

FEATURE

Japan's Fundamental Freedoms Imperiled

Asia Pacific Journal and Hokusei University Support Group

The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12,
Issue 41, No. 4, October 13, 2014

Introduction

In early August, the Asahi Shimbun retracted some stories that it published in the 1990s about the wartime “comfort women”. According to the newspaper, the most egregious mistakes involved articles based on claims by Yoshida Seiji concerning his personal involvement in the forced mobilization of young Korean women from Jeju Island to be used as sex slaves in brothels run by the Japanese army.

Publication of these articles coincided with the moment that the “comfort women’s” personal stories and history became central to broader debates about Japan’s “war responsibility,” a topic that has reverberated with a vengeance in the Japanese and regional political scene since last spring when the Abe administration announced it would conduct a review of the Japanese government’s official statement concerning this matter (notably the “Kono Statement”).

Not surprisingly, vocal neo-nationalist groups and the politicians they support have been triumphantly pummeling the Asahi since its formal retraction and apology for having published these incorrect pieces. Ishiba Shigeru, one of the most powerful leaders of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) said he would consider summoning members of the Asahi Shimbun to testify to the Diet about their involvement in the issue, a move many regard as overt political pressure on the allegedly left-leaning Asahi to toe the government line on the comfort women in the weeks leading up to the new secrecy and censorship laws taking effect on December 10.



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Among the myriad visceral attacks against the Asahi organization that continue to appear in the weekly magazines and popular blog sites, the attacks against Uemura Takashi stand out in their intensity and personal calumny. Uemura, a former Asahi correspondent in Seoul, in 1991 broke the story about a surviving Korean comfort woman. In particular, rightists denounced him as concocting the article and “fabricating the whole comfort women story.” Specifically, they criticized Uemura’s article for having confused some technical terms for “comfort women (ianfu)” as “wartime laborers (teishintai)” and for failing to mention that the woman at the center of the story had once been a student at a school that trained “kisaeng” (Korean

“geisha”). The Asahi explained and rebutted both points, emphasizing that “Uemura’s article contained no intentional distortions.”

Nonetheless, systematic and organized attacks against Uemura and his family have deepened and point to problems more pervasive than the ostensible issue of journalistic ethics. Uemura’s marriage to a Korean woman whose mother belongs to a Korean veterans family organization, encourages his attackers to direct vitriol against him and his family, including his highschool aged daughter. In this regard, the Uemura case must be seen in the context of “hate crimes” (both in speech and action) that have proliferated rapidly throughout Japan in recent months.

Critically, this is not just a matter of journalism or of one newspaper trying to protect its reputation. Academic freedom is also at stake in the Uemura affair. Uemura had taken early retirement from the Asahi last year. Although he had received and accepted an offer at a university, the university immediately cancelled the contract as soon as right wing media attacks on him began. The university failed to consider his explanation concerning the authenticity of his article, instead buckling under right wing pressure. In a still confidential explanation to Uemura, the university stated that the voluminous blackmail and threats it was receiving would make it difficult to ensure the safety of its students.

Uemura now teaches as a part-time lecturer at Hokusei Gakuen University, a famous Christian school in Sapporo. As before, this school, too, received countless threats of blackmail against it and its students. Currently, the university is considering whether it should renew Uemura’s contract for next year. It appears that the university administration is reluctant to enforce its policy of protecting academic freedom and the university’s autonomy.

In order to protect him and his family, and defend academic freedom and freedom of speech and press, 400 citizens, scholars, lawyers and journalists throughout Japan organized “the

Hokusei University Support Group” on October 6, 2014.

Founding members include Professors Yamaguchi Jiro, Tanaka Hiroshi, Utsumi Aiko, Komori Yoichi and others. Encouragingly Nonaka Hiromu, a former LDP Chief Cabinet Secretary during the Obuchi cabinet has lent support to the group, indicative of his concern for the principle of democracy at stake.

Their statement follows:

Statement in Defense of Academic Freedom and a Plural Society
By the Hokusei University Support Group
October 6, 2014

Hokusei Gakuen University in Sapporo has been receiving threats that demand the university fire Mr. Takashi Uemura, or allude to injuring its students. Such threats take various forms, including emails, letters, phone calls and noisy demonstrations. For the university to submit to these threats would mean destruction of freedom of speech as well as academic freedom.

Concerned scholars, lawyers and journalists hereby form the “Hokusei University Support Group,” and will take action to encourage the university to maintain academic freedom and autonomy of the university.

Mr. Uemura wrote articles about the wartime sufferings of the “comfort women” from the Korean Peninsula when he was a staff writer of the Asahi Shimbun in 1991. Some accuse him of igniting the whole issue. There is room to investigate the accuracy of his articles, but any debate must be conducted properly, based upon the facts. Threatening the university with bombing or injury to students is nothing but criminal behavior.

Mr. Uemura’s high-school age daughter has been harshly attacked on the Internet with her photo and name exposed with a call to pressure her to commit suicide. A classmate of Mr. Uemura’s son also had his photo and name exposed and attacked on line in a case of mistaken

identity with such comments as “son of a traitor” and “kill yourself.” We cannot turn our back on such a vicious hate crime.

Mr. Uemura teaches a class on international exchange for foreign students, and does not address the comfort women issue. Academic freedom, guaranteed by our Constitution, includes such matters as who a university hires as professors, what professors teach, and what students study.

We denounce the threat to Hokusei and Mr. Uemura’s family as a form of terrorism attacking freedom and democracy. We believe that citizens should be able to overcome differences in opinion and viewpoints to share one simple principle: to cherish and protect freedom and democracy. We call on the public to support Hokusei Gakuen and encourage the university by petition, letters and assembly.

We believe that blinding ourselves to the present violence will mean accepting further brutality in the near future. We should not isolate Hokusei Gakuen. We would like to proclaim to the authors of such despicable threats that “we are also Hokusei.”

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Authors: Asia-Pacific Journal Feature