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Yasukuni Film and NHK's Declaration to Promote National Interests. Government Funding, Free Expression and Propaganda in Japan

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The big media-related news story on April 1 was the ongoing controversy over the documentary feature "Yasukuni," screenings of which had been canceled by a number of movie theaters in Tokyo and Osaka out of fear of rightwing protests. That night, NHK's regular 7 p.m. news bulletin did not mention the film, but it did feature a report on the public broadcaster's reply to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications that it would "accept" the government's request for NHK to promote Japan's "national interests" in its overseas broadcasts.

Though the two stories aren't related, much of their newsworthiness is based on the connection between government funding and the right of free expression. In the case of "Yasukuni," which is directed by Chinese filmmaker Li Ying, a 20-year resident of Japan, at least part of the controversy centers on a ¥7.5 million grant that the production received in 2006 from the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Some politicians believe that the film, which examines the embattled Shinto shrine dedicated to Japan's war dead, has an anti-Japan bias. Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Inada Tomomi, who is also a lawyer, has questioned whether or not the movie deserved such a grant, saying that it shouldn't be given to projects with a political agenda.



Li Ying

NHK is supported by viewer fees, so technically it isn't funded by the government. Nevertheless, its budget must be approved by the Diet and its international broadcasting service does receive subsidies. It's impossible to say if this fiscal relationship influenced NHK's decision to accept the government's request, but it can't be discounted.

However, the funding aspects in both stories are less central to the free expression issue than the perceived political angle. In the one story, you have politicians complaining that an independent documentary film is biased, while in the other you have a public broadcaster essentially promising to follow the government slant on whatever news it conveys overseas.

In the official statement released April 1, NHK tied itself in knots trying to justify its decision to accept the government's request without sacrificing its "reliability and objectivity" as a "news organization." It mainly did this by citing a specific example. Since one of the government's requests was to "pay special attention to the issue of Japanese abducted by North Korea" and NHK has so far covered this issue "properly" and in a way that doesn't contradict the government's position, it presumes that NHK will still be able to "ensure its rights as an independent broadcaster." In other words, it's OK to accept the government's request because we've been doing it all along.

In Japan, journalistic neutrality is usually manifested as giving voice to every view on a given issue, an idea that can be taken to extremes. During last year's Upper House election, Komori Shigetaka, the chairman of NHK's management committee, was reported to have suggested that historical dramas be suspended during the campaign since they might be seen as favoring particular regions over others. However, when it comes to international broadcasts, every country in the world advances its own national interest. "It isn't the same as domestic broadcasting," Komori said at a recent management meeting, "where all the different opinions are presented." Here, he clearly equates "international broadcasting" with state-controlled media. He even told an Asahi Shimbun reporter that Japanese broadcasters must "clarify Japan's position" in the face of North Korea's and China's media reports. Fight fire with fire, as it were.

As far as "Yasukuni" goes, some politicians have complained that the movie is not neutral, and their primary impulse is the same as Komori's, which is to ensure that Japan and its policies are presented in a favorable light. "Yasukuni" is viewed by both the media and the authorities as a foreign production — the director's nationality is the most prominent consideration in any report on the controversy. To them, the movie automatically assumes a certain bias since it is a film about a Japanese issue that was not made by a Japanese person.

In an April 3 editorial in the Asahi, documentary filmmaker Mori Tatsuya pointed this out, saying that any Japanese "reaction" to the film quickly jumps to the fact that its director is Chinese, and such a reaction "colors" the way that person views the film. But there is nothing necessarily wrong with that, he says. "Documentaries vary in the way they frame the 360-degree world," Mori writes. There is no such thing as a completely objective documentary. Anyone who insists that it be 100 percent neutral doesn't know how to watch one.

Mori's idea is what connects Komori Shigetaka to Inada Tomomi. Neither of these authority figures trusts viewers to make up their own minds about the information they receive. Komori believes that overseas viewers of NHK World broadcasts will not form a correct idea of Japan's interests unless those interests are conveyed exclusively; while Inada thinks that anyone who sees "Yasukuni" will come away from it hating Japan.

Both of these positions are inherently patronizing, which brings to mind a comment a Japanese friend made after seeing "Yasukuni." She said that all the local reports about the movie stress that it has no narration. Japanese people have been raised on NHK-produced documentaries, which could be described as over-narrated: the visuals and dialogue are reinforced with redundant voiceover that, in some cases, is added for the visually impaired but whose content and tone nevertheless implicitly tell viewers how to process what they're taking in. A 74-year-old man who attended a public preview of "Yasukuni" in Tokyo told the Japan Times that he was bothered by the film because its "message...is not clear." The trouble many Japanese will have with the documentary is not that it brings up difficult issues, but that it doesn't tell them how they're supposed to feel about them.

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For additional writing on the Yasukuni film controversy see

[*Freedom Next Time. Japanese Neonationalists Seek to Silence Yasukuni Film*](#)

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John Junkerman interviews Li Ying

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