT* 1987, 1). Japan also imposed a ban on organized Japanese travel to the Philippines, which dealt a direct blow on Philippine tourism. Philippine officials formally protested this advisory, calling the fall in tourism alarming (ibid., 6). According to official figures, 134,261 Japanese tourists visited the Philippines in 1986, a number that was 20,000 less than the previous year (ibid.). Based on

a government directive, the Japan Association of Travel Agents urged its 1,448 member agents and subagents to suspend package tours to the Philippines, including sex tours by male groups (*ibid.*). Nishiyama Reiko, a travel agent in Tokyo, stated that Japanese tourists were absolutely not going to the Philippines, citing the decline in the influx of Japanese students to the country. She stated that Japanese agriculture students who used to go to the Philippine countryside during the spring vacation were booking flights to Indonesia instead. Tokyo also dragged its feet on the ¥60 billion loan it promised to review in response to Aquino's request for a ¥120 billion loan from the Overseas Development Aid Fund during her visit in November 1986. Plans by Japanese firms to invest US\$150 million in Philippine industries were also suspended in the wake of Wakaoji's abduction. An official of the Japan External Trade Organization stated that, although it was not certain whether Japanese companies would actually freeze investments in the Philippines, many Japanese were scared and large companies were thinking of pulling out. He further stated that "people are shocked, so scared. While people in the Philippines or other countries regard this as only one case, we take it very seriously" (*ibid.*).

A critique by Roberto Tiglao in the *Manila Chronicle* expressed dismay over diplomatic maneuvers by Japan to pressure the Philippines into solving the Wakaoji case in the soonest time possible. Tiglao (1987) cited several instances when Japan applied sledgehammer diplomacy after the abduction of Wakaoji. One was Japan's involvement in the delay in the Paris Club agreements concerning the rescheduling of the Philippines' official loans from foreign countries, which it desperately needed as a requirement for the release of IMF credit tranches. The Japanese insisted on certain concessions that one Finance Department official said were highly irregular, such as one involving a US\$25 million rice loan the Marcos regime had gotten from Japan in the 1970s. This rice loan was considered an official loan covered by the Paris Club agreement, but Japan had refused to consider it as such and to reschedule the payment. To make matters worse, Japan had imposed a penalty rate on the loan at 9 percent per annum over the original interest of only 3 percent and a maturity of thirty years. Japan also insisted in the Paris Club agreement that their thirty-year Overseas Economic Cooperation



Fund (OECD) loans (yen package) be transformed into loans with a maturity of only eighteen months. The Japanese also reportedly refused the request to reschedule an official loan extended to the Philippines by the Japan Export Import Bank through Japanese private firms. When Aquino visited Japan in November 1986, Japan was reported to have told her to expect only ¥80 billion and not the requested ¥130 billion loan. According to Tiglao (*ibid.*), Japan had further reduced the amount to only ¥55 billion.

### **Wakaoji's Release, 31 May 1987**

After four months in captivity, Wakaoji was released unharmed in the evening of 31 May 1987 near the Santo Domingo Church in Quezon City (*MB* 1987c, 1). The business executive narrated his ordeal in a meeting with President Aquino in Malacañang on 1 April (*PDI* 1987c, 6). He was reportedly forced to inhale ether and was hit in the stomach when abducted on 15 November 1986. He was chained and handcuffed for 137 days without seeing sunlight. He said three people guarded him in captivity while another negotiated for his release. He was fed bread in the morning, rice for lunch, and fish, vegetables, and sometimes pork for dinner. Wakaoji also stated upon his release that he could not identify his captors as he was kept in a dark corner of a warehouse of a farmer's house in a mountain location. He mentioned that he could hear dogs barking and cassette music being played all the time. According to Wakaoji, on the night he was released, he was instructed by his abductors to wait for a car to pick him up near a church in Quezon City. Given new clothes and ordered to wear dark glasses, he was also given P200 by the abductors. Wakaoji related that the moment he was left alone he rode a jeepney all the way to the Manila Garden Hotel in Makati, where he got in touch with the hotel's Japanese manager, after which he called up his Mitsui associates.

Wakaoji's release came after extensive and protracted negotiations involving the government, Japanese women's groups, and the Catholic Church. Mitsui, the Japanese government, and the Church in the Philippines claimed victory over the successful solution of the case. Two days after Wakaoji's release, Philippine Constabulary spokesman

Cresencio L. Maralit said that some of the suspects had been identified, although he declined to say how many suspects there were. Philippine Foreign Affairs undersecretary Manuel Yan also stated that they would investigate the possible involvement of the Yakuza in the abduction (ibid.). In seeming contradiction to what Wakaoji earlier alleged that he could not identify his captors, given the circumstances under which he was kept, a news report in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* dated 8 April 1987 stated that Wakaoji had identified one of his abductors hours before he was flown to Japan (*PDI* 1987f, 1).

