

<BOOK REVIEWS>Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan Edited by Jeff Kingston

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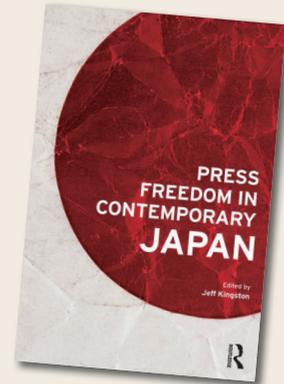
**BOOK REVIEW**

***Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan***

Edited by Jeff Kingston

Routledge, 2017  
xiv + 322 pages.

Reviewed by Jason MORGAN



In *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan*, editor Jeff Kingston writes, “All governments manage the media, and every administration has a few spin-doctors to massage the message. Tactics may vary, but governments hope to sway public opinion in their favor.” One might then expect Kingston and his authors to demonstrate a level of governmental interference with the free press in Japan categorically different from other democratic societies. Given also the recent much publicized media scandals in the United States, one might further expect Kingston to reveal government agents insinuating themselves into the highest reaches of the fourth estate in Japan, micromanaging ledes and headlines, as the Clinton campaign did at CNN and the *New York Times*, and turning major media outlets into mouthpieces like *Renmin Ribao*.

The burden of *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan* is to justify the portrait of the Japanese government that Kingston, among others, has spent the past several years painting for overseas audiences: Abe Shinzō as a prime minister whose enmity to freedom of expression rivals that of Adolf Hitler and Boko Haram. Kingston has excoriated the Abe administration as “arrogant,” accusing it of “muzzling the media” while “championing revisionist history.” It should not be too difficult, then, for Kingston and his allies to build their case against Abe as picking journalistic winners and losers with impunity.

And yet, by the time I finished *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan*, I was struck by the gauziness of the evidence. There is none there. Kingston and company succeed only in confirming the suspicion that their attacks against Abe spring from personal malice. I have a strong libertarian streak, and was prepared to join in the chorus denouncing the Abe administration for interfering with the right of people in a democratic society to think and speak as they please. But even I was left wondering what all the fuss is about. If anything, this volume resembles a fire brigade, sirens blazing and engines roaring, speeding around a neighborhood in search of an inferno. But the question remains—where is the fire?

Some chapters of *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan*, to be sure, are less strident than others. For example, in chapter 5, “NHK: The changing and unchanged politics of semi-independence,” Ellis Krauss offers a relatively sober, if selective, history of taxpayer-funded media in Japan. There are valuable passages on key Japanese court cases touching on free speech in chapter 7, “Chilling Effects on News Reporting in Japan’s ‘Anonymous

Society,' by Lawrence Repeta and Yasuomi Sawa. The wrangling over Okinawa is deftly covered in chapter 17, "Media Side-lines the Sit-in Protest in Takae, Okinawa," by Akihiro Ogawa. And chapter 18, Hideko Yoshimoto's "A Historical Perspective on Press Freedom in Okinawa," helpfully traces the Okinawa press issue back to 1945. These are welcome additions to the literature on journalism and censorship in modern Japan.

However, overall the book is marred by such passionate intensity that I cannot recommend it to those who seek a serious, balanced investigation of press freedom in Japan. Kingston himself sets the tone in the introduction:

Since Abe returned to power in 2012, the recrudescence of nationalism under his leadership has emboldened right-wing activists and organizations targeting liberal media outlets, journalists, peace museums, and ethnic Korean residents in Japan. [...] On August 14, 2014, the Abe statement [on the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War], approved by the Cabinet, elevated a myopic and exonerating revisionist narrative of history to Japan's official policy. The vague and ambiguous references to past misdeeds, the inadequate recognition of Japanese aggression and the horrors inflicted, the minimalist nods toward contrition and declaring an end to apologies became state policy. [...] [H]is slippery circumlocutions about history only heightened scrutiny of Japan's wartime past and apparent perpetrator's fatigue. (pp. 8–9)

When the editor abandons all pretense of objectivity, what hope for the rest of the volume?

*Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan* is a sustained staccato of jabbing epithets. For example, by my count, there are at least ninety-three uses of some variant of "right wing" or "reactionary." I also count fifty-eight uses of some form of "revisionist" or "denialist," fifty-two of "nationalistic" or some form thereof, and a liberal lagniappe of other inflammatory phrases. As instances of the last category, the *Yomiuri shinbun* and *Sankei shinbun* are "loyal pitbulls" (p. 37); criticizing the *Asahi shinbun* for inaccurate comfort women reporting "became fair game for Japanese bureaucrats and rival media groups" after having been "the exclusive province of Japan's lunatic fringe" (p. 80); and "the Abe administration and Abe himself" are "pigheaded" (p. 86). Even Professor Donald Keene is chided by Debito Arudou for making an innocent joke at his own expense (p. 225).

