

Fanning the Flames: China vs. Japan in the Media

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Abstract: *Critical media studies have long understood the role of the media in not just illuminating disputes between nations but in inflaming them. The media can be used to inform or distort the background and causes of conflict and arouse public opinion. This article surveys the potentially calamitous decline of public perceptions in China and Japan toward the other and asks if the media is a monitor of this decline or a party to it.*

Keywords: *media, Japan-China relations, nationalism, public opinion*

Every year for two decades, nonprofit organization Genron (2023) has mapped fluctuations in Japanese popular sentiment toward China. The results are sobering: the percentage of Japanese respondents saying their impression of China is “poor” hit 92% in 2023, up from 38% in 2005 (just below the record 93% set in 2014). Fewer than one-in-ten Japanese have a ‘favorable’ impression of their neighbor, according to the survey. Negative Chinese impressions of Japan have seen more oscillations and some recent improvement, but still languish at 63%, roughly where they were 20 years ago. Trust in China has worsened in many countries in recent years, but Japan (and Australia) shows the highest negative ratings, according to other polls (Pew, 2023; Sasakawa, 2023).

There are obvious reasons for this sullen and potentially calamitous distrust among Asia’s two most powerful nations, particularly military competition and decades-long quarrels over territory and history. Genron’s president, Yasushi Kudo, ruefully notes the growing “anxiety and alienation concerning mili-

tary activity by and disputes with the other country” (Genron, 2021). Japanese respondents to the survey cite the “anti-Japanese sentiment” that seems to prevail in the Chinese media. This was most recently evident in 2023 amid China’s state-backed disinformation campaign following the decision to begin discharging treated radioactive water from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant (Cai, 2023; Davidson, 2023).

Coordinated propaganda against Japan, Taiwan, and the United States, often as a vent for public anger over domestic issues, is a recognized feature of Chinese media, which is state-run or heavily dirigiste, and “leads the world in repression of the Internet”, says Paris-based media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders (Wang, 2021; Piao, 2023; Zhang et al, 2024; RSF, 2024). Videos widely viewed in China have claimed (falsely) that the Fukushima discharge has eliminated large numbers of fish, triggered mass protests or even killed a Japanese official who drank contaminated water. Recent online stories have claimed that Taiwanese officials, at America’s behest, harvested blood samples from Taiwan residents with the aim of creating US-made bio-weapons targeting China (Dotson, 2023).

Less consideration is given to how Japanese media, which is mostly privately run and free from direct government meddling, covers China. At a summit to discuss reporting in Asia in 2023, Hiroki Sugita (2023), a veteran Kyodo journalist and winner of the 2021 Japan National Press Club Award, described the ‘slow motion’ deterioration of the Japanese media, driven by negative reporting and online campaigns. “Most of the reporting is very one-sided...

very nationalistic and sometimes chauvinistic and militaristic,” he said. “Japanese government policy and public opinion about China are getting worse and worse. Those conditions inevitably and naturally affect the course and overtone of the media coverage of Japan” (Sugita, *ibid.*).

Though the internet is siphoning away traditional media audiences, Japanese people still rely on the vernacular news media for most of their information on China and the Chinese (Genron, *ibid.*). It is worth considering, therefore, whether the media on all sides reinforce negative impressions of the other, poisoning public opinion and stoking “antagonistic foreign policy decisions.” The stakes are high: in 2024, the joint command of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces and the U.S. military for the first time named China as a “hypothetical enemy” (Kyodo, 2024, Hanssen, 2024). Japan will have the third largest defense budget in the world by 2027, after the US and China. Taro Aso, a former prime minister, said in 2023 that Japan and its US ally must be prepared to fight over Taiwan (Reuters, 2023). Asia’s arms race risks spinning out of control, warns CNN (2023). Are the media, to cite the title of a landmark study of propaganda in Japan from the Meiji era through the Second World War, illuminating the facts or “fanning the flames” (Ueda, 2021).

From Friend to Foe

Postwar Japanese media coverage of China until the late 1980s was largely positive.

NHK’s reporting on China in particular, Satoru Nagai (2009) notes, was almost uncritically positive until the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. The pro-China mood arguably peaked with Premier Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Tokyo in 1978. A series of NHK specials in 1980 and 1981 helped reinforce positive views of China in Japan by showing unexplored regions of the country; audience ratings were high. In the 1980s, despite disputes over history with Japan, the favorable coverage continued in multiple documentaries exploring China.