A military report submitted to then Philippine Constabulary chief Maj. Gen. Renato de Villa said that Wakaoji positively identified the photos of Ireneo Fajardo, who had been arrested and detained by the Criminal Investigation Service (CIS) since the previous December on charges of illegal possession of firearms. Fajardo, however, denied the charges and said he was in a shooting competition on the day of the abduction. On the day of his arraignment in Laguna, he pleaded innocent of the charge of kidnapping, although Laguna regional trial court assistant fiscal Modesto Nieva said there was a very strong case against Fajardo, who was positively identified by Romeo Doria, Wakaoji's driver, as one of the kidnappers (*PDI* 1987h, 1).<sup>1</sup> On 15 April 1987 news reports stated that a suspect, identified as Simplicio Atienza, confessed his part in the kidnapping, saying that two weeks before the event he was hired by Fajardo's group as the lookout. Atienza allegedly also named six other suspects involved in the crime. His lawyer insisted, however, that the statement his client gave could not be used in court as it was obtained by the military in the absence of a lawyer, thereby violating Atienza's civil rights (*MC* 1987a, 1).

On the part of the Philippine and Japanese governments, the release of Wakaoji signaled the resumption of friendly relations. Reading from a joint Philippines-Japan statement, Press Secretary Benigno said Tokyo expected the closure of the case to lead to the further promotion of friendly and cordial relations between the two countries (*PDI* 1987c, 6). Japanese Foreign Minister Kunari Tadashi informed Philippine ambassador to Japan Ramon del Rosario that the travel ban to the Philippines would be lifted in light of Wakaoji's safe release (*PDI* 1987d).

However, just as Japan celebrated the resolution of the case, the Philippine press viewed the whole incident with suspicion, with the perception of a mystery surrounding Wakaoji's abduction and release. Mitsui admitted that the company conducted its own investigation of the case in tight secrecy with British, Japanese, and Filipino consultants (*PDI* 1987f, 8). Mitsui also mentioned that it withheld certain information for fear of endangering Wakaoji's life. The company also believed that the kidnappers were part of a large syndicate, possibly international in nature.<sup>2</sup> Although Wakaoji stated that he did not note any Japanese national among his abductors, some Japanese newspapers speculated that members of the Yamaguchi-gumi, one of the most powerful groups within the Yakuza, could have been involved (*ibid.*).

When Wakaoji was released, he was quickly taken to a hospital in Clark Air Base, away from media attention; it was said that foreign and local journalists failed to locate him after scouring the hospitals in Metro Manila (*MB* 1987c, 14). Wakaoji was also whisked to and from Malacañang, arriving and departing in a helicopter.

Speculations abounded that money traded hands between Mitsui and the abductors. Initial news reports pegged the ransom paid by Mitsui at US\$8 million, but later news reports cited US\$3 million. However, the Japanese trading firm neither confirmed nor denied the allegation, choosing instead to remain silent on the issue even as it was hounded by Japanese newsmen for more information (*PDI* 1987e, 6). Mitsui also declined to comment on the identities of the suspects, saying that the Philippine government was still investigating the case (*ibid.*, 1, 6).

Aside from the involvement of the Japanese firm and the Philippine government, the Catholic Church stepped into the picture, claiming responsibility for the safe return of Wakaoji. Manila archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin mentioned that four priests were assigned to contact the kidnappers and that one of them succeeded in the negotiations, although he would not disclose the name. Sin stated that Wakaoji was released to the custody of the priests, but he also declined to mention the name of the church. Sin initially denied knowledge of the identities of the kidnappers but, when pressed by newsmen, said that he knew but could not reveal the names. Sin also denied that ransom was paid for Wakaoji's

release, but admitted a contribution was paid to cover food expenses (*PDI* 1987g, 1).

An editorial in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* issue of 2 April 1987 emphasized the surreptitiousness with which the Philippine government and the Mitsui Company handled the negotiations for Wakaoji's release. The editorial stated that, although the Philippine constabulary had identified the culprits, the suspects were still at large. The editorial also alluded to reports that there were two sets of kidnappers (*PDI* 1987b). The original abductors had supposedly agreed to release Wakaoji in December or January but the intermediaries, who saw how quickly Mitsui was willing to shell out the ransom amount, decided to make a financial killing of its own. The editorial thought this was possibly the reason why lawmen already had some of the suspects in their custody as early as December. It urged the Philippine government to establish the identities of the abductors in order to quell speculations regarding the persons behind the crime, particularly as it was earlier believed that the abduction was the work of destabilizing groups, possibly from the military. The evasiveness of the authorities regarding the issue, according to the editorial, only served to reinforce the theory that more than money was involved in the case. The editorial lamented the fact that mystery surrounded the case since day one and had continued to be so even after Wakaoji's release. It then criticized the handling of the case by Philippine lawmen, as there were indications that two units assigned to the case were involved in a headlock over "incentives" supplied by Mitsui.<sup>3</sup> The editorial lamented the lack of expertise and competence among Philippine law enforcers. That the victim was supposedly freed after the intervention of the Catholic Church only served to prove the lawmen's incompetence.