Much of the language here jars, calling into question Kingston's fitness for editorial work. For example, Alexis Dudden avers that two Sankei books she received in the mail contain statements that in other countries would be "hate speech," follow "a logic that would have pleased George Orwell," and "in other places such as Germany would bring criminal charges of Holocaust denial" (p. 157). Not to be outdone, Gregory Clark warns that Japan could "easily evolve into a blind emotional nationalism similar to that of pre-war Germany" (p. 189) due to the "fascistic tendencies" (p. 190) which, along with the LDP, are pushing the country "close to real fascism" (p. 190). Clark even claims to have been "cast out into the 'desert' by a bone-pointing witch-doctor" such as might happen in "primitive Australian tribes." (Who is insulted more here—Aborigines or Japanese?) Elsewhere, the actions of Abe and his government "smack of a purge" against journalists to "weaken human rights and freedoms and replace democratic norms by a semi-authoritarian style of government" (p. 112). NHK chairman Momii Katsuto is a "revisionist buffoon" (p. 36), and those who

work in “the Japan Lobby” in Washington, DC, are “unwitting and opportunistic dupes of Tokyo” (p. 289). This is ugly stuff.

*Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan* is, moreover, riven with inconsistencies and contradictions. For instance, Michael Penn, in chapter 4, fawns over Barack Obama’s “impressive 2008 presidential campaign,” while elsewhere in the book the Japanese stand accused of being soft on their own political leaders. Nancy Snow, in chapter 20, wonders where Japan’s “citizen journalists” could be, before Jeff Kingston, in chapter 21, quotes Anna Fifield, a *Washington Post* journalist based in Tokyo, complaining that she has received “unwelcome emails trying to influence my coverage on the history issue.” No citizen journalists wanted, in other words. And in chapter 13, Philip Seaton engages in the usual back-patting when he says that “the idea of respecting diverse views is itself liberal,” only to be contradicted by Nancy Snow and Debito Arudou, who lament that the media in Japan are *too* fair and allow *too many* opposing viewpoints to be heard.

Examples such as these abound. On the fallout from the comfort woman issue, Martin Fackler, in chapter 3, “A Pooch After All? The *Asahi Shimbun*’s Foiled Foray into Watchdog Journalism,” portrays the *Asahi* as a chastened erstwhile champion of hard-hitting investigative reporting, bullied by rightist agitators. However, the picture that emerges from this chapter is of a highly competitive Japanese media environment in which truth and facts, and not ideological grandstanding, carry the day. The *Asahi* failed not because it was targeted, but because it pushed a bad story despite the evidence. If so, what is Kingston’s stable of accusers so exercised about?

Yet, Kingston and company are not wrong about everything. There are, to be sure, areas of journalistic life in Japan needing reform. I too share doubts about the press club system, which comes under withering attack here. However, I fail to see how it differs much from the cultivating of sources which typifies journalistic work in any political capital. Do not *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reporters, for instance, try to get high-ranking administration officials in Washington to leak titillating information in exchange for kid-glove treatment of their pet projects? Politicians trade access for flattery, but good reporters play the game to their own advantage. It is cumbersome, but hardly unique to Japan.

Anyway, why dismantle the press club system when there is such a vibrant alternative press? Travelers on the Tokyo subway encounter advertisements for weekly news magazines featuring big-font headlines screaming about some new scandal within the Diet, the Prime Minister’s office, the Self-Defense Forces, or the imperial household. These no-holds-barred publications batter Abe, his ministers, and his supporters with story after story about cover-ups, pay-offs, buyouts, sexual improprieties, and the daily round of gaffes. The press club system clearly does not prevent the roiling mix of revelation and muckraking in countless off-the-rack outlets which form a teeming bazaar of gleefully anti-establishment privateering. Kingston seems to be aware that this throttling undermines his case that Abe is puppet master of Japanese journalists, so he has Mark Schreiber and William Wetherall, in chapter 15, dismiss the tabloids as “racist.” This canard is unlikely to sway anyone with more than a passing knowledge of modern Japan.

Unfortunately, much of the evidence Kingston and his contributors present for the deterioration of press freedom under Prime Minister Abe is fake news. Take, for example, the case of Kuniya Hiroko, allegedly railroaded out of NHK over her failure to bow to pressure from the Abe administration. But Kuniya herself has categorically denied that dark

forces influenced her early retirement. Likewise, the woes of Uemura Takashi, the disgraced *Asahi* reporter feted by Carol Gluck and others as a martyr of right-wing hate, seem to spring more from Uemura's own troubling career than the handful of nasty postcards presented in *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan* as "intimidation" tactics.

In the last chapter, Professor Kingston warns that "labeling critics [...] evades engaging the arguments and the facts and instead relies on cheap shot ad hominem attacks" (p. 300). "It is unlikely," Kingston continues, "that these polemical jeremiads will convince anyone to change their mind and are more likely to incite a negative reaction" (p. 303). My sentiments exactly. *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan's* inflammatory and contradictory statements far outweigh any contribution it makes to dispassionate scholarly inquiry into an admittedly contentious subject.