

Johnny Kitagawa and the Code of Omerta in Japanese Entertainment

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Abstract: *Claims of sexual abuse against the pop Svengali are symbolic of an entertainment industry that views pop stars as disposable objects and sublimates their sexuality and individuality to the demands of fame.*

Keywords: *Johnny & Associates, sexual abuse, censorship, J-Pop*

Half a lifetime separates the first and most recent public claim of sexual abuse against pop Svengali Johnny Kitagawa. In 1988, Koji Kita of Four Leaves, one of the earliest successful groups to emerge from Kitagawa's talent agency, Johnny & Associates, accused Kitagawa of sexually preying on him and other male teenage trainees (Kita, 1988). Kita's book *Hikari Genji e* prompted a string of other accusations. Ryo Nakatani, another former member of Johnny's Junior, the stable of budding stars that Kitagawa hand-picked and cultivated, published a book (1989) which claimed that Nakatani had been sexually initiated by the then middle-aged Kitagawa when he was 11 years old. This early experience (shared by the other boys in his charge) so deformed his view of romantic encounters, wrote Nakatani, that for years afterwards he thought love was nothing more

than "the act of ejaculation" and he said he dealt with the trauma by (like Kita) becoming addicted to stimulant drugs. In the 1990s, several more former trainees went public with similar claims (see for example Toyokawa, 1982). Long before Kita's book, allegations of predatorial sexual behavior against Kitagawa were cited in a 1964 legal dispute between him and a former member of his agency (Headline, 2023).

There could have been little surprise, therefore, when the BBC released a documentary in March 2023 that disinterred these historical claims, four years after Kitagawa died. Or when Kauan Okamoto, a former member of Johnny's Jr said a month later that he and many of his fellow teenage trainees had been the target of repeated and unwanted sexual attention by a now elderly Kitagawa (FCCJ, 2023). He said that "almost all" of the 100-200 boys who stayed at Kitagawa's penthouse apartment in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo during his four years with the agency were victims. Yet, Okamoto, who joined Johnny's Jr. in 2012, aged 15, insisted he was unaware of Kitagawa's controversial history before he joined. "I don't know about the other members but...I only learned about it after I joined the agency when searching the Internet. It was not widely covered in the mainstream media so I had no way of knowing" (*Ibid.*). Okamoto said he was legally a minor, like all Johnny Jr recruits, and could do little without the permission of his mother but that she, too, was oblivious. Journalists for large broadcasters, including TV Asahi and NHK,

pronounced their shock at the allegations and “shame” that they had not done more to reveal them before Okamoto’s testimony (*Ibid.*).

If these decades-long abuse claims are to be believed, and not even Johnny & Associates denies them (a statement released after Okamoto’s testimony said management changes since Kitagawa’s death had created a “transparent organizational structure and systems in line with the times that...can be trusted by society” NHK, 2023), they might indeed prompt shameful reflection by the media organizations that enabled them. In liberal democracies, the mass media is an essential element of civil society, a public watchdog monitoring abuses and crimes by the powerful. It seems only sensible to speculate that had the mainstream media followed up on the many strikingly similar and credible claims against Kitagawa since the 1960s that they could have saved hundreds of children from a similar fate.

Kitagawa’s early bio is well known. Born in Los Angeles to a Buddhist priest, he was briefly an interpreter for the US Occupation in postwar Japan, before starting to manage singing groups. By the time he died of a stroke aged 87 in July 2019, he was one of the most powerful and richest figures in Japan’s entertainment world, and could lay claim to being a force in popular culture throughout East Asia. Johnny & Associates, the organization he set up in 1962 had ignited the careers of some of postwar Japan’s top pop acts, among them Four Leaves, Hikaru Genji, SMAP, TOKIO, Kinki Kids and V6, and in turn helped seed the formula for K-pop, South Korea’s even more successful incarnation (Chun, 2018). Kitagawa’s agency held the world record for most No. 1 singles and concerts produced by an individual from 1974-2010. This success was not overnight but the result of years of trial and error. As Furmanovsky (2020) notes, Kitagawa’s template of squeaky-clean dance and musical-based boybands initially failed to lift off

because he misread the counter-cultural current that roiled Japan and the United States amid the Vietnam War from the late 1960s. Kitagawa appeared to have little liking for the overt politics of the era. “As a result, he did not begin to fulfill his ambition until the third decade of his complex career.

