

Reinventing the Japan Times: How Japan's oldest English-language newspaper tacked right: Updated

David McNeill, Justin McCurry

On November 30th, 2018 *The Japan Times* waded into the interminable controversy over Japan's wartime misdeeds with a small editor's note tacked onto the end of a story about conscript labor. The previous day, South Korea's Supreme Court had ruled that Mitsubishi Heavy Industries should compensate Korean forced laborers. That followed a similar ruling against Nippon Steel in October. With another dozen lawsuits pending against about 70 Japanese companies, Japan's most venerable English-language newspaper appeared to question whether these laborers were actually forced to work at all.



The South Korean Supreme Court upheld the verdict requiring Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to compensate Korean forced laborers

"The term 'forced labor' has been used to refer to laborers who were recruited before and during world war two to work for Japanese companies," said the note. "However, because the conditions they worked under or how these workers were recruited varied, we will

henceforth refer to them as 'wartime laborers.'" In addition, the note said, the description of "comfort women", a euphemism for girls and women herded into military brothels would be changed to reflect the fact that their experiences "varied widely." Hence, "women who were forced to provide sex for Japanese troops before and during world war two" would be dropped in favor of 'women who worked in wartime brothels, including those who did so against their will, to provide sex to Japanese soldiers'."

The revision was greeted with glee by *The Japan Times'* critics, who view the country's oldest English-language newspaper as a nest of whining Western liberals dedicated to blackening Japan's image (its nickname among online rightists is "The Anti-Japan Times"). Sakurai Yoshiko, president of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals (a conservative think tank) and Sato Masahisa, state minister for foreign affairs, were among several prominent commentators who [publicly congratulated the management](#). Sato wondered out loud if the long-running campaign to alter media descriptions of Japan's wartime conduct was finally bearing fruit.

A larger group of people praised the paper for adopting what one called "a more reasonable policy on terminology", one that did not assume "all brothel workers were slaves or laborers forced." The reaction among journalists and editors inside the paper, itself, however, was disbelief, then anger and protest.

According to several sources at the paper, Daimon Sayuri, the paper's managing editor,

sent out a brief note on the revision on November 29th. There was no consultation among the editors and reporters that have kept the newspaper humming through one of the toughest periods in its 120-year history. Mizuno Hiroyasu, the paper's director and executive editor, was identified as the author. "We demanded a meeting with Mizuno on Monday," said one staffer. That demand evolved into an angry, sometimes tearful three-hour confrontation on December 3rd, followed the next day by a meeting with Kambara Suematsu Minako, the paper's new publisher.

The key demands were straightforward: that the paper return to the "internationally recognized style" for wartime comfort women and conscripted labor, and that Mizuno take responsibility for the abrupt editorial turn. According to those at the meeting, most of the editorial staff (30 out of 120 employees) rebelled and several threatened to quit. Later, around two-dozen staff put their names to a statement opposing the editorial changes. In the New Year, one staff writer, Cory Baird, announced that he had resigned via his Twitter account.

That initial meeting was seen by some as an opportunity to clear the air after more than a year of tension under the paper's new owners. In 2017, Nifco, the plastic components manufacturer that bought the paper in 1996, sold it to News2u Holdings, an "online public relations service." Nifco's boss, Ogasawara Toshiaki, had treated the paper with benign neglect, content to bask in the prestige of its rich history, while ignoring grumbling about its politics, sinking readership or (from shareholders) years of operating losses. His death in 2016 allowed Nifco to look for new proprietors, who quickly took a broom to several columnists, notably Jeff Kingston of Temple University Tokyo and Yamaguchi Jiro of Hosei University – both full-throated critics of the government of Abe Shinzo.

The Japan Times management appeared unprepared for the wider reaction to the editorial change. *The Guardian* was one of several foreign media outlets that covered the story, prompting one social media user to describe the British newspaper's Japan and Korea correspondent, Justin McCurry, as "Japan-hating". McCurry contacted the newspaper by phone on the day of the editor's note and was asked to address his questions in writing and send them to a generic email address, with the assurance that "someone will pick them up." He did not receive a response, and noted that in the story he filed the same afternoon. According to multiple sources at the JT, when senior editors were asked why they had failed to respond to an email by an internationally recognized newspaper, they initially denied receiving the correspondence. It then transpired that somehow the email had found its way into the account's trash folder.

