Selective Pain: Kidnapping, Contemporary Japan and Media Obsession

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By David McNeill

The Japanese media is obsessed with the kidnapping of its citizens by North Korea. David McNeill suggests other stories the media might pursue as enthusiastically.

All the pain of the tragedy that has befallen their family is etched in the crumpled faces of Yokota Shigeru and Sakie. Most parents can only imagine the horror of losing a young child, but after years of believing their daughter Megumi was the victim of a random attack in 1977, the Yokotas learned that she had been snatched by North Korean spies. They still don't know if she is alive or dead.

The scale of their suffering is almost enough to forgive the choices they've made in their struggle to uncover Megumi's fate: riding sidesaddle with neo-nationalists who care more about squaring up to Pyongyang than rescuing its victims, for instance; or seeking help from George W. Bush, whose administration is not above state-sponsored kidnappings – known these days as 'renditions,' not to speak of the systematic torture and killing of prisoners from Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo.

The Yokotas are only trying to save their daughter, but what's the media's excuse? Day after day for five years, every tiny development in the abduction drama has been obsessively played out here in Japanese newspapers and on TV.

The abductions, most now agree, were the bitter fruit of a spying program run by elements of the military that resulted in the deaths of at least eight and probably more Japanese citizens. Bizarre, cruel and criminal, certainly, but there are many important, more deadly issues affecting Japan that have yet to receive anywhere near the same lavish media attention. Moreover, the relentless coverage of the abduction issue has smothered a much-needed debate on the historic responsibility of Tokyo and Washington for the mess on the Korean Peninsula. Here's a small selection of stories to which the press might devote more time.

Cigarettes kill 100,000 people in Japan every year, according to the Japan Association against Tobacco, including, some believe, former Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro, a well-known chain-smoker. About 600,000 tobacco machines in Japan sell 360 million cigarettes a day at the cheapest retail price in the developed world, many of them to underage smokers.

Japan Tobacco, which controls about two-thirds of the market here, is the third-largest tobacco company in the world and it is majority-owned by the Finance Ministry. And Japan accounts for a huge chunk of the global $4-billion annual tobacco advertising budget, perhaps helping to explain why the press shies away from stories of gaspers hacking their lungs out.

Stories mentioning 'Yokota Megumi' carried in the Asahi Shimbun since 2001: 487
Stories mentioning 'smoker' and 'cancer' in the Asahi Shimbun since 2001: 24

Suicide is perhaps the most startling expression

of Japan's tortured modern id. 94 people a day take their own lives in one of the world's richest, safest nations. The official toll from suicide since the Asian crash of 1997-98 is nearly a quarter of a million people, and experts say this almost certainly underestimates the problem. "I believe the real figure is closer to 110 or even 120 people a day," says Saito Yukio, a founder member of Japan's largest telephone lifeline, Inochi no Denwa.

That, say those grappling with the problem, constitutes an epidemic that the authorities have been shamefully slow to recognize. Japan spends 1,700 times more on road safety than on preventing suicide, which causes three times more deaths than traffic accidents. "The Health Ministry has told me many times they consider it a problem for individuals, not society," says Sugimoto Naoko, head of an anti-suicide NGO. "So it is left to us. But there is only so much a small group like us can do. We are at our limit."

Stories mentioning 'Yokota Megumi' carried in the Yomiuri Shimbun since 2001: 1128
Stories mentioning 'suicide' and 'prevention' in the Yomiuri since 2001: fewer than 40

Nuclear Power Japan has one of the world's fastest-growing nuclear industries, with 55 reactors operating and 11 more planned. Nuclear power currently provides about a third of the country's energy needs, but Tokyo wants to meet its Kyoto Protocol commitments and reduce its dependence on oil supplies by raising this to over forty percent.

Many say that building so many reactors in one of the most seismically unstable places on the planet invites catastrophe. Of special concern is the Hamaoka plant, which boasts two of the country's oldest reactors and sits on a particularly dangerous fault, just 90 miles southwest of Tokyo. A major quake could send radioactive dust showering down on the world's largest metropolis.

Sixty years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan has amassed 45 tons of plutonium -- the Fat Man that destroyed Hiroshima contained just five kg. The government has yet to say how this plutonium will be used; some of it has already been 'lost'. "Most ordinary Japanese people don't know about this huge stock of plutonium because the media doesn't cover it," says Ban Hideyuki of the Citizens' Nuclear Information Center.

Stories mentioning 'Yokota Megumi' on the NHK domestic network since 2001: 346
NHK Stories with words 'Hamaoka' and 'nuclear accident' since 2001: 16

Cars. The auto industry is Japan's biggest advertiser, spending over $1 billion annually, more than enough to suppress potentially damaging stories about an industry that kills many more people than North Korea. About 2,500 pedestrians and bikers are killed and 80,000 injured directly by automobiles every year. The National Organization for Automotive Safety & Victims Aid estimates annual fatalities and injuries due to road accidents in Japan at about one million people.

Although fatalities have fallen since their peak in the early 1970s, the statistics show a relentless rise in the number of elderly victims, partly because footpaths in Japan come a poor second to roads. Very few articles or TV reports question the wisdom of selling 4.5 million passenger cars a year and building more roads in these crowded islands.

Stories on 'Yokota Megumi' carried in the Nikkei Net since 2001: 187
Stories on 'road accidents' carried in the Nikkei Net since 2001:8

Welfare. Japan now has the highest proportion of over 65's on the planet, and the already weak welfare system is struggling to keep up. Nearly nine million elderly people live on pensions, of

which just under half are less than 40,000 yen a month, just as the state is rolling back its meager provisions. The pressure of poverty, the burden of caring for elderly, infirm spouses and the lack of professional backup appear to be driving some to suicide, crime and early death.

The percentage of over-65s incarcerated in Japan has tripled in the last decade and now exceeds 10 percent of the total prison population– four times the UK figure. Japan now has the highest rate of incarceration of pensioners in the industrialized world. And with the privatization mania now sweeping the government, many more will be left to sink or swim in the coming years. The rising number of elderly suicides adds to a truly appalling portrait of an ageing population in a society that was once famous for its respect for the aged.

Stories mentioning 'Yokota Megumi' carried in the Sankei Shimbun since 2001: 1086
Stories linking 'poverty' and 'early death' in the Sankei since 2001: Fewer than 20

Dioxins from incinerators, medical incompetence . . . most people reading this could add to this short list with their own. Home-grown violence by the yakuza and ultra-nationalists (the people who drive sound-trucks around Kasumigaseki screaming at the government to go to war with Pyongyang) has probably harmed many more Japanese than the North Koreans. But then, dealing with these issues requires that big media confront powerful political and economic interests at home, rather than a desperate, reckless but bankrupt foreign dictatorship.

Articles mentioning Yokota Megumi on the Japan Times website since 2001: 241

(Freelance researcher Miguel Quintana contributed to this article. Statistics were compiled with standard data searches of newspaper archives using keywords and covering the period from October 2001 to August 2006. Different keywords may produce different results.)

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