Many Japanese media organizations were permit-

ted to set up bureaus in China in the 1950s, albeit subject to capricious policy changes: in August 1957 for example, the bureau of the *Asahi Shimbun* was suspended for what was considered the ‘anti-Chinese attitude’ of Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (Lu, 2020). Sugita (2022) recalls that Zhou Enlai, China’s first premier, demanded the Japanese press obey three political principles: not to be hostile toward China, to oppose ‘two Chinas,’ and to not impede the normalization of relations between Japan and China (MOFA, China). In 1964, an agreement allowed the six newspaper companies, two broadcasters (NHK, Tokyo), and an agency (Kyodo) to dispatch one journalist-in-residence each to Beijing—nine reporters in total (Wits, 2020). China sent seven journalists, mostly from Xinhua, to Japan.

Takai (2012) posits three initial frameworks for understanding Japanese media coverage of China. After the ‘Nixon Shock’ and the normalization of diplomatic relations with the US and Japan in 1972, media coverage mostly avoided criticizing China and focused on its development. In the 1980s, the coverage broadened to include the mounting mood for democratization in Asia. After 1989 and Tiananmen, news reports in Japan were more likely to cast doubt on whether China shared ‘common values,’ such as human rights and democracy.

The balance of coverage began to significantly shift in the 1990s, driven by mutual threat perceptions, argue Rose and Sykora (2017). They cite China’s nuclear tests, tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and Chinese concerns about the tightening US-Japan alliance, reinforcing perceptions of a resurgent Japanese military. Moreover, they add that “changes in the structure of Sino-Japanese relations meant that the pro-friendship constituencies on both sides were becoming less influential—this included friendship groups, China/Japan experts, the ‘China school’ in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, pro-Japan or pro-China parliamentary groups or factions, the business lobby and trusted individuals and so on” (*ibid.*).

Commentators have noted a steep rise in anti-Japa-

nese propaganda in China since the 1990s (Steinfeld, 2015). Zhu Dake, a culture critic and professor at Shanghai's Tongji University, calculates that about 69 "anti-Japanese" television series and 100 films were approved by the state regulators in 2012 alone, and says that at one point about 70% of Chinese TV dramas focused on the war with Japan (Lague & Lee, 2013). During the second administration of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012–2020), China made over 200 anti-Japanese war movies a year (ibid).

In Japan, meanwhile, conservatives began in the late 1990s to aggressively challenge much of the accepted narrative of the Second World War, complete with its grim catalogue of war atrocities in China. In the 2000s, the education ministry mandated that school textbooks reflect the government position on history and territorial issues, including the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. The Abe administration attempted to cajole or pressure public service broadcaster NHK and the commercial media into taking a less independent or critical line on these controversies and to adhere more closely to government views on the growing threat posed by China.¹

Rising China

The prelude to this was a period of economic and political disarray. In 1993, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was cast out of office for the first time since 1955. Between 1993–2012, 13 men sat in the prime minister's chair before Abe took a grip of the office. In 2010, Japan lost its place as the world's second largest economy to China, a title it had held since 1968 when it surpassed West Germany. In 2024, it slipped behind (the now reunited) Germany to world number four (Asahi, 2024). These losses, coupled with ebbing faith in the Japan-US alliance, triggered deep anxiety among Japanese nationalists.

¹ Both sides accelerated efforts to reshape global perceptions. Japan's global PR budget was dramatically expanded under Abe (Sieg, 2015). China's media conglomerates, Xinhua and the China Media Group, began to heavily promote its preferred narrative on history, territory, and domestic issues, such as its treatment of minorities. The United Front Work Department, a branch of the Chinese Communist party, zeroed in on university campuses and ethnic Chinese student groups in an attempt to boost its influence worldwide.

In 2015, Abe pushed through a controversial 're-interpretation' of Japan's pacifist constitution, allowing it to come to the aid of its US military ally (BBC, 2014).

A key moment in media coverage came in September 2012, when protests broke out in China following Japan's decision to purchase the Diaoyu Islands, which China considered its national territory. Japanese TV screens filled up with scenes of angry Chinese smashing Japanese cars, recalled Yasuhiro Tase, a former reporter for the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (Li, 2017). Though these incidents were isolated and sometimes staged, Japanese audiences were given little of this context, notes Tase. "When I was young, I never thought about writing negative reports about China. At that time, about 80 percent of Japanese people liked China, but things are totally different nowadays," Tase said, blaming Japan's post-1990s rightward drift.

