

The Yomiuri Shinbun Takes Pride in Its Shame: Expurgating Japan's "Sex Slaves" 読売新聞、誇りをもって恥をさらす 「性奴隷」への言及削除

Michael Penn

The Yomiuri Shinbun stunned the world in late November with a highly unusual apology. The paper announced that it had found dozens of articles in past issues of the English-language Daily Yomiuri (now called The Japan News) between February 1992 and January 2013 that used the expression "sex slave" to refer to wartime comfort women.

They explained that the term comfort women is "difficult to understand for non-Japanese who did not have knowledge of the subject." The Yomiuri Shinbun regretted the impression its past articles had given "as if coercion [of comfort women] by the Japanese government or the army was an objective fact."

The Yomiuri Shinbun's apology was greeted with near shock by foreign correspondents in Japan. Articles about the apology were published in the New York Times, Washington Post, BBC, and just about every other major news organization with its own reporters in Japan.

Not only was the Yomiuri Shinbun pledging not to use political expressions that were annoying to the incumbent Abe government, but they even felt the need to condemn their own past news articles going back more than two decades. They explained that they would "add a note stating that [the expressions used] were

inappropriate to all the articles in question in our database."

To the ears of many educated foreigners, this latter pledge sounds all too much like Winston Smith, the character in the novel 1984, whose job at the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth is to rewrite historical documents to match the constantly changing ideology and policies of the all-powerful government.

In a follow-up article in December, they proudly declared: "The Yomiuri Shinbun and The Japan News will further promote information sharing in the Editorial Bureau in the future to thoroughly ensure that the English-language newspaper is prepared based on The Yomiuri Shinbun's editorial stance."

Journalists around the world were appalled by this open declaration supporting the imposition of top-down ideological conformity.

In the words of The Guardian newspaper, the Yomiuri apology "fuelled concern that sections of the country's media have signed up to a government-led campaign to rewrite Japan's wartime history." The Washington Post suggested that the apology was "astonishing." And in the words of the New York Times,

"Critics sensed a political statement disguised as an admission of guilt."

Normally, a Japanese newspaper offering a retraction of mistakes in its previous articles would be of little or no interest to foreign audiences. This particular apology, however, bounced around the global headlines because it demonstrated just how far removed the Yomiuri Shinbun has become from the common sense of the news media world.

In democratic countries, the major news media is expected to maintain independence and even to play the role of a watchdog on the government, testing official explanations and investigating official actions.

Of course, it has been clear to outside observers for many years that the Yomiuri Shinbun does not really fulfill its supposed role as the guardian of the public trust, but instead functions most of the time as a mouthpiece for the Liberal Democratic Party.

And yet, it is still a matter of awe that the internal culture of the Yomiuri Shinbun has degenerated so much that they were no longer able to predict that an open declaration of ideological conformity with the government would not be greeted with global admiration for their principled stand, but rather with derision and horror.

The Yomiuri Shinbun's apology is a shame to the ethics of journalism, but somehow their editorial board has convinced itself that conformity and censorship is something to be proud of.

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