In the wake of negative press publicity in Japan regarding the Philippine military's handling of the Wakaoji case, the military issued a statement on 21 April 1987 that they had established a link between the Yakuza and the kidnapping of Wakaoji (*MC* 1987b, 1).<sup>4</sup> It claimed it was silent about the matter because of an earlier agreement with the Japanese government on the case. According to Brig. Gen. Romeo Zulueta, the involvement of the Japanese syndicate was established because a Japanese

was reported to have flown to Hong Kong from Manila to deliver to newsmen in Japan the tape recorded voice of Wakaoji, a photograph purportedly showing the severed middle finger of Wakaoji, and a ransom demand for US\$5 million. He stated that Fajardo's group was hired by another more powerful group to kidnap Wakaoji and that Wakaoji was later turned over by Fajardo's group to members of this international syndicate (MC 1987c). Zulueta also revealed that Bureau of Prisons chaplain Ernesto Espiridion contacted Wakaoji's kidnappers with the help of two Yakuza members who were then in detention at the Muntinlupa National Penitentiary (MC 1987b, 3). Although Cardinal Sin had earlier admitted that Espiridion had been instrumental in negotiating Wakaoji's release, he had also commented on the lukewarm nature of the military investigation. Benigno and de Villa also assailed the Japanese government and Mitsui for not cooperating during the investigation (ibid.). Benigno also criticized Tokyo for breaking diplomatic protocol by directly requesting the U.S. embassy that Wakaoji be brought to Clark Air Base hospital after his release (ibid.).

On allegations that the Japanese were critical about the Philippine government's response to the case, the Japanese embassy denied these by saying that they appreciated the efforts of the Aquino government who assured Wakaoji's safe release.

### **Bidding Out the Roppongi Property, 1989**

On 30 March 1989 the Philippine government put up for bidding a 3,179-square-meter prime lot in the high end district of Roppongi in Tokyo. The lot was the site of the old chancery and used to belong to Baron Mitsui of the prewar Mitsui zaibatsu. The Philippines acquired this property from the Japanese government as part of the war reparations payment in 1958. The property had been idle since 1975 when the Philippine ambassador transferred residence to Kudan and the Philippine chancery to Nampedai, both in Tokyo. Of the five pieces of property given to the Philippines as part of the reparations package, only one—in Fujimi, Tokyo, where the Philippine ambassador resided—was not considered for sale (Kiunisala 1990b, 16). The Philippine government

decided to put up the Roppongi property for bidding in an effort to generate added revenue, the proceeds of which were supposed to benefit the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). In 1990 the value of the lot was estimated at US\$600 million (MC 1990, 1). The Philippine government decided to put it up for sale after Tokyo announced a ceiling on land prices in 1989.

The property was offered to bidders in Tokyo in March 1989 for a base price of US\$220 million (Macatuno 1989, 10). The March 1989 bidding surprisingly attracted only two bidders, despite the interest shown by Japanese buyers who bought copies of the bidding rules and procedures priced at US\$2,000 per copy (ibid.). One was Tohensha Ltd. and the other Tonan Josho (Kiunisala 1990a, 15). Of the two bidders, one failed to qualify when it did not post the required deposit of 15 percent of the floor price. With only one bidder left, a failure of bidding was declared. Speculations abounded as news circulated that the Japanese companies had conspired to bring about this failure in order to compel the Philippine government to enter a negotiated sale (Macatuno 1989, 10). There was also talk that Japanese buyers avoided the sale because it was hounded by controversy long before the bidding started. In January 1989 charges of corruption had floated around, pointing to the fact that some Philippine government officials had taken bribes from interested buyers.<sup>5</sup>

The bidding committee reportedly blamed the Philippine press for bad publicity, making an issue of the sale and frightening Japanese buyers (Kiunisala 1990a, 15). According to the Philippine press, however, many buyers had been turned off because of the nature of the rushed bidding, which made them suspicious why the government was eager to sell the property at such a low price. Articles came out in both local and foreign press regarding the estimated value of the property. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) published a table showing the exact value of diplomatic properties in Tokyo, on the basis of which the Philippines could have gotten US\$650 million for the Roppongi property (cited in Macatuno 1989, 10).<sup>6</sup> It was reported that Ambassador del Rosario blamed the Tokyo City government for mandating low floor prices, but the FEER reportedly checked with the Tokyo City government and learned that the latter had not known of the bidding until they read

about it in the newspapers. The Philippine press derided the government for rushing the sale at such a low price and reminded the public that in 1986 the Philippine government sold a property in Stockton, California, at a price lower than what another group of bidders had proposed to pay.<sup>7</sup>