Once the counter-culture ran its course, Kitagawa’s agency merged with and catered to the mass consumer tastes that dominated Japanese popular culture from the 1970s to the 2000s. Central to the shaping of these tastes was network television and its sprawling satellite network of publishers, where producers and advertisers targeted Japan’s vast urban middle class with aspirational lifestyles. There were of course pop rebels and outsiders, such as Yutaka Ozaki, who rejected this route to stardom, and what they saw as the workaholic culture and drab conformism of the boom years. In “High School Rock ‘N Roll” (1983) for example, Ozaki lashes out against society:

*I don’t want to be crushed in the rush hour
until my death*

*Why, to whom and what do have I have to
be tied?*

*I can see myself struggling in a stream
from which I can’t escape.*

But such sentiments had little place in Kitagawa’s agency, which became nearly as efficient at producing inoffensive, machine-tooled entertainers as the factories that made the ubiquitous Japanese electronic devices on which they were consumed. Once acts from Kitagawa’s stable began to achieve success, thousands of resumes flooded in from across Japan (Takuya Kimura, arguably the most loved of the five members of SMAP joined Johnny’s

after his aunt sent his photo and resume to the agency before his fifteenth birthday). Kitagawa took charge of spotting and nurturing talent and was widely admired within the entertainment industry for his connoisseur's eye for beautiful boy stars, which some saw as the price they had to pay for his behavior. Senior TV producers pronounced themselves thankful for the company's professionalism and uninterested in much else. "As a producer I'm not interested in rumors of sex scandals. It doesn't concern people like us who are making programs," said Tamon Andrew Niwa, a former producer with TBS in a story I wrote for *Newsweek Japan* (2005). "His stars can sing and dance, they're well mannered, remember their lines and are never late," he said. "They run a tight ship. If someone quits (the agency), I always assume there must have been a problem with that performer because it is so professional."

After passing Kitagawa's initial screening, new recruits were placed in company "dorms" where they were molded for stardom; taught how to dress, walk, dance, sing and speak to cameras, to convincingly wield swords and remember dialogue for period dramas, a Japanese TV staple. Contracts were not discussed until debuts were made and lawyers were never involved, so who earned what was a touchy subject: TV work in itself was lucrative only for a clutch of top stars: At the agency's peak, a drama series typically paid around three to five million yen an hour of broadcast time to its top star, and sometimes far less (*Newsweek, ibid.*). But television was in effect a shop window for concerts, records and advertising.

Years of expensive training and grooming and heavy dependency on this advertising meant scandal could be disastrous and was ruthlessly snuffed out. Over the years, multiple stories were suppressed. When SMAP member Goro Inagaki was caught in 2001 in a minor hit-and-run traffic accident in Shibuya, the agency

leaned on TV networks not to use the career-killing tag *yogisha* (suspect). After a rash of cancelled contracts and a few months in seclusion, Inagaki was back. Muckraking magazine *Uwasa no Shinso* once carried an interview with a young girlfriend of another SMAP member, Masahiro Nakai, who said she had become pregnant with his child. According to the magazine, she was told to abort the baby and offered money by the group's management; she angrily severed ties and told her story instead (McNeill, 2003). The agency protected itself from them too. When Koji Kita went public with his claims of sexual abuse, he was dismissed as a vengeful addict and became the subject of anonymous attacks in the tabloids.

Throughout this attack on the industry and cultural product he helped pioneer, Kitagawa managed to not just escape criminal investigation but apparently continue preying on his charges unabated. Okamoto said Kitagawa's grooming focused on 'favorites' who were invited to sleepovers at his penthouse in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward. The abuse began when a boy was instructed to wash and go to bed. Okamoto said he pretended to be asleep while Kitagawa touched and fellated him. These sexual attentions were implicitly tied to the prospects of stardom, noted Okamoto. "He never explicitly said that if you don't put up with (the abuse) you won't be a success. But Johnny's favorite first picks would make it." Criticism was muted despite the obvious parallel between Kitagawa's own alleged personal exploitation of children and the industry he helped create. Kita of Four Leaves, for example, noted that once he asserted his independence, Kitagawa moved onto younger boys. After his death, the great and the good gathered to eulogize him at an event in Tokyo Dome to which a message of condolence from then prime minister Shinzo Abe was sent (Kyodo, 2019).

