

## Reinventing the Japan Times: How Japan’s oldest English-language newspaper tacked right

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On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 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 (<https://twitter.com/SatoMasahisa/status/1071294989664116737>). 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 29<sup>th</sup>. 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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/11/23/editorials/seoul-guts-comfort-women->

<http://www.debito.org/?p=15227>) 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 (<http://www.debito.org/?p=15227>))

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 (<https://en.jinf.jp/suggestion/archives/5815/http://en.jinf.jp/weekly/archives/5076/> <https://jinf.jp/weekly/archives/16441>) 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” (<https://twitter.com/YoshitoHori/status/858181129530101760/photo/1>) in Shikoku (link

(<https://globis.jp/article/6751/>)), 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 (<http://www.news2u.net/releases/145122>))

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 6<sup>th</sup> admitting responsibility for the editorial ad.

“For our readers, the change warranted a more detailed and nuanced explanation of our decision,” he wrote. (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/2018/12/06/announcements/message-executive-editor>) “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. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-politics-newsroom-insight/fear-and-favor-chill-newsroom-at-storied-japanese-paper-idUSKCN1PI36V?fbclid=IwAR1J2jqaHAf2yWia0D0-iZf4mTicugKjbI5OxFFgcbdraykVqs2UQteaVAM>)

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