A second bidding for the Roponggi property was scheduled in July 1989 but was halted by public protest. The Philippine Congress questioned the legality of the sale and passed Resolution No. 55, which urged Malacañang to stop the sale. On 15 February 1990 the government announced that a public rebidding of the Roponggi property was to take place on 21 February 1990 at 2 PM (Almario 1990, 4). According to government sources, part of the proceeds of the sale was being eyed for the new scheme being implemented to reduce the country's foreign debt (*PS* 1990a). Budget Undersecretary Benjamin Diokno raised opposition to the proposed use of the proceeds, arguing that such revenue could not be utilized for the debt-buy-back scheme because the agrarian reform law required that proceeds from the Asset Privatization Trust (APT) should be utilized to fund the CARP (*ibid.*, 10). The APT chair Ramon Garcia countered by saying that the foreign component of the sale could be used for the debt-buy-back scheme, while the local component could go to the CARP. Amid this effort to reschedule the bid, questions regarding bribery resurfaced, but Ambassador del Rosario and Garcia denied charges that embassy officials in Japan had received money from prospective buyers. Garcia was quoted to have said, "I am putting at stake my reputation as far as this bidding is concerned," reiterating that he had refused to see any representatives of the bidders (*ibid.*). As of mid-February 1990, twenty Japanese companies had reportedly applied to participate in the bidding. Each company was required to deposit US\$20 million with the Sumitomo Bank.

### **Halting the Rebidding of Roponggi, 1990**

On 16 February 1990 Vice President Salvador Laurel asked the Supreme Court to prohibit the Aquino administration from selling the Roponggi property without the consent of Congress (*PS* 1990b, 1). In a twelve-page petition filed by Laurel before the court,

Executive Secretary Catalino Macaraig Jr., Foreign Affairs Secretary Raul Manglapus, and Garcia were named as respondents. Laurel argued that under the Reparations Law (RA 1879), properties acquired as part of war reparations could only be sold to Filipinos or firms that were at least 60 percent Filipino-owned (*ibid.*, 10). He argued that this law was repealed by the Aquino administration two days before Congress convened on 25 July 1987, thereby allowing anybody to buy the property. He also stated that the Roppongi property was acquired for diplomatic or consular use, which classified it as "public dominion" as provided for by Article 420 of the Civil Code. ("Public dominion" refers to properties intended for public use, such as roads, canals, and bridges, which belong to the state but are intended for public service or development for national wealth.) Laurel also argued that government stood to lose from 50 percent to 70 percent of the proposed US\$225 million sale in taxes. He urged government to look for other means to generate much needed revenues or to lease the land to a Japanese firm and still keep the lot. A petition of the same nature seeking to stop the sale of the Roppongi property had been filed in August 1989 by Representative Dionisio Ojeda on behalf of Filipino war veterans, but the Supreme Court had it dismissed.

Laurel argued that the Roppongi property was part of the national heritage and served as a strong reminder of the Filipinos who had died during the Second World War under the hands of the Japanese. He stated

Filipino honor and national dignity dictate that we keep our properties in Japan as memorial to the countless Filipinos who died and suffered. Even if we should become paupers, we should not think of selling them. For it would be as if we sold our lives and blood and tears of our countrymen. (Almario 1990, 6)

A day before the scheduled rebidding of the Roppongi property, the Philippine Senate had not reached a decision as to their stand on the proposed resolution dropping the sale. After four hours of deliberations the session was suspended. Senators Agapito (Butz) Aquino and Rene Saguisag insisted that questions regarding legality had already been



resolved when the Supreme Court dismissed the petition filed by Ojeda (*Malaya* 1990). Both senators "also chided their colleagues for not acting on the issue during the past six months when Malacañang suspended the bidding upon the request of the Senate" (*ibid.*). Even as no stand was made by the senators, Senator Sotero Laurel, brother of the vice president and one of the principal authors of the resolution, maintained that the Senate should express its sentiments so that when the Supreme Court declared the sale illegal it could be shown that the Senate was not remiss in its duties (*ibid.*). Determined to stop the government sale, Sotero Laurel and Salvador Laurel also threatened to make an exposé that Nacionalista Party members claimed involved attempts by influential people to cash in on the sale.

The Supreme Court acceded to Laurel's petition and temporarily halted the sale of the Roppongi property. Malacañang countered that the filing of the Laurel petition violated the sub judice principle and the bar against raising "innuendoes and distortions" (*PS* 1990c, 5). Presidential spokesperson Adolfo Azcuna stressed the transparency of the bidding process and the adverse impact of the cancellation of the bidding (*ibid.*).

Senator Juan Ponce Enrile also alleged that Presidential daughter Ballsy Cruz received a letter from a Japanese businessman interested in the sale. Azcuna replied that there was nothing anomalous about the process and that receiving the letter did not mean that any bribe or wrongdoing had taken place (*ibid.*). Enrile also stated that some Japanese businessmen had donated a statue of Benigno Aquino Jr. in Paniqui, Tarlac, insinuating that this was done to gain favorable ground in the bidding process (*ibid.*).

