Japanese Radio Broadcasting during the Occupation and the Truth about "Democratization"

The Civil Information and Education Section, which was in charge of media guidance and management at GHQ, tried to make the most of NHK radio broadcasts, which were listened to by an estimated 30 million of Japan's 74 million people at the time, to achieve the Occupation Army's goal of eliminating militarism and promoting democracy through thorough education on war crimes.

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Has Japan's media really been "democratized" since the end of the war?
The notable author, winner of the Uchikawa Yoshimi Memorial Prize, unravels the political machinations hidden in radio broadcasts during the occupation and the truth about postwar Japan.

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Was postwar Japan a "society where it was easy to speak out"?

The media in postwar Japan was democratized by GHQ (General Headquarters). More precisely, it is *said* to have been democratized. Radio broadcasting was at the forefront of media democratization reform. This was a reflection of the top-down nature of wartime radio broadcasting, such as announcements from Imperial Headquarters[1], and involved "opening the microphone to the public," actively seeking to

[1] The Imperial Headquarters Announcements were official radio announcements regarding the Second Sino-Japanese War (China Incident) and the Pacific War (Greater East Asia War) from November 1937 to August 1945. As the war situation worsened, from May 1942 onward, they began to make false announcements of war results that were detached from the actual situation and made it appear that Japan was in the lead. For this reason, the term is used as a distraction to describe unreliable information released by the government or influential people that is only convenient for them.

incorporate the voices of listeners. In this way, the appeals of the people could be heard throughout the country. After the war, radio broadcasting made a new start as a means of conveying the opinions and demands of individuals to the streets in order to build a society in which all citizens are equally respected.

But on the other hand, if the above common belief is correct, why do we feel that the world is so "suffocating" now, 79 years since the start of a new beginning after Japan's defeat in World War II, surrounded by media that have developed over time based on radio broadcasts during the occupation period (1945–52), namely television broadcasts, websites, and social media? In the recent Tokyo gubernatorial election (July 2024), a record number of 56 candidates ran, but they were met with a barrage of insults on social media. Humorously edited videos of street speeches and political broadcasts were circulated, and "impersonation announcement of candidacy" of people who were not actually running were frequently posted. "Freedom of speech and expression" was supposed to be guaranteed in Japan immediately after the end of the war, but when exactly did it come to be misunderstood in this way? Where has the public space for speech based on democracy gone?

"Has postwar Japan really been a society in which it is easy to speak up?" Starting from the awareness of the problem, this article focuses on radio broadcasts during the occupation period, which are the author's specialty, and considers the "truth" of the war as reported in conjunction with the voices of the people, drawing suggestions for the chaotic modern media.

The clever rhetoric of radio broadcasts during the occupation

"Now we can tell the truth. This is the first program to reveal the truth about the war to the entire Japanese people."

This is the opening narration of *Shinso wa Koda*[2] (The truth is here), a 10-episode documentary drama that was broadcast from 8 p.m. on Sunday, December 9, 1945, and is the most well-known radio program during the occupation. The Civil Information and Education Section (CIE), which was in charge of media guidance and management at GHQ, tried to make the most of NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai, Japan Broadcasting Corporation) radio broadcasts, which were listened to by an estimated 30 million of Japan's 74 million people at the time, to achieve the Occupation Army's goal of eliminating militarism and promoting democracy through thorough education on war crimes. Through *Shinso wa Koda*, the "truth" of the Japanese military was revealed, such as the Nanjing Massacre and the Bataan Death March. Its music and sound effects emphasized the vividness of the atrocities.

Slightly more than 10% of the numerous radio programs produced during the occupation were called "information programs" within the CIE and were scheduled to be broadcast at times of high listenership. When translated directly into Japanese, the name is "*joho bangumi*," which sounds like a variety show, but that was not the case. Those programs had political and strategic significance as special programs that

[2] This radio program was organized by the Civil Information and Education Section of GHQ itself in order to promote democratization, and reenacted the actions of politicians and the military before and during the war and played it to the public. The program was short-lived because of its overly stimulating production, with its skillful use of sound effects and fast-paced delivery, but it became a model for documentary dramas and served as a model for broadcast producers on how to structure and direct them. (NHK Archives, https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/movies/?id=D0009060068_00000 [in Japanese])