One of the outcomes of this drift has been more circumspect and cautious coverage of historical issues. During the Abe era, for example, NHK effectively banned the terms "Nanking Massacre" or "Rape of Nanking" (Lloyd Parry, 2014; McNeill, 2016, NHK 2023). NHK's inhouse stylebook now mandates that the 1937 destruction of the Chinese capital by the Imperial Japanese Army must be referred to only as "the Nanjing Incident" ("The Nanjing Massacre" is used only when directly quoting remarks made by important people overseas etc., when the fact that it is a quotation must be made clear"). In reference to claims that 300,000 people were killed in the six weeks that the Imperial Army controlled Nanjing, NHK's formula (as per similar guidelines followed by MOFA) states: "The Japanese government says it cannot be denied that killing of noncombatants occurred following the entrance of the Japanese army into Nanjing. However, it says there are numerous theories as to the number of actual victims, and says it is difficult to determine what the correct number is." NHK reports typically use quotation marks around Nanjing Incident and state that many civilians were "allegedly" (とされる) killed. This elliptical description contrasts sharply with that in China,

which not only mandates teaching the massacre as part of the national educational curriculum, it commemorates it nationally every year (since 2014) on December 13.

Other wartime misdeeds are similarly glossed over. On Yasukuni, the Shinto shrine that venerates Japan's wartime leaders along with its 2.4 million war dead, NHK instructs its employees to avoid English expressions such as “war-related shrine”, “war-linked shrine” and “war shrine,” whereas for China, a pilgrimage to the shrine implies endorsement of the leaders and their war aims (McNeill, 2016, *ibid*) References to a ‘dispute’ with China over the Senkaku Islands have reverted to the formula: “Japan controls the Senkaku islands. China and Taiwan claim them. The Japanese government maintains the islands are an inherent part of Japan’s territory, in terms of history and international law. It says there is no issue of sovereignty to be resolved over them” (NHK, 2021).

This approach contrasts with coverage of the Senkakus by international media outlets, which, rather than baldly cite government policy, include their Chinese name (Diaoyu) and highlight the fact that China disputes sovereignty. Kaori Hayashi (2014), a media scholar at the University of Tokyo said the three basic tenets of NHK contemporary operations seemed to be “avoidance of controversy, pandering to audiences, and parochial nationalism.” These tenets,” she points out, “are diametrically opposed to the original spirit of public service broadcasting as it developed after World War II.”

All of this allows the propaganda arms of the Chinese state to claim that Japan is not just fleeing from its past but implying that it “might repeat the folly of war.” *The China Daily* accuses the Japanese ruling class of betraying ordinary citizens. “Japanese people long to live in a country that can completely bid farewell to its history of aggression and adhere to peaceful development, but that requires Japan to face up to its wartime crimes and profoundly reflect on that period of history, in order to win forgiveness from its neighbors and win their respect” (Zhang,

2022).

History Fades

A landmark case of political interference in NHK was over its documentary, *ETV 2001 Questioning Wartime Sexual Abuse*. The 2001 program, which included a mock tribunal putting the emperor on trial for war crimes, was substantially edited to remove testimonies of ‘comfort women’ and comments by former Japanese soldiers (Yonekura, 2017, 2021). In 2005, the *Asahi* newspaper reported that these changes followed pressure from Abe, then deputy chief cabinet secretary and another senior politician, but NHK denied it (*ibid*). NHK has not made a stand-alone program about comfort women since (*ibid*).

Such overt meddling—or at least its exposure—was rare. Yet, the shifting political sands in Japan made TV producers fearful of being sucked under. Eriko Ikeda, an ex-NHK director indirectly involved in the 2001 ETV documentary, recalls that by the end of her tenure, program-makers in NHK tacitly understood that the Nanjing massacre and comfort women were taboo. She says of the mid-1990s period that her proposals on programs related to comfort women were repeatedly blocked by NHK management (Ikeda, 2014; 2023, personal interview). Ikeda herself was demoted to NHK Archives in Saitama for the last four years of her employment at NHK, until her retirement.