In the heat of the controversy, President Aquino ordered Solicitor General Francisco Chavez to defend the position of the executive department in answer to the Laurel petition (*PS* 1990c, 1). Chavez countered the arguments presented in the petition by saying that the sale of the Roppongi property was authorized under Executive Order 296 issued by President Aquino early in her term in 1986 when she still had legislative powers (*PFP* 1990a, 10). He also argued that the property was covered by Japanese laws even if it was deemed a Philippine property, and that it could not be considered public dominion because it had been idle for thirteen years, giving the impression that it was no longer

intended for public use. He also said no capital gains tax would be imposed on the sale since the sale of any foreign property in Japan was not taxable. He also argued that, since the sale of any foreign property in the Philippines would not be taxed, the Bureau of Internal Revenue had stated that Japan would be expected to reciprocate in the same manner.

In the wake of the temporary suspension of the sale of the Roppongi property, a news commentary in the *Manila Chronicle* held the view that something was fishy with the Supreme Court resolution, given that it had dismissed the earlier petition filed by Ojeda (Yuson 1990, 4). It speculated that the court ruled in favor of Laurel's resolution because Chief Justice Marcelo Fernan was Laurel's classmate in the University of the Philippines. While stating this in jest, the commentator drove home the point that the high court itself, just like the Filipino nation, always vacillated on major decisions. The author lamented that the tribunal had contributed to national embarrassment by aborting the bidding at the last minute.

The sale had been tagged as "shady," "smelly," at times a "scam," "scum," or "scheme." Kiunisala (1990b, 16) of the *Philippines Free Press* even likened the "hush-hush" nature of the deal to a rape in progress. *Philippine Star's* Max Soliven (1990, 8) wrote that Malacañang's reaction over the fact that bidders might withdraw if the sale was delayed had reduced the nation to penury. He observed that Filipinos were taking the "Divisoria" approach or the "cash and carry syndrome" in the implementation of foreign policy (ibid.). Soliven reminded the reading public that Filipinos had scorned deposed President Marcos for sending emissaries all over the world with "begging bowls" for foreign loans and aid, and lamented that the Aquino administration had not changed anything, citing the Roppongi sale as an embarrassing example of this practice. He also criticized the government for making the Philippines a laughing stock in Japan. For Soliven the tragedy of this sale was that it would not benefit the poor, and it would be more beneficial if the property was used to generate rent.

In another column, Soliven (1989, 5) stated that the Roppongi deal had resulted in tainting the Filipino image in Japan. He narrated that the bidding's failure was reported over Japan's largest broadcasting network,

the Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK), on 4 April 1989 and Japanese newspapers, such as the *Asahi Shinbun*, the *Japan Times*, and the *Mainichi*, had analyzed the failure of the bidding. Soliven also linked Roppongi to the memories of Filipinos who died in Bataan during the Second World War, whose anniversary fell on the date this piece was published. Its title, "The ghosts of our Bataan dead haunt Roppongi," succinctly alluded to this symbolic connection.

The Philippine press viewed the Supreme Court decision to suspend the sale of the Roppongi property as another dent on the Aquino administration. An editorial of the *Philippines Free Press* in June 1990 described the Roppongi deal as human waste that was being splattered repeatedly on the face of Filipinos (PFP 1990b). The editorial ranked the Roppongi deal along with major cases of corruption and dirty deals associated with the Aquino administration that the Philippine press had exposed. In July an editorial in *Malaya* (1990) considered the Supreme Court decision stopping the sale of the Roppongi property as a thorn added to the series of disasters that faced the Aquino administration, namely, rebellions, the acquittal of Imelda Marcos on charges of corruption, the government's feeble response to the earthquake that hit Luzon on 16 July 1990, and the daily floods in Manila. As in the *Philippines Free Press* editorial, *Malaya* lamented that Aquino was unable to deal with the numerous problems that confronted her administration.

It was also reported that Filipino scholars in Japan considered the Roppongi property a symbol of war reparations talks that some believed left the Philippines shortchanged (Protacio 1990). A Tokyo group of Filipinos called Crusade for the Protection of Filipino Interests did not want the Roppongi property sold and suggested that it be converted into a Philippines-Japan Friendship Center to showcase Philippine culture and products as a step in improving the negative image of Filipinos in Japan (ibid.). Their suggestion that the lot could also be used to build a center for Filipino contract workers in Japan was also reported.

An editorial in the *Manila Times* in March 1990 expressed concern over the possibility of resurrecting the Roppongi sale, stating that the Aquino administration, despite the Supreme Court's temporary restraining

order, was preparing to sell another Philippine property in Japan, this time the Fujimi lot where the Philippine ambassador's official residence was located. It reported that Executive Secretary Macaraig had inquired from the Justice Department if there were any legal obstacles to the sale of the Fujimi property and had been assured that there was none. The editorial also stated that a base price for the Fujimi property had been agreed upon already, amounting to US\$380 million. The editorial cautioned the Philippine government to allow the uproar over the sale of Philippine properties to die down before embarking on another controversial sale, lest it lose the peoples' confidence as a government that did not heed public opinion.