spread anti-communist propaganda in anticipation of the Cold War and transmitted essential "information" to make Japan an ally of the United States. *Shinso wa Koda* was the first of them. When hearing the term "information program," many readers may recall the "War Guilt Information Program," which the literary critic Eto Jun (1932–99) translated into Japanese as "*Senso ni tsuite no zaiakukan wo nihonjin no kokoro ni uetsukeru tame no sendenkeikaku* (a propaganda program to plant war guilt in the hearts of the Japanese people)" in his *Tozasareta Gengo Kukan: Senryogun no Ken'etsu to Sengo Nihon* (Bungeishunju, 1989) (translated by Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture [JPIC] as *Closed Linguistic Space: Censorship by the Occupation Forces and Postwar Japan* in 2020). This program was carried out by various divisions of the CIE with the aim of denouncing "war guilt" against Japan's war of aggression and the mistreatment of prisoners of war. When it was applied to the medium of radio, it took the form of "information programs" such as *Shinso wa Koda*, the broadcast date of which was deliberately set for December 9, 1945, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941 (Japan time).

Listeners did not accept the "truth" broadcast at face value, and NHK was inundated with calls and letters of protest. Regarding this situation, the CIE decided to change the program to one that answered listeners' questions about the war. Then, in February 1946, they began broadcasting a new "information program" following *Shinso wa Koda*, the letter program *Shinso-bako* (Truth box). The program, which literally "opened the microphone to the public" in response to the approximately 1,000 letters that arrived each week, focused on questions about Emperor Showa and the war from May through July 1946, intentionally reflecting the progress of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal (International Military Tribunal for the Far East), which opened in May 1946. Questions about the decision to go to war featured Tojo Hideki (1884–1948). It was explained that the Emperor reluctantly accepted the outbreak of war against Britain and the United States, even though he privately opposed it, so as not to go against the "will of the people" and the "desire of the people" [who wanted war].

> Question: "Was His Majesty the Emperor aware of the plan to attack Pearl Harbor?"
> Answer: "On December 8, a few hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Prime Minister Tojo entered the Imperial Palace carrying the Imperial Rescript declaring war. At 11:30 a.m., His Majesty the Emperor signed it with a brush. His Majesty was the very embodiment of 'melancholy.'" (Scripts for the 22nd episode of *Shinso-bako*, in the possession of the NHK Broadcasting Museum)

The main focus of *Shinso-bako* was the "exemption of Emperor Showa (exemption from war responsibility)," and it was broadcast with the aim of creating a social psychology among the people that would accept such a decision. There was a clever "rhetoric" hidden in it that spread the responsibility for the war to the general "people." In fact, this program deliberately repeated the word "people" instead of the Cabinet to let the listeners see Tojo Hideki, who headed the Cabinet, and the "people" are indeed the same in that they are both "those who wanted war."

In a later broadcast, as if to show that they had taken this rhetoric to heart, the following letter was introduced, using the pronoun "we" instead of the military.

Question: "Even though His Majesty the Emperor was deeply concerned for peace, why did we rush headlong into war?" (Script for the 27th episode of *Shinso-bako*, in the possession of the NHK Broadcasting Museum)

Of course, it is very likely that these letters were not actually sent by listeners, and that they were fabricated by the CIE. But the important points here are: (1) the "truth" about Emperor Showa and the war was reported over several episodes on *Shinso-bako*, (2) listeners who were convinced by these answers reflected on the "war guilt" of "us," the "people," and as a result posed new questions to the program, creating an "ideal circulation" between the sender and receiver of the broadcast via letters, and (3) even if the CIE staff had written the letters themselves, by demonstrating this kind of "ideal circulation" the program was able to broadcast "information" that absolved the emperor of responsibility and in turn blamed the "people" without giving listeners the impression that the CIE was forcing it on them.

Shinso-bako's ingenuity transformed the "truth" that the drama *Shinso wa Koda* blatantly and unilaterally imposed on the audience into a two-way exchange of letters and responses. In other words, the cleverness of the show lay in the "democratic program format" made possible by "opening the microphone to the public" and thus seeking and discovering the "truth" with the listeners.

From *Shinso-bako* to *Shitsumon-bako*

In December 1946, *Shinso-bako* was renamed *Shitsumon-bako* (Question box), and the program advertised that it would accept letters not only about the "truth" of the war but also about everyday life in general. In reality, however, the CIE had defined *Shitsumon-bako* as a program that would introduce letters about the Trade Union Law, the new Constitution, the Daily Life Protection Law, coeducational education, and other topics, with a primary focus on "war guilt."

These topics were in line with the "information" of the "Five Major Reform Directives" issued by GHQ to the Japanese government in October 1945, such as "encouraging the formation of trade unions" and "liberalizing education," so it is not difficult to imagine that the letters read on the program were biased. The first episode of *Shitsumon-bako* featured a total of seven letters. The fourth letter, which was placed in the middle of the list to be mixed in with other letters about daily life in general, asked about "the purpose of the Japanese military in going to war." It is noteworthy that the answer mentioned America, not the Emperor.