The number of TV documentaries in Japan dealing with the war, heavily clustered around the anniversary month of August, also declined steadily after the 1990s, according to one study, partly for commercial reasons (Yonekura, 2021). Programs that showed the Japanese Imperial Army *perpetrating* war crimes fell from 26 in the 1990s to almost zero today. A corollary of this decline in attributing agency to Japanese wartime actions was a rise in victimhood. According to a 2017 analysis by Córdoba (2019), 88% of Japanese represented in dozens of television programs on Japanese TV over four decades were victims. In Japanese cinema, too,

61% of Japanese war films made from 1980 to 2020 focused on Japan’s ‘suffering.’

Arm-twisting of the commercial media was another feature of the Abe years. In 2016, then communications minister, Takaichi Sanae, threatened to close television stations that flouted rules on impartiality, enshrined in the Broadcast Law, amid a political row about the near simultaneous departure of three liberal TV anchors from the airwaves (The Economist, 2016). Internal documents from the telecommunications ministry later recorded attempts by top Abe aide, Yosuke Isozaki, to cajole ministry bureaucrats into changing their interpretation of the Broadcast Law in 2014–2015 (Asahi, 2023).

The law, passed in 1950, reflected America’s newly minted “fairness doctrine,” which demanded that broadcast companies be politically impartial—or lose their right to broadcast. The scrapping of the US fairness doctrine in 1987 has since been blamed for opening up the partisan media wars that have roiled American politics (Tompkins, 2021). Isozaki reportedly bullied bureaucrats in his efforts to get them to agree that the law could be applied to a single ‘biased’ TV program and not just (as had been interpreted for 64 years) on the totality of a broadcaster’s programming. Abe was keen to either reinterpret or scrap the law because it would have ended what he perceived as liberal bias in the media (Okubo, 2024).

Global Coverage

The Japanese media has reduced its coverage of global news since the late 1990s, sometimes dramatically: 22% of coverage by the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan’s largest newspaper, was foreign news in 1998; this had shrunk to 13% by 2018, according to Global News View (2019). The share of international coverage in the left-liberal *Asahi Shimbun*, halved to 3% in the same period (ibid). The number of foreign bureaus is also declining, at the *Yomiuri* (for example) from 34 in 2008 to 27 in 2019.

This is largely the result of shrinking paying

audiences for newspapers and TV in Japan. Daily newspaper circulation has plummeted by about 23 million since 1997. The *Asahi* has lost nearly half its readership since 2003 (Hoffman, 2024). Many young people have abandoned their parents’ habit of reading a newspaper every day. One survey suggests that 10% of young Japanese watch no TV at all (Jiji, 2019). Instead, they surf Instagram, YouTube or TikTok and get their news sliced and diced on aggregator portal sites, such as Yahoo and Line.

Yet, mainstream media coverage of China (Japan’s largest neighbor and most important trading partner) is still extensive. The number of NHK correspondents in China steadily expanded from the 1990s – 2020s. Most news organizations have tended to reduce bureaus in Africa and South America and centralize European coverage to Brussels, London or Paris, but to maintain, as far as possible, bureaus in China and South Korea. This is because the latter generate a great deal of news that is of interest to Japanese audiences, notes one newspaper editor (interview, 2024).

Yet, program budgets have shrunk, reducing the ability of producers to do in-depth or on-the-ground reporting (Toyo Keizai, 2023). NHK has been called on to reduce its operating budget, which is about 700 billion yen (Asahi, 2020). The agenda-setting of the Japanese media has changed, too. In addition to eliding or dismissing Chinese claims about the past, negative reports about China have mushroomed. TV often highlights the irrational and capricious nature of China’s leadership, its growing military budget, human-rights abuses, and its attempts to “reshape the global rules-based order” and claim regional military supremacy. Increases in China’s military budget, which has risen steadily for 28 consecutive years, are reported in detail (Sipri, 2023).

Less reporting is given to context. Although Japan’s military is generally framed as “defensive” in the domestic media (NHK even frowns on the word ‘troops’ to refer to Self-Defense Force personnel), it is nevertheless one of the world’s largest and most sophisticated. Japan shelters under the US nuclear

umbrella. While China has long affirmed a No First Use of nuclear weapons policy, the US and its allies have not. China's militarization is at least partly a response to the perception of encirclement by the US and its allies. Until the 2020s, China had little desire to modernize its nuclear forces because it perceived no immediate external threat, notes Tong Zhao of Carnegie China (2021)—“But that era is gone now.”

Japan's military spending, meanwhile, grew by 5.9% between 2021 and 2022, reaching \$46.0 billion, the highest since 1960, notes the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (*ibid*). In 2022, Japan announced a doubling of this spending to 2% of GDP and an expansion of military options, including the ability to strike enemy bases. All this represents a profound shift in Japan's military policy, concludes Xiao Liang, a researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme. They further assert that “The post-war restraints Japan imposed on its military spending and military capabilities seem to be loosening.”