Abuse claims against Kitagawa peaked in 1999, when the weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun*

published a startling *j'accuse* by 12 of his former charges. That led to global media coverage, including a highly critical feature in *The New York Times* - then the world's most influential newspaper - and even questions in Japan's parliament (Sims, 2000; Shugiin, 2000). Kitagawa sued publisher Bungei Shunju for libel, and, despite the testimony of two of 12 rape victims interviewed by *Bunshun*, the Tokyo District Court ruled in Kitagawa's favor, ordering the publisher to pay 8.8 million yen in damages to him and Johnny's in 2002. The Tokyo High Court overturned this decision in July 2003, however, and concluded the claims were true. "The agency failed to counter argue the allegations in the detailed testimony of the victimized youths," said presiding Judge Hidekazu Yazaki. Kitagawa's final appeal was dismissed in 2005. Hiroaki Tsunematsu, a journalist who helped write the *Bunshun* scoop, later said the victims had been offered money and offers of entertainment work to drop their lawsuits (Newsweek, *ibid.*). This could have been a devastating legal or public-image denouement for Kitagawa but there was little follow-up by *Bunshun's* bigger and richer media counterparts, recalls Kosuke Yanai, a *Bunshun* editor who testified in court during the libel trial. "Even though these claims had reached the point of a court case, there was almost no media coverage. We thought that *The New York Times* might have led to pressure for change but nothing happened. There were a few mentions in the newspapers but not a second of TV airtime" (McNeill, 2023).

A major disincentive to digging deeper into the open secret of Kitagawa's misdeeds was (and remains) the commercial interdependence of television with his agency. Despite claims that the company's influence has withered since the death of Kitagawa and his sister Mary in 2022, no fewer than 57 TV programs (as of April 2023) still use artists from the Kitagawa stable as hosts, actors or regular guests (TV Vision, 2023). Before they disbanded at the end of 2016, the five members of SMAP, then Japan's

best-loved popular group, had about 15 regular TV shows between them. SMAP at their peak earned an estimated ¥120m to ¥150m per TV commercial. Johnny's and the other big agencies still enjoy serious clout in TV drama schedules, often effectively deciding which actors are hired. In extreme cases, in a drama series where you have a regular cast of eight regulars, "seven of them will be decided by the agencies behind the scenes," said Niwa. That's the power they have." Then there are the pop charts and the prime-time commercials. Many publishers, too, depend on access to the company's stars. Yanai points out that *Bunshun* is relatively free to report because its publisher is "not that dependent on" the agency. Megumi Inman, one of the producers of the BBC documentary concludes: "It is still surprising how powerful and omnipotent Johnny & Associates is. You cannot escape them. That is something that is hard to find a comparison to in the UK."

This industry clout, and the media omerta it encouraged ensured that little mention of the abuse claims was made even after Kitagawa's death. When Inman and Mobeen Azhar began to research the BBC documentary, there was still no incentive for establishment media figures to talk to them. "We were flabbergasted at the brick-walling we met from the media and other institutions while making the documentary in Japan," he says. "One of the predominant conversations we had was the press not reporting this story...I think I underestimated how that would affect the story, and how difficult it was for press in Japan to report these issues" (FCCJ, *ibid.*). Although *Bunshun* was furious and returned to haunt the company with a series of interviews with alleged survivor, it stood more or less stood alone. Even today, TV producers show little appetite for digging into what went on inside Kitagawa's penthouse for decades. One network TV producer, who spoke off the record said that while he accepted what Kitagawa did was "wrong", everyone knew it was the price of

fame.