"Looking back from today, 1946, no citizen would doubt how reckless it was to try to defeat America. But at that time, the military clique that agreed to the plan for the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was determined to do so. When Japan was burning with victory fever in the early stages of the war, the words 'conquer and occupy America' were actually used." (Script for the 1st episode of *Shitsumon-bako*, GHQ/SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers) Documents, in the possession of the National Diet Library)

On November 3, 1946, the Constitution of Japan (new Constitution) was promulgated, guaranteeing the survival of Emperor Showa as the symbolic emperor. In *Shitsumon-bako*, which began the following month, there was no longer any need to denounce the "war guilt" of the "people" under the premise: "Although His Majesty the Emperor was deeply concerned for peace." Instead, a new premise was introduced: "Although America was such a powerful nation."

Rereading the quoted passage, the third sentence uses the ambiguous term "Japan," which can refer to both the "citizen" and the "military clique" mentioned in the previous two sentences. Like the name of the program, the first episode of *Shitsumon-bako* did not use the word "truth" (*shinso*) in either the questions or the answers. However, the program used an expression of shifting the blame for the war similar to the "we" in *Shinso-bako*. In other words, it implicitly encouraged listeners to reflect on why they had not realized the "truth" that the "surprise attack" on America was "reckless." *Shitsumon-bako* was peppered with rhetoric that attributed the nation's problems to the problems of each "citizen" and encouraged the listeners to think and take action for themselves in solving them. In other words, the CIE's intention was to create pro-American democratic "citizens," the "people," through "self-reflection" rather than through "coercion" by the occupying forces.

As mentioned above, it seems as if the opinions and will of the listeners were gradually incorporated into the broadcasts, from *Shinso wa Koda* through *Shinso-bako* to *Shitsumon-bako*, but the reality was different. Although the format of the letter programs may have seemed democratic, the voices of the public were never listened to equally, and only "voices" that were convenient for the CIE to disseminate "information" were deliberately selected. The voices of the public in radio broadcasts during the occupation were used by the CIE as a means of inducing listeners to voluntarily accept "information" about "the truth" and most importantly "war guilt." This was done by skillfully manipulating the psychology of the listeners.

The voices "*Gairoku*" did and did not record

"Opening the microphone to the public" was performed not only indirectly by soliciting listener letters, but also directly by collecting live voices through interviews. In September 1945, *Gaito nite* (On the street) began, in which NHK announcers asked people on the street for their opinions on a given topic. After the title was changed to *Gaito Rokuon* (Street radio show) in June of the following year, it became popularly known as *Gairoku* (contraction of *Gaito Rokuon*).

One episode that shows its popularity is "Regarding Emergency Economic Policy," which aired on June 24, 1947. Katayama Tetsu (1887–1978), the first prime minister to take office after the new constitution was enacted, and Wada Hiroo (1903–67), director general of the Headquarters for Economic Stabilization, appeared in front of Shiseido (a cosmetics company) in Tokyo's Ginza district and listened to appeals from the audience in a recording that resembled a mock parliamentary session. Approximately 4,000 spectators gathered for the event, and both automobiles and Tokyo City Streetcars were closed to traffic.

Gaito Rokuon also recorded the voices of people who could not make it to the city. For example, "How to Prevent Juvenile Delinquency Part 2: Girls Under the Railroad Tracks," which aired on April 22, 1947,

was a secret recording of the voices of women known as *panpan* who prostituted themselves to American soldiers, one night in Yurakucho, where GHQ headquarters was located. The candid exchange between the announcer and the "sister" who managed these stigmatized women caused a great sensation at the time.

Announcer: "They have no hope for the future?"
Woman: "They are human, you know? It can't be that they have no hope."
Announcer: "But do you say, for now they are beside themselves with pleasure? Now they are young enough to reform themselves, aren't they?"
Woman: "No idea."
Announcer: "You have no idea?"
Woman: "...".

In response to this unprecedented broadcast, a man wrote the following in a letter to the editor:

> "'Girls Under the Railroad Tracks' really touched the hearts of ours. When the issues or targets we were trying to address appeared as raw, real voices and then figures, it felt like something that could not be resolved by superficial arguments or criticism." (*Weekly Report of Listener Letters*, in the possession of the NHK Broadcasting Museum)

Listeners had no way of knowing it, but the CIE produced *Gaito Rokuon* as an "information program." The program had the role of stimulating discussion among listeners about specific "information," whether at the public recording site on the street or in front of the radio at home, and "Girls Under the Railroad Tracks" was an episode to disseminate "information" with the aim of reforming young prostitutes. However, the letter quoted above tells us that the sender found the importance not in seeking a fundamental solution to the problem of reforming the "girls," but rather in listening to the "real voices" that "touched the hearts." The original purpose of the program, which was to promote democratic discussion, was indeed obscured.