The JT did respond ... six days after *the Guardian* story was published. An unnamed spokesperson said the decision to change its style had been reached after "lengthy discussions between the executive editor and certain managers", and denied that the paper had come under any pressure. "The decision was made in the belief that the change would better reflect a more objective view of what many historians, researchers and journalists agree are extremely difficult issues to summarize," the spokesperson said. "As for the pressure from outside parties, the answer is no. In the past, we have frequently reported on these contentious issues, and, when appropriate, cited the government's official stance, but the language we use has always been decided upon independently. The recent style revision was not predicated by any request from the government.

The mainstream Japanese press greeted the controversy largely by ignoring it. The *Asahi Shimbun*, which has had its own troubles with comfort women coverage, would have been

reluctant – understandably – to intrude on a fellow media organization’s grief over the issue of Japan’s wartime conduct. *The Japan News*, the English-language edition of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, also kept its counsel, having issued a feeble apology over its own past use of “sex slaves” at the height of the orgy of Asahi-bashing in 2014. Only NHK has gone further, insisting that its English-language editors describe them as “those referred to as wartime comfort women.” *The Nikkei* was similarly sheepish – perhaps with good reason: on the day the JT ran its editor’s note, the Nikkei – Mizuno’s former employer – announced it had given Kambara a gong for “communicating Japan to the world” (日本を伝えるメディア賞) as part of its Woman of the Year awards. *The New York Times*, with which *The Japan Times* has had a publishing agreement since 2013, has not publicly commented.

Journalists at the paper describe other more insidious changes that suggest a shift to the right in its political stance, regardless of its management’s claims to the contrary. One senior reporter, known for his sometimes aggressive questioning of Japan’s top spokesman, Suga Yoshihide, was yanked off his beat at the Prime Minister’s Office. Editorials, including one on November 23rd berating the South Korean government for gutting the 2015 “comfort women” agreement, seemed to lean right, away from the paper’s old liberal or at least conciliatory stance. There were notes from the editor nudging staff toward more positive coverage of Abe, and of Japan itself. A journalist described being berated when the word “surrender” appeared in a story about World War 2 (the phrase used for August 15, 1945 in the Japanese media is *Shūsen-kinenbi* (終戦記念日), or “memorial day for the end of the war.” Columnists, some speaking off the record, [have noted](#) that their work is being edited more vigorously than before in an apparent attempt to take some of the sting out of criticism of Japan. ([source](#))

According to those present, the newspaper’s management was taken aback by the size of the revolt on December 4th and seemed unusually defensive. One manager claimed the root of the problem was “exaggerated reporting by the foreign media.” Mizuno singled out the *Financial Times* for still using the term “sex slaves” but insisted he was not “rightwing.”

There were explicit denials of direct government interference or of ties to the radical right. Some staffers noted Mizuno’s friendship with Hori Yoshito, the Harvard-educated CEO of Globis Capital Partners and Management School. Hori is also a former director of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals, the same conservative think-tank Sakurai runs. Both are considered close to Nippon Kaigi, Japan’s most powerful rightwing lobby.

The institute’s demands for revisions to the English language of Japan’s wartime behavior overlap strongly with the November 30 editorial changes. Its website says: “What is wrongly referred to as “requisitioned” and or “compulsorily recruited” laborers (from the Korean Peninsula in the wartime past) should be correctly called “wartime Korean workers.” Comfort women, says one member, were “registered prostitutes under the supervision of the military.” Hori himself [wrote on the Institute’s website](#) in 2015 that Japan should stop apologizing for its past.

One journalist at the paper noted that Hori has published an agenda titled “100 Actions: Creating a vision for Japan” under the Globis brand. “Two particular goals on that list pertain to the November 30 editorial note,” said the journalist. One criticized the “poor quality” of Japan’s English-language media, “the gateway through which foreign nationals access information about the country.” It added: “Since the English-language media is expected to play a leading role in disseminating information throughout the world, it is

necessary to fundamentally improve its quality to ensure accurate information...so that Japan may be assessed fairly." A second goal lamented "untruths" about Japan, "repeated over many decades," on comfort women and territorial issues. "If every Japanese person makes an effort to get accurate information out there, it will be possible to correct misunderstandings among the people of the world."