On 25 July 1990, the Supreme Court made permanent the restraining order as it issued a writ of prohibition stopping the sale of the Roppongi property (Kiunisala 1990b, 18). Manuel Almario (1990, 5) of the *Graphic* explained the ruling by citing passages from the majority decision penned by Associate Justice Hugo E. Gutierrez. Accordingly, both petitioners and respondents agreed that the Roppongi property and three other sites were acquired through reparations agreements, that these were assigned to the government sector, and that the Roppongi property was specially designated under the reparations agreement to house the Philippine embassy. The court reiterated that the Roppongi property was of public dominion, and that its patrimonial status had not been proven convincingly. On the question of whether the president had authority to sell the property, the court ruled that Executive Order 106, which was used as basis for the bidding offer, merely eliminated the restriction under Republic Act 1789 that reparations goods might only be sold to Filipinos. The executive order, therefore, merely authorized the sale to non-Filipinos. Almario noted that the order was made to circumvent Congress since it was issued two days before the legislature convened and sought to alienate portions of public domain to foreigners. He asked, "Did those who inveigled the President to sign the executive order already, at that time, discern an evil opportunity to make a lot of money at the expense of the national interest?" (ibid.).

The Supreme Court also stressed that, in the sale of Philippine properties, Philippine law and not Japanese law should be followed, as Solicitor General Chavez had claimed. In response to Chavez's claim that the

Roppongi property had become patrimonial as it had been left idle for thirteen years, the tribunal stated:

The fact that the Roppongi site has not been used for a long time for actual embassy service does not automatically convert it to patrimonial property. Any such conversion happens only if the property is withdrawn from public use. A property continues to be part of the public domain, not available for private appropriation or ownership until there is formal declaration on the part of the government to withdraw it from being such. (Kiunisala 1990b, 18, 38)

Even if the Roppongi property were no longer of public dominion, the tribunal pointed out that it could still not be disposed of because no law existed authorizing its conveyance. Since it involved a policy decision, only Congress could decide such conveyance. Edward Kiunisala of the *Philippines Free Press* noted that Aquino circumvented the law and indulged in legal shortcuts in her decision to sell the Roppongi lot (*ibid.*, 38).

Executive Secretary Macaraig expressed disappointment over the Supreme Court decision by stating that "substantial opportunities had been lost due to the indecisiveness and divisiveness of some on this matter" (Almario 1990, 6). In his column "The Lawful Truth," Rene Saguisag (1990) wrote in defense of the administration, saying that the sale of the property would have generated funds for war veterans, for their personal benefit or through the Philippine Veterans Bank, or to retire Philippine debt service burdens. He chided the high court for ruling against the government when it had ruled a year earlier in 1989 that the decision of the executive to dispose of the Roppongi property could not be questioned. He delivered a stinging remark when he said that what the court said in response to Laurel's petition it could also have said in responding to Ojeda, when it did not stop the sale: "We certainly hope that the reason why the 1989 case failed to stop the projected sale was not because an obscure sectoral representative was the 1989 suitor and not a well-known figure from a powerful, prominent clan" (*ibid.*). He also stated his dissent against arguments calling the Roppongi property a national patrimony. He stated that Roppongi was in the entertainment district and it was not a place where "our heroes made some valiant

stand or attended something historic. It is no Mactan, Tirad Pass, Balangiga, Pugad Lawin, Bataan, Mendiola or EDSA. It stirs no poignant memories of struggle, sacrifice or achievement" (ibid.). He also stated that a country seeking debt relief would not be credible were it to be pointed out that it had idle assets worth billions. He urged the people to reconsider the sale, saying that "our self esteem as a people demands certain imperatives before we beg or borrow" (ibid.).

### **Analysis**

The Wakaoji kidnap incident and the Roppongi case put to test the ability of the Aquino administration to solve national crises effectively. The Wakaoji incident incited the Philippine press to severely criticize the Philippine government for (1) projecting an image of political instability, (2) giving in or acceding to pressures from Japan, and (3) shrouding the case in mystery.

For the Philippine press, the Wakaoji incident reflected the Aquino administration's inability to control the rising crime rate in the country and specifically to provide security for its own people as well as foreign visitors. Moreover, because the case was linked to a supposed plot to destabilize the government, it projected a very unstable political climate at that time. The duration of Wakaoji's captivity, the failure of the Philippine government to find an immediate resolution of the case, and the involvement of too many agencies exacerbated the images of a feeble government. In the course of the investigation, the divisiveness in Philippine society became apparent as the different agencies involved in the case proposed various solutions that were all unsuccessful in resolving it. Most apparent was the divisiveness between the Philippine government and the military, with the latter complaining that they were not given a vital role to play in the case and that they were not informed of Wakaoji's eventual release.

The Philippine press also criticized the Aquino administration for succumbing to diplomatic pressures from Japan, which tied the Philippine government's hands because the highly coveted yen loan package was pegged to the immediate solution of the case. While the Philippine press was highly critical of this diplomatic blackmail from Japan, it also

criticized the Philippine government for keeping silent on the issue and for allowing the Japanese government and Mitsui to take the helm in controlling the investigations.

