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Nous ne sommes pas Charlie: Voices that mock authority in Japan muzzled

BY [DAVID MCNEILL](#)

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For those who think political satire doesn't exist in Japan, take another look at the now-infamous performance by the Southern All Stars on NHK's "Kohaku Uta Gassen" New Year's Eve concert.

Sporting a Hitler mustache, lead singer Keisuke Kuwata took what most interpreted as a dig at Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his jamboree of historical whitewashers.

"Textbooks run out of time before modern history, the part we most want to know," sang Kuwata in "Peace and Hi-Lite." "Why do people forget the stupid, tragic things we did in the past.

"Raising fists will not open hearts," he went on, calling the villain at the heart of the song "the emperor in the emperor's new clothes," and asking, "Didn't we have enough (of this) in the 20th century?"

Given the political climate, and the fact that nearly half the households in the Kanto region were tuned into the show, it was a brave piece of political theater. It was also pretty rare.

Japan has few political comedians and no satirical magazines or cartoonists to speak of. There is no Charlie Hebdo, "The Daily Show" or The Onion, the U.S. satirical magazine; no "Monty Python" or "Spitting Image," landmark British comedy shows that mercilessly lampooned the powerful.

Openly mocking politicians is often considered bad form. Satirizing the Imperial family is not only culturally verboten — it's dangerous. Kuwata came close when he pretended at another concert last year to auction off a medal he received from the emperor.

British writer Will Self describes satire as the "deployment of humor, ridicule, sarcasm and irony in order to achieve moral reform." The test, he says, is to apply H.L. Mencken's definition of good journalism: It should "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." It should also leave the subject looking, well, as ridiculous as possible.

There is a long tradition of using jokes to undermine the powerful, which is one reason why you don't hear many in North Korea — not in public, anyway.

So why does Japan seem to have largely abandoned the field? The question often invites cultural clichés: The craving for “consensus” and the fact that Japanese people supposedly consider social order more important than abstract concepts of free speech and human rights.

Those explanations miss another reason, however: intimidation. Challenging power, even with humor, is risky, as Kuwata found out. Predictably, right-wingers hated his stunt and picketed his management company, forcing him to issue a desultory mea culpa.

For lovers of satire, that sad denouement was all too typical. Student Yamato Aoki, who made people laugh when he set up a website poking fun at Abe, also apologized for causing offense — the whole point of satire. Not surprisingly, Abe didn't get the joke. The thin-skinned prime minister criticized the website as “despicable.”

Tough guys are surprisingly sensitive to criticism, too. Filmmaker Juzo Itami was famously beaten and slashed across the face by the yakuza in 1992 after he satirized them in the brilliant “Minbo no Onna” (“The Gentle Art of Japanese Extortion”). Itami gleefully overturned years of cinematic mythologizing by portraying the mob as stupid, venal and weak.

If there was a tipping point in the war on satire, we might pick December 1960. Chuo Koron magazine published a landmark parody in which the narrator dreams that left-wing revolutionaries take over the Imperial Palace and behead Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko in front of a cheering crowd. After watching the Imperial heads roll, the narrator has an angry exchange with the Meiji Emperor's wife.

The dowager empress tells him he owes his life to the Showa Emperor, Hirohito, who “saved the country” by surrendering unconditionally on Aug. 15, 1945. “How can you say that, you shitty old hag?” says the narrator. “Damn you! Our lives were saved because people around your grandson persuaded him to! Unconditionally!”

The satire — unthinkable today — provoked fury in the Imperial Household Agency, and among ultra-nationalists, who demonstrated daily outside Chuo Koron's Tokyo offices. Finally, on Feb. 1, 1961, a 17-year-old rightist broke into the home of Chuo's president, Hoji Shimanaka, killed a maid with a sword and severely wounded Shimanaka's wife.

The incident had profound consequences for freedom of the press in Japan. The author, Shichiro Fukazawa, went into hiding, Shimanaka apologized repeatedly, Chuo Koron pulled in its horns and other publishers followed suit. Bungei Shunju magazine balked at publishing the followup to Kenzaburo Oe's anti-rightist novel, 17, and no mainstream publisher ever dared to publish such a satire again.

Ironically, Fukazawa wrote the piece to warn about the radical left, according to the editor who replaced Shimanaka at Chuo Koron.

“It was a story about the terror of revolution, but what remained in the mind was the visceral image of the crown prince and princess’ heads flying,” says Kazuki Kasuya, who helmed the magazine until 1978. “It was a mistake to publish such an inflammatory article during what was a revolutionary situation in Japan. The article itself was the problem, not the reaction to it.”

Japan faced another crisis 30 years later with similarities to the one now faced by France: a dangerous, well-financed death cult that attempted to set up its own caliphate, intimidated and attacked journalists, and reacted murderously to being lampooned.

Aum Shinrikyo used elite lawyers to muffle the media and intimidation to silence critics. It tried to murder several journalists, including freelancer Shoko Egawa, before gassing the Tokyo subway, killing 12 people and injuring thousands.

“In many respects, Aum is the prototype for al-Qaeda, and its devotion to mass murder, its religious base, and its attachment to modern technology,” wrote U.S.-based reporter David Kaplan in 2007.

Once again, it was lone iconoclasts like Kuwata who called them out. Cartoonist Yoshinori Kobayashi and ubiquitous TV commentator Dave Spector were among the small number of those who began to ridicule them. As a result, they both famously ended up on Aum’s assassination list. “They didn’t have a sense of humor,” Spector recalls laconically.