

Rowan Callick, China correspondent | *September 24, 2007*

**JUST as Asia moves to centre stage of the world's economy, its news magazines in English - the language of global business - have been closing down.**

First, Time's Asiaweek went in December 2001, then Dow Jones' Far Eastern Economic Review in October 2004 - though the title is retained for a more academic, foreign affairs style monthly.

Jasper Becker, one of the most widely respected journalists and authors in Asia, whose books include *Hungry Ghosts*, the ground-breaking expose of the true horrors of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, saw in the magazines' demise "a great opportunity".

He says: "They had between them more than 200,000 subscribers, and the big media corporations that had owned them left the niche open and nobody was filling it."

Becker, a Briton who has lived for more than two decades in Beijing, has now moved to fill it, with *Asia Weekly*, a low-gloss colour magazine-format publication with 48 pages, just under A4 size. Based in Hong Kong, the magazine chiefly comprises tightly written encapsulations of the most important and interesting stories running in the region.

Its sections include people and politics, news at a glance, the best of opinion, and a page each of the best of Asian, US and other world media.

It also covers Asian issues, health, science and environment, a double-page feature usually from a new book on the region, business stories, business commentaries, stock markets and currencies, travel, food and drink, films, books, arts, sports, obituaries, lists and weather.

Becker, who is funding the publication himself with some support from "angels", says: "It's a very good market. But the magazines that were in it had very high overheads, including huge editorial budgets - meaning you had to sell a lot of adverts just to cover costs."

After the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, those revenues fell away for several crucial years.

Becker says: "They were important publications when there were not many sources of news about the region, before the internet and before satellite TV. But they needed a lot of people on the ground.

"I think there is still a need among readers to get an overall view of everything going on in Asia" - which for now includes North and Southeast Asia, but Becker intends in time to encompass the Indian subcontinent too. "With the rise of China, the Asian economies are more interlinked," he says. "There's a need to know what's going on in all of them, though maybe not long accounts, for instance, of national politics.

"And there's a big interest in finding out what the Asian media are seeing, rather than having Asia seen through the prism of Westerners' perspectives."

He is convinced that people prefer to read magazines in hard-copy form - but also provides a free website that includes PDF formatted pages - [www.asia-weekly.com](http://www.asia-weekly.com).

There are two or three English language publications in every Asian country, "so there's a lot of good material out there. It's a matter of bringing it all together, telling the readers what everyone's talking about in the countries and boiling it down".

"If people want to find out in depth, they can go back to the original sources" - which are printed in a box at the end of the magazine.

Gradually, it is also including translations of material from Asian languages, starting with Chinese.

"It's such a big region, of huge variety, and nobody has the time to comb through it all."

Asia Weekly is intended to do that on behalf of its readers.

"And I didn't want to approach things through an ideological bent," Becker says. "We've had a big welcome from magazine distributors, advertisers and increasingly readers too."

It has news stand sales in 12 countries and is seeking subscriptions from further afield - including Australia - where it is not yet available over counters. It has just won a coveted distribution permit in Singapore, likely to prove a key market.

"People are doing their advertising budgets now and we'll get good revenues next year," Becker says.

"Now we have to raise our profile, having produced 27 issues, and build circulation", which has reached 20,000. He has a target of 50,000 in two years.

The subscription rate is \$US150 (\$173 a year) including postage.

Editor Erin Conway-Smith says her team began producing dummies last October and began printing in April, with a ratio of two-thirds editorial to one-third advertising.

The editorial staff - six full time, plus others working part time, and a full-time designer - receive hard copies of the publications from places like Mongolia, whose websites are only sporadically updated, but monitor most of the region online.

She says: "They can be a bit impenetrable, but we search for the golden stories that can be buried."

They rewrite them, where necessary, to ensure a consistently readable style, and sometimes cobble together a coherent single narrative from various sources.

"We're working to make it a good read," she says.

Conway-Smith, a Canadian, says: "We don't want anyone to feel we're stealing their work, so we limit what we use from any one source to what is fair."