Moreover, just as the letter programs purposefully selected and rejected the voices of their listeners, *Gaito Rokuon* only featured the voices of the "people" that were suitable for the dissemination of "information." In fact, the voices of Koreans in Japan and Okinawans were never heard. Those who held the microphone were always the producers of the program, in other words, those in power. Those who could not speak into the microphone were excluded. The "real voices" that "really" reached the listeners or made them feel that "the truth" was there were moving and "raw." However, the brilliance of that "truth" also led the listeners into a kind of brain freeze. As a result, the existence of socially vulnerable people, who are not recognized as "the issues or targets we were trying to address," was cast away.[3]

As mentioned above, in postwar Japan, the voices of the nameless public were broadcast nationwide

3 The radio programs introduced in this article *Shinso wa Koda* (The truth is here), *Shinso-bako* (Truth box), and *Gaito Rokuon* (Street radio show) are available online on the website of the NHK Archives, in which the highlights of about 30,000 broadcast materials are stored.

over the airwaves, and the listeners who responded to them began to exchange opinions by sending letters or participating in public recordings. In this sense, it is not an exaggeration to say that radio broadcasting during the occupation was the forerunner of the communication style offered by modern social media. To put it differently, it established a "voice circulation structure" among the Japanese public. This communication structure made possible by occupied Japanese radio appeared to the CIE as a "virtuous cycle," but to listeners it was merely a distorted space for speech. This is because only voices that were useful to those in power echoed loudly, and these echoes sometimes aroused emotions in the receivers that the senders of broadcasts had not anticipated. Ultimately, the listeners would come to lose sight of the essence of the issues that should have been discussed.

Now, what about the state of modern media? Shortly after the incident on July 8, 2022, in which Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was shot and killed while giving a campaign speech, the suspect's statement that "it was not a grudge against PM Abe's political beliefs" was reported. Nevertheless, the media unanimously criticized the action of the suspect (now the defendant) as a "challenge to freedom of speech" and "the destruction of democracy." Even after police investigations revealed that the background of the incident was problems with the former Toitsu Kyokai (the Unification Church) and its second-generation followers, reports of so-called "toxic parents[4]" continued to appear.

Of course, the perpetrator's action is never forgivable. However, when the unresolved issue of the separation of religion and state, which has been left unaddressed since the end of the occupation, was reintroduced in modern times as a problem of structural violence experienced by the perpetrator who never had the chance to hold a microphone to speak up, how did the media respond? The political issues between the government and the people were dismissed as if they were family matters between a mother and child. As a result, long-standing societal contradictions were handled by the media as if they were the tragic consequences of self-contradictions.

In the episode "Girls Under the Railway Tracks" of *Gaito Rokuon*, when the announcer asked, "They have no hope for the future?" the "sister" raised her voice and said, "They are human, you know? It can't be that they have no hope." Did the media treat this answer as a voice pointing out the problems of sexual violence and discrimination in occupied Japanese society rather than the problem of delinquent girls in Yurakucho? Did the media know that it was the voice desperately resisting "social contradictions"? Some voices were not picked up by the microphone at all, and some, even when the microphone was pointed at them, were not properly heard, as in the case of "sister" who fell silent with "....." after being questioned by the announcer. Her voice was, however, certainly reported by the media. In the distorted space for speech that has long existed in postwar Japan, isn't it most important to avoid the rush of "information" from those in power and of sensational "truth" and make an effort to listen to the voices of the people involved themselves? When we, living in the current era, belatedly grant the "freedom of speech and expression" to those who never had the chance to exercise it, and when their once-silenced voices finally resonate throughout contemporary society, could it be that we will finally achieve the democratic dialogue that transcends time and space, something that was never attainable in the past?

Japan, which had hoped for peace for all time, continued to hesitate to examine the reality of the media

4 A toxic parent is a parent who has a negative influence on his or her children through abuse, neglect, overprotection, verbal abuse or violence, abandoning them or treating them like possessions.

manipulation that took place during the occupation. As a result, understanding and discussion of the war did not deepen at home and abroad, and thus insufficient efforts were made to achieve peace. Meanwhile, the bullet of war went through Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, and finally pierced Trump's right ear. Today, 79 years after the end of the Second World War, we are the ones who can make a decision on if the voices calling for help should be listened to or continue to be ignored.

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