In a representative democracy, such a profound shift might be accompanied by robust public debate. Critics of the Japanese government, however, say it has discouraged discussion and tried to avoid journalistic inquiry. Such criticism spiked after Hiroko Kuniya, who had anchored NHK's flagship investigative program *Close-up Gendai* for two decades, quit in 2015. The weekly press blamed her departure on a 14-minute interview on July 3rd, 2014 with Yoshihide Suga, the government's top spokesperson. Kuniya asked an unscripted question on the possibility that the government's new security legislation might mean Japan becoming embroiled in America's wars. The prime minister's office later called the show's line managers and complained about the content. NHK took their chance to yank her off the air (McNeill, Tanaka, 2022)

This skirmish was not the last. During a live interview in October 2020, Yoshio Arima, anchor of NHK's flagship evening news program *News Watch 9*, asked then Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to elaborate on why he had blocked the appointment of six

scholars as advisors on government policy, reportedly as payback for their criticism of his predecessor, Shinzo Abe. “I think there are people who want an explanation about what is going on,” prodded Arima. “There are things that can be explained and things that cannot,” Suga responded, cutting him off. Arima quit in March 2021 (McNeill, 2021). Arima's predecessor, Kensuke Okoshi, was also allegedly ousted after a clash with a member of the Abe government (Kingston, 2016).

All of this had a chilling effect on the media, argue a group of shareholder activists, led by Yuko Tanaka, a former president of Hosei University and Kihei Maekawa, an ex-administrative vice-minister for education (FCCJ, 2024). The activists have published a set of formal shareholder proposals to the big TV networks, including demanding that they “observe the autonomy and independence as stipulated in the Broadcasting Act.” They were triggered partly by what they called the networks' “eerie silence” (不気味な沈黙) on Japan's military buildup. “Have those in power become servants of some rather than the whole?” asked Maekawa rhetorically. “Are they preparing for war without the knowledge of the sovereign people? The role I expect [of] the media is to expose the reality of power and inform people about it” (*ibid*).

Anti-Chinese Sentiment

Studies have claimed a tendency by the Japanese mainstream media to interpret China's rise negatively and confrontationally. A content analysis of 196 newspaper stories published from 2018 to 2020 by researchers from the School of Journalism and Communication at Shanghai International Studies University concludes that selective framing by Japan's five main daily newspapers “strongly exaggerate the China threat” and “create the illusion that China is challenging the existing order and disturbing regional peace” (Xiaotian et al, 2021). For example, falsely attributing the withdrawal of Japanese companies in China to anti-Japanese demonstrations or local economic problems rather than to the companies' own business failures.

China's plans with Russia to expand its international influence "in an alliance of 3.1 billion people" are portrayed as a global menace.

Anti-Chinese sentiment in Japan worsened during the Covid pandemic, argue Lyu and Takikawa (2022). Their analysis of online news discourse (in over 84,000 comments) in Japan from January to May 2020 found that existing stereotypical negative views on China were reinforced. Their research concluded that "rather than negative attitudes toward Chinese people due to the self-protective response to possible infection, the negative attitudes toward the Chinese government constitute the main features of expressed anti-China sentiment in Japan." Another study of China coverage in the *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun* from 1987–2018, noted that while neither had an overarching narrative, the cumulative impact of terms such as 'concern,' 'anxiety,' 'distrust,' 'crisis,' 'risk,' and 'increased influence and presence' reinforced stereotypical interpretations of China as threat (Lu, 2020).

One of the problems alluded to by Sugita (2022) is that press clubs tend to faithfully and uncritically report Japanese government reports on Chinese military development. In the popular media, meanwhile, xenophobic or racist commentary is rife. Thus, the framework for much Japanese media coverage of China is "othering" China, and vice-versa in the Chinese media. "Portraying "Otherness," whether as a role model or a threat, has become a means of constructing a Japanese identity through a foreign mirror," concludes Shogo Suzuki (2014). This othering resonates with similar sentiments in other Western nations, especially those in the US security embrace (Zhang, 2024).