Mizuno reportedly denied any links to Hori to his staffers. *The Japan Times'* own press release says, however, that Mizuno moved from New York to the Globis Corporation as manager of the Public Relations Department in August 2011. The worlds of Kambara and Hori also appear to overlap. On August 8th 2017, in a post announcing her purchase of *The Japan Times*, Hori said "Globis supports the reborn Japan Times." Kambara responded by saying, "Thank you, I will try my best." Publicity for Globis continues to appear on the Japan Times Online, "suggesting an ongoing financial link" between the two, said the journalist.

Journalists at the paper unearthed other connections. In May 2016, Hori and Kambara appeared together at a rally in Otsu, Shiga Prefecture for Upper House Diet Member Hayashi Kumiko, the wife of Seko Hiroshige, a known critic of the newspaper. (Kambara was head of Hayashi's Tokyo support group). In April 2017, six weeks before the sale of the paper was announced, Kambara moderated a panel discussion for [Hori's "G1 Summit"](#) in Shikoku ([link](#)). The summits are forums "for the leaders of the next generation to gather, discuss, and paint a vision for the rebirth of Japan in a turbulent world." Suga has also attended. ([link](#))

Kambara's family owns Tsuneishi Holdings, a century-old [Fukuyama](#)-based conglomerate with interests in real estate, hotels, shipbuilding and marine cargo transportation and offices in China and The

Philippines. It appeared to have, at least until 2017, little interest in publishing. The conclusion by some was that Japan's troublesome English print portal had been taken over in a silent coup. The government now has "their own Pravda" said Kingston. "Despite the reactionary editorial swerve towards revisionist drivel the reporters still do an excellent job and I feel badly that an incompetent editor has impugned the credibility of the newspaper."

It is unclear where all this leaves the paper. Mizuno, who took a 30% pay cut for three months, put his name to a note on December 6th admitting responsibility for the editorial ad.

"For our readers, the change warranted a more detailed and nuanced explanation of our decision," [he wrote](#). "As a media organization, one of our duties is to communicate efficiently and avoid ambiguity. The note failed to do that. We must acknowledge the fact that the note damaged the relationship of trust that we have developed with our readers, our writers and our staff."

Weeks on, it remains to be seen how assiduously the newspaper's foot soldiers will follow the new editorial guidance. At least one wire agency to which the paper subscribes has made it clear that it does not want references to "wartime forced labor" tampered with in articles published solely under its name. Some stories published since the end of November have used that exact wording. A Kyodo story that ran on the JT website on December 14th, for example, used the word "forced" in the headline and first paragraph. A month later, a news article by a staff writer followed suit. Discussions over how, exactly, journalists and editors are to refer to wartime sex slaves and forced laborers are reportedly continuing. Still, a reversal to the previous usage so despised by Japan's right is unlikely.

See also the Reuters report by Mari Saito and Ami Miyazaki, 'Fear' and 'favor' chill newsroom at storied Japanese paper.

UPDATES



Japan Times Editors' Open Letter

February 25, 2019 by TozenAdmin

On Nov. 30, 2018, the Executive Editorial Committee at The Japan Times published an Editor's Note announcing changes in the way the newspaper would describe both the so-called comfort women and wartime forced laborers recruited before and during World

War II to work for Japanese companies.

Under the former style, the comfort women were described as "women who were forced to provide sex for Japanese troops before and during World War II." Under the new style, they were to be referred to as "women who worked in wartime brothels, including those who did so against their will, to provide sex to Japanese soldiers."

In addition, the note said that those who were previously described as "forced laborers" would now be referred to as "wartime laborers." The Executive Editorial Committee attempted to justify both these changes with the reasoning that the recruitment and experiences of members of these groups "varied."

Tozen Union and its Japan Times General Workers Union chapter strongly oppose these editorial changes. Both changes were pushed through with total disregard for the input of knowledgeable writers and editors, with zero advance notice, and the changes also show a disturbing disregard for the mainstream historical record.

As a result, The Japan Times is now perceived publicly as trying to downplay the suffering of the comfort women and forced laborers; of putting political considerations above fair, balanced and truthful reporting; and of toeing the Japanese government's line for commercial gain.

The changes have harmed The Japan Times in terms of its reputation, and this has had a direct effect on JTGWU members' working conditions, affecting everything from morale to working hours and stress levels. The impact of the new editorial stance on perceptions of the paper's integrity, as well as that of those who work there, has resulted in difficulties for staff writers and editors working with sources on stories, and in commissioning stories from outside contributors.