“Perhaps he (Kitagawa) was fulfilling his own desires by taking advantage of them. But the pure feelings of those who wanted to be famous, to sing, to have a concert at Tokyo Dome, to be on TV, and so on, I think those were important to him...And I think the boys he trained said, ‘I’m going to do this to become famous; I’m going to become a star’. I always found (the boys from Johnny & Associates) to be very positive. They wanted to become famous and they were very ambitious. In that world, you have to have an important quality, which is to stand out from the crowd. ‘I want to be better than other people. ‘I want to be more famous than other people.’” Now that Kitagawa is gone, the producer added, he didn’t see much point in pursuing the claims further. (Personal interview, April 2023). While older producers understood the nature of this transaction, however, it is clear from the small library of pained testimonies from Kitagawa’s former charges that they did not, regardless of their “consent”. In some cases, the handful of years spent in his presence shadowed their sexual and psychological lives forever.

If this industry shoulder shrugging is notable, even more striking is how many of the alleged victims of Kitagawa still express affection for him. Before he died from cancer in 2012, Kita of Four Leaves kept a blog in which his last message was directly to Johnny and Mary Kitagawa: “Thank you. I’m grateful to you.” (Japan Zone, 2021). Okamoto said he, too, was thankful to Kitagawa for launching his career. Hirohide Yakumaru, a former member of Shibugakitai, an eighties boy band, said he had “cried all night” on hearing about his death in 2019. In other words, many victims have complex feelings for their abusers. Azhar says Kitagawa was a highly successful groomer, described by child protection agencies as one who builds a relationship of “trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and

abuse them”. Japan is increasingly recognizing such behavior as abuse rather than mentorship. As I write, the Diet is preparing to pass a law in June 2023 raising the age of consent to 16 and criminalizing “grooming for the purpose of sex” (French, 2023).

Okamoto’s testimony then comes at a historical moment. Unlike all previous claims, his press conference to the FCCJ was widely covered by all the mainstream media. But the stories were often strikingly timorous and careful. NHK’s report (2023), for example, immediately allowed Johnny & Associates a right to reply, and gave almost as much space to them as to the alleged victim. The comparison made most frequently in the wake of this and the BBC documentary is to Jimmy Savile, who hosted two of the BBC’s top-rated shows from the 1970s – 1990s. A revered if eccentric figure when he was alive, Savile used his fame and access to fans to hide decades of predatorial abuse in plain sight. Police believe he sexually abused at least 580 victims. The BBC was widely criticized for overlooking this abuse. After he died in 2011, however, a tsunami of revelations destroyed Savile’s reputation.

Mobeen notes that Savile has been the subject of multiple documentaries since his death, and a new upcoming drama series on the BBC. “That hasn’t happened with Kitagawa in Japan.” A key difference, however, between the revelations in 1999-2005 and 2023 is the internet. Today, everyone, including children (and their parents), can bypass the mass media and read the allegations online for themselves. That makes the contrast between the soft-peddling and self-censorship of television all the more striking, says Yanai of *Bunshun*. Faith in TV is already declining and young people are turning away – 10 percent of Japanese people in their teens and 20s do not look at TV at all, according to some surveys (*The Japan Times*, 2019). “The media is cutting its own throat,” concludes Yanai.

Johnny & Associates is now run by Mary's daughter, Julie Keiko Fujishima. Without the company's founder, its long-term survival may be in doubt. The K-Pop revolution and the death of Kitagawa are major blows, says Michael Furmanovsky, a J-Pop specialist who teaches at Ryukoku University in Kyoto. "I think the (sex) scandal is further evidence of (the agency) being a bit of a dinosaur. It did get some exposure in the mainstream media but at this point in history, it is highly unlikely that another Johnny or Jimmy Saville would be able to avoid media scrutiny of abuse. As far as the company's popularity is concerned, what seems to be happening is that Japanese girls graduate from *Janizu* to K-Pop at an increasingly young age. Around 15-20 percent of my female university students are quite keen K-Pop fans with perhaps just five percent still following a *Janizu* group with any enthusiasm or loyalty."

Kitagawa posthumously bears some responsibility for this commercial decline. Neither he nor his sister appear to have understood how the Internet was changing the entertainment business - their agency didn't release their first pop video online until 2018 (Sankei, 2018). In the end, changing fan tastes, not scandal, may finally topple the cultural behemoth Johnny Kitagawa founded.

Parts of this article appeared in ジャニー喜多川という“傀儡師”に操られ、踊らされた国, published by Courier Japon on May 4 2023. Many thanks to Laura Hein and Patrick Galbraith for reading over the text and suggesting changes.

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