The Roppongi case did not directly involve a Japanese national, but it involved a Philippine property in Japan given to the Philippines as part of war reparations. As in the case of Wakaoji the Aquino administration received severe criticisms, this time for its decision to sell the property without proper consultation with the people. The Philippine press called the case a scam, pointing to how Aquino circumvented the law to create an executive order to dispose of the property. It also argued against the sale on the grounds that Roppongi was of public dominion and, therefore, could not be disposed of by the Philippine government. Moreover, like Laurel and Ojeda, the press fought for the retention of this property based on the fact that it symbolized the valiant sacrifices of Filipinos who had died during the Second World War. Again, the Philippine press viewed this case as a reflection of the Philippine government's divisiveness as different internal factions fought over the legality of the sale.

Both the Wakaoji and Roppongi incidents reflected the powerful role of media in affecting and effecting responses from the government and the public. Both incidents became highly celebrated because of media mileage. In Wakaoji's case the Philippine and Japanese presses became venues for civic groups to appeal for his immediate release. Roppongi would not have been so controversial were it not for the numerous negative publicity it garnered from the Philippine press. Many periodicals, especially the *Philippines Free Press*, printed several lengthy articles on the legal battles between the Philippine government and the opposing party headed by Vice President Laurel. Japanese mass media were also said to have commented on the divisiveness of Filipino legislators over the sale of the property.

Both the Wakaoji and Roppongi incidents engendered mutual negative images of the Philippines and Japan. These negative images found a most effective venue in the press that did not only mirror the issues and opinions surrounding both cases but also affected public discourses on those issues. Interestingly, however, although the Philippine press was severely critical of its own government it was also fiercely protective of

its government and nationals, defending them against foreign criticisms. The unfair and biased portrayal of the Filipinos in Japanese media spun reactions from the Philippine press, which were sometimes punctuated with a racist edge, such as the description of the Japanese as “buck-toothed, horn-rimmed troopers of Tojo” (Bocobo 1987). As Ballescas (1988, 94) observed, the negative Japanese media barrage had prevented investors and tourists from coming to the Philippines and “left the Philippines unstable, divided and variedly humiliated, apologetic and angry.”

Wakaoji's abduction led the Japanese government to reformulate policies and issue sanctions against the Philippines, such as a travel ban. The repercussion was a severe slump in tourism and foreign investments in the Philippines. Japan was also said to have withheld the fourteenth yen loan package pending the resolution of the case. These moves by the Japanese government were criticized by the Philippine media as part of a wholesale diplomatic blackmail of the Philippines. Allegations of bribery of Philippine officials by Japanese businesses interested in acquiring the Roppongi lot also came to the fore, resulting in negative images of both Filipino government officials and Japanese businesses.

The two incidents also reflected the significant voices of Filipinos in Japan whose views had been solicited by the Philippine press. In both instances, Filipinos in Japan were sympathetic to the Filipino nation and people and protective of their national symbol. Their opinions reflected their awareness of the need to build a good image of Filipinos in Japan. They fiercely defended the Philippines in the barrage of negative criticisms hurled against the country by the Japanese media in the wake of Wakaoji's abduction. In Roponggi's case Filipinos in Japan suggested its conversion to a cultural center in order to build positive images of Filipinos in Japan.

An important observation is that, when an attack on Filipinos was initiated by the Japanese, it was parried by counterattacks on Japanese brutality during the Second World War. In the Wakaoji incident, for instance, the Philippine press issued statements reminding Japan not to criticize Filipinos and their legislators, constantly referring to the wounds of war suffered by Filipinos. Likewise, arguments against the sale of Roppongi reflected the symbolic value Filipinos attached to the



property. As part of Japan's war reparations payment to the Philippines, it was seen as a symbol of victory over the Japanese during the last war. Contrary to what Saguisag (1990) had said about Roppongi, the property stood for poignant memories of Filipino sacrifices and victory over a foreign conqueror. References made, whether casually, in jest, or seriously, against Japanese brutality during the Second World War pointed to the fact that historical legacies remained dominant in the Filipino consciousness and continued to affect Filipino images of the Japanese.

While the Philippine press had been severely critical of the Aquino administration, the problems generated by these issues must be seen from the standpoint of a very young administration desperately trying to rise from the ashes of a former regime. The Wakaoji incident happened during the first year of Aquino's term, which was racked by several groups attempting to destabilize the government and wrest power from the administration. It may be viewed, therefore, as premature for the Philippine press to judge the government's competence based on this incident alone.

The issues must also be seen from the vantage point not only of the local government's responses and actions but within the larger context of the glaring inequality between the Philippines and Japan. The Wakaoji incident mirrored a dominant and wealthy Japan pressuring a weak nation to submit to its dictates through government sanctions, media propaganda, and big business interests. For Ballescas (1988, 95) the case vividly reflected the unequal status of both countries, clearly articulating the ability of wealthy nations like Japan to muster its "national and worldwide advantages (financial, media, governmental resources) towards the resolution of the threat in its favor regardless of what happens to the *gaijin* [foreigner] and their society." She stated thus:

The Wakaoji case highlighted the contradictions that accompany foreign investments and control. It highlighted the control of an economically powerful country over that of a weak "smaller power." It brought into light the contemporary, innovative, aggressive responses of the economically superior nation whose interests are threatened in foreign grounds. (ibid.)