In collective bargaining, the JTGWU and Tozen have demanded a full retraction of the editorial policy changes as well as prior consultation on future changes of this magnitude.

The union has proposed that 1) The Japan Times apologizes for the Editor's Note and reverts to the previous style on comfort women and wartime forced laborers; 2) that the JTGWU has representation on both committees involved in drafting such style changes in future; and 3) that the union be given one month's notice for consultation before such changes are implemented in future, including the right to delay changes if the union feels they haven't been properly discussed. The company has yet to agree to any of these proposals.

“The Japan Times was considered detrimental to public diplomacy”

Jeff Kingston Interview

David McNeill

Kingston: I felt that Abe needed to be called out because much of the press was coopted or intimidated. In 2015 the *kantei* (Prime Minister's Office) orchestrated the ouster of several commentators that was aimed at taming the press.

I heard my column was popular and got lots of feedback from around the world though don't know how many clicks it got or whatever. Sometimes I would see it in the top trending articles. In thirty years writing for *The Japan Times*, nobody ever messed with the content until Sayuri Daimon, the managing editor, intervened in June 2017. Everyone had been telling me the new owners would be bad news. The irony was that the *Asahi Shimbun* had done an interview with me on press freedom in Japan

in June, which didn't run till August, a few days before the note terminating my column. The following week I was chairing a session on press freedom in Japan at the European Association of Japanese Studies with Koichi Nakano (of Sophia University) and got a mail from Anna Fifield (then Japan correspondent for *The Washington Post*) saying she'd been scolded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) about quoting us. I've heard from other journalists that they'd also been warned by MOFA handlers not to quote us, calling us unreliable. Almost like a Good Housekeeping seal of approval.[\(Link\)](#) They went after the *Asahi* over its reporting about the Fukushima debacle and the comfort women. These attacks on the *Asahi* were shamelessly orchestrated by the *Yomiuri* and the *Sankei* newspapers and seemed to enjoy the Kantei's approval. So the gloves were off. I don't think we've seen such a sustained attack on the media as we had under (Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide) Suga and Abe. I felt it was important to connect the dots, to let the world know what's going on here because they were running roughshod over the press and it was necessary to subject their policy agenda and snafus to sustained critical analysis. When *The Economist* ran the Abe Superman cover I was very disappointed and made it a point to delve beneath the shiny PR veneer and explain why most people in Japan think that Abenomics is a sham, little more than welfare for the wealthy.

The paper was losing money so when the buyers came in the one thing they wanted to do was boost revenue and that's not going to come from subscriptions but from ads. The beauty of the Reuters article is that it confirms *The Japan Times* traded its integrity and journalistic ethics for government money and access to Abe. It's on tape. It's very clear that canning me had an upside, but if you read the silly interview with Abe it's just boilerplate pabulum and executive editor Hiroyasu Mizuno keeps his journalistic skills well hidden. But based on the tape they did get more government sponsored

content. If you look, METI now takes out half-page advertorials and there's lots more government-sponsored content. If you look at the editorial direction, the columnists they've brought in are Abe cheerleaders. And the critical op-eds have virtually disappeared. Hugh Cortazzi, a former UK ambassador, used to wail on Abe over historical revisionism; you had Jiro Yamaguchi, criticizing his neo-liberal reforms. William Pesek wrote syndicated columns critical of Abenomics and they stopped running him. Kevin Rafferty was also axed and other regular contributors who didn't toe the line suddenly were getting hassled and experiencing long delays. One op-ed that was already laid out and just hours from printing was spiked at the last minute...a piece critical of Deputy PM Aso's family mining business use of forced labor.