Within this landscape, some might celebrate the waning ability of the mainstream media in Japan to frame issues in a way that reinforces nationalist sentiment. But ultranationalist, xenophobic, and conspiratorial commentary is also a feature of online discourse. Distrust in the establishment Japanese media, which clusters around press clubs disgorging official information, is growing, says Masaru Seo,

the president of Slow News, an online media outlet set up in 2019 that supports investigative journalism (2021). "The media views themselves as watchdogs monitoring those in power, but the public sees the media as a vested interest group."

Left and right can now bypass this mainstream media (the Japanese equivalent of the conservative smear 'lamestream media' is *masu-gomi*) and speak directly to disciples. Right-wing YouTube channel Toranomon News, for example, has 890,000 followers, dwarfing left-wing channel Democracy Times, the progressive channel, run by Professor Koichi Nakano of Sophia University. Hyakuta Naoki, neoconservative author and one time NHK governor, has 457,000 followers. Nihon Bunka Channel Sakura has 530,000 subscribers. Channel Sakura and its activist wing, Ganbare Nippon, have been behind some of the biggest right-wing demonstrations in postwar Japanese history, notes researcher and author Jeffrey Hall (2021).

The online right has helped turn mainstream once fringe ideas—and overlaps with establishment politics. Channel Sakura has repeatedly hosted politicians from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), including former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Regular commentator Toshio Tamogami, former chief of staff of Japan's Air Self-Defense Force, built up a cult following that he leveraged into a campaign for Tokyo governor in 2014. He won 12.5% of the vote. All of these outlets argue for a tougher or more confrontational line with China. Channel Sakura, for example, have aired flag-waving incursions by Japan's far-right onto the Senkaku Islands, which in turn provoked Chinese activists to do the same.

There is evidence, too, that factions within the LDP are trying to manipulate public opinion by artificially amplifying right-wing online topics, especially on Twitter. Social media, notes Fabian Schäfer (2022), helps to mainstream "marginal and even extremist political positions" (as he notes with the populist term "anti-Japanese"). He continues, "[N]ormalizing radical positions via social media is a central tool of what right-wing populists and others on the far right

describe as ‘metapolitical’ strategy: the strategic dissemination of extremist ideas and discourses in the ‘pre-political’ sphere of culture in order to pave the way for their inclusion in the political public sphere.”

It will be difficult to stop the drift away from the big Japanese news gatherers, especially since they rely so heavily on access to government agencies. Information from such sources has shrinking value, notes Susumu Shimoyama of Sophia University (2021), because with online platforms “flooded with free news, even if one newspaper gets information faster than others, the others will soon catch up.” Scoops in recent years, such as influence peddling and corruption, have come from outside the press-club system via *Shimbun Akahata* or the weekly magazines, he notes.

It remains to be seen how far this media fracturing will go. There are several important differences between Japan and, say, the United States. One is that there are still few online news outlets in Japan (such as *Politico* or *The Hill*) that do original reporting. Most websites are parasitic or commentary. Notable exceptions are *Tansa*, founded by ex-Asahi journalists, and *Slow News*. Another difference is that the Japanese mainstream media, especially broadcaster NHK, are still unifying institutions, partly because of their vital role during Japan’s numerous natural disasters.

What seems likely, therefore, is that the decline of mainstream media will lead to a further popular disengagement from political and social issues, as people turn online mainly for entertainment and distraction. As Hayashi (2018) notes, “The biggest concern in Japan’s case is not that people distrust the media, but they are indifferent to them. And by extension, they are liable to be indifferent to their society.”

Conclusion

The World Press Freedom Index reminds us that Japan is a parliamentary democracy and “upholds the principles of media freedom and pluralism.”

Freedom of expression is constitutionally protected and the Internet is open and lightly regulated, unlike China where the state intervenes much more intrusively. Nevertheless, self-censorship in Japan is rife, particularly on sensitive issues such as the imperialist past and war with China. Reporters Without Borders notes the “weight of traditions, economic interests and political pressure” that prevent journalists from fully exercising their role of holding power to account. In recent years, the mainstream media has become more susceptible to the increasingly charged political atmosphere as well as signals from the state—and from the United States—encouraging more overtly negative coverage of China. Online commentary on China is also strongly negative, amplifying xenophobic and right-wing voices. Japanese politicians should work to prevent a conflict between China and the US over Taiwan, said former Japanese assistant chief Cabinet secretary Kyoji Yanagisawa in 2024 (Taipei Times). The same might be said of the media.

Acknowledgements: *The authors would like to thank Zhang Yusi and Zhu Ziqi for their help with this article.*

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