Similarly, the Roppongi case demonstrated this unequal relationship, stirring memories of Japan as a former conqueror and the attempts of the Philippines as a victim to reclaim its dignity. The Filipino people's insistence on the retention of the property as a symbol of victory, therefore, can be viewed as an attempt to reverse this unequal dyad.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to argue that mass media should be considered as a significant "actor" in international relations. It has been shown that the Philippine and Japanese presses played a crucial role as conveyor of public opinion and pleas for the immediate release of Wakaoji. Importantly, public dissent over the handling of the Wakaoji and Roponggi cases found a significant voice in the Philippine press. Media can also be a powerful agent in defining government action on issues affecting bilateral relations. The highly publicized Wakaoji incident in the Philippines and Japan caused both governments to muster all their resources to save one individual. Similarly, the Roppongi property would have been sold without public knowledge had the Philippine press not exposed the supposed anomalies in the proposed deal. However, although the press played a crucial and positive role in these instances, it should also be stated that negative results were generated through the highly emotional and sensationalized coverage of both incidents. The mutually negative images reported in the Philippine and Japanese presses indicate that mass media do not always improve mutual understanding between countries but, instead, may fuel bilateral antagonism.

## Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges the Sumitomo Foundation for funding her study on images of the Japanese in Philippine editorial cartoons from which this article has been derived.

## Abbreviations of news sources used

- MB *Manila Bulletin*  
MC *Manila Chronicle*  
MT *Manila Times*  
PDI *Philippine Daily Inquirer*

*PF* *Philippines Free Press*

*PS* *Philippine Star*

1. Ireneo Fajardo owned a fleet of trucks that hauled sugarcane from the plantations of former Laguna legislator Jose Yulo (*MC* 1987a, 7). Fajardo contended that he was innocent and was able to post bail. In 1999, however, the Supreme Court meted a life sentence on Fajardo on the strength of evidence that proved his guilt, but the high court did not require him to pay back the alleged US\$3 million ransom because there was no proof such transaction took place. See Supreme Court 1999a, 1999b.

2. According to Mitsui officials, their British consultants pointed out that, because the abductors could afford the high cost of the crime, it was possible that an international syndicate was behind the kidnapping. This speculation was reinforced by reports that the ransom was paid by Mitsui at a foreign destination, but Mitsui would not confirm the report. It was also rumored that some communications from the group to the company were mailed from Hong Kong. News also circulated that a Filipino lawyer went to Tokyo sometime in January 1987 to meet with Mitsui officials secretly regarding the case. Mitsui denied all these reports (*PDI* 1987e, 8).

3. It was reported that Mitsui released P1 million for expenses incurred in different operations of the rescue process, which included the use of eight new Lancers, three British van wagons, and one Toyota Silver Electron model, as well as allowances for gasoline and food (Ballescas 1988, 94).

4. More than a decade after the celebrated Wakaoji case, Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) spokesperson Gregorio Rosal issued a statement in January 2003 claiming that a special team of the New People's Army (NPA) had killed former head of the CPP/NPA military commission Romeo Kintanar on 24 January 2003. Among the crimes which Kintanar supposedly committed, according to Rosal, were the kidnapping of Wakaoji in 1986 and of Bombo Radyo Philippines president Roger Florete in 1989 (*SunStar* 2003).

5. It was reported that President Aquino's uncle-in-law, Congressman Herminio Aquino, charged that some persons close to Malacañang had received "goodwill money" from interested buyers of Roppongi. Aquino said that her uncle-in-law had denied that he had made such charges. Later, however, the congressman was said to have stated that the persons he was referring to were not in the government and not close to the president. Curiously enough, Ambassador to Japan Ramon del Rosario confirmed that indeed there were people close to Malacañang who made money from the proposed sale. But the ambassador reiterated that it was not anomalous (Macatuno 1989, 11).

6. In March 1989 the Australian embassy in Japan sold its Tokyo property measuring 2,200 square meters for US\$450 million or US\$240,000 per square meter. The property was located much farther from the Imperial Palace than the Philippine property in Roppongi. It must be noted that land properties around

the Imperial Palace were the choicest and most expensive real estate in Tokyo. The Japanese buyer also reportedly committed to build for the Australian government a residence for its ambassador, a four-story chancery building, and an apartment building with forty-three units for the Australian embassy staff (Macatuno 1989, 10).

7. The property in Stockton was a choice real estate in San Francisco. A certain Mrs. Cita Dinglasan had come out in the open, saying that she had submitted a higher bid but that the property was eventually sold for much less because of irregularities in the bidding process. The Philippine Senate, at the time of the Roppongi sale, was investigating this allegation (Macatuno 1989, 11).

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