The government is spending a lot of money trying to create a favorable operating environment. They tripled their public diplomacy budget in 2015, partly squandered on cringeworthy infomercials on CNN and in the foreign media boosting the brand and Abenomics. They were hiring pricey overseas PR firms, splashing money on ads and favorable coverage and building Japan Houses and sponsoring endowed chairs at universities for \$5 million a pop...Columbia, MIT, Georgetown, Kings College and Toronto. I think *The Japan Times* was considered detrimental to this public diplomacy. You spend a lot of money trying to promote the brand and there are these op-ed writers who have a lot of credibility and knowledge and they're regularly exposing the chicanery and deceit. Somebody goes on the Internet and Googles Abenomics and up pops *Japan Times* articles. It has a tiny circulation - they claim 45,000 - but the Internet gives it a huge audience and because it's in English it is a very powerful source of information about Japan. At a meeting in 2016, cabinet minister Hiroshige Seko publicly stated that the paper was a problem, and something needed to be done about it. I have been told

that MOFA played a behind the scenes role in the ownership change but have never seen a smoking gun. I had numerous "fan" letters to the editor from MOFA that read just like the Net uyoku troll-mails I got. I think it is essential to distinguish between the new editorial team—stage right—and the excellent reporters who continue to provide in-depth and insightful coverage.

Mizuno is widely disliked by staff and reporters because he ignored their views opposing the changes in how the paper refers to comfort women and forced labor. They are demoralized because he has embarrassed them and tarnished the paper's reputation. Most wish he would resign and want to revert to the previous editorial stance because they think that the craven kowtowing to Abe and embrace of historical revisionism is undermining the *Japan Times'* credibility. It's a bad sign when the Net Uyoku are applauding and claiming victory.

Japan Times president apologizes for 'turmoil,' warns leakers face punishment

[March 20, 2019](#) by Mari Saito

TOKYO (Reuters) - The Japan Times, an English-language newspaper that amended its description of "comfort women" and wartime forced laborers last year, apologized to its staff last month, but threatened to punish anyone found leaking confidential information.

In a five-sentence note published last November, the paper said it would refer to Korean laborers simply as "wartime laborers" and would describe comfort women as "women who worked in wartime brothels, including those who did so against their will."

The move polarized readers. Some saw it as an effort to whitewash Japan's wartime history,

while others celebrated the move as a way to correct foreign misinterpretations.

In an email sent to the paper's staff on Feb 28, Japan Times president Takeharu Tsutsumi apologized for causing "turmoil." A Japan Times source shared the email with Reuters; it was verified by several other employees at the paper.

The president explained that the purpose of the style change was to "enable us to report controversial issues in a fair and neutral manner," and denied that the paper had shifted its political views.

"Some European and American media have accused us with the narrative that 'The Japan Times' editorial direction moved to the right following the change in ownership.' Based on groundless speculation, this is inaccurate," he wrote, adding that on the other hand "Japan's right wingers seem to have welcomed this change, but by no means did we intend to reflect any right-wing views."

Reuters called and emailed Tsutsumi for comment about the internal email. In response, a public relations representative for the Japan Times wrote in an email that it would not respond to queries about internal documents.

In January, Reuters published a story based on interviews with nearly a dozen sources at the Japan Times, as well as hundreds of pages of internal emails and presentation materials, that showed the revision was partly made to ease criticism that the publication was "anti-Japanese" and increase advertising revenue from Japanese corporations and institutions.

The issue of comfort women and Koreans forced to work in wartime factories and coal mines remains incendiary more than seven decades after the war.

Despite the backlash, Tsutsumi told staff there was no significant impact on the number of subscribers. In his email to staff last month, Tsutsumi also called the Reuters story "regrettable" and said it "coupled speculations with information taken out of context to promote a certain narrative."

"According to the Reuters article, the company's confidential materials and remarks made at the All Company Meeting appear to have been leaked," he wrote, saying it was regrettable if any information had been divulged by employees.

"The act of leaking confidential information and the act of damaging the company's reputation constitutes a violation of compliance," he wrote. "If we learn the identity of the parties who leaked confidential information, we would have no other choice but to penalize them."

Some of the paper's staff have criticized the recent changes.

In an open letter published online last month ahead of the president's email, Tozen, a labor union representing mostly foreign workers in several industries across Japan, and its Japan Times chapter demanded a full retraction of the style changes.

The paper's local union, which has 15 members, has been in collective bargaining meetings with management over the issue. Members of the Japan Times chapter declined to comment on the contents of the recent all company e-mail.

"Both changes were pushed through with total disregard for the input of knowledgeable writers and editors, with zero advance notice, and the changes also show a disturbing disregard for the mainstream historical record," the paper's union members wrote in the letter.

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This article brings together the original McNeill/McCurry story on the reinventing of *The Japan Times* together with subsequent reports by Jeff Kingston and Reuters, as well as the response of the president of *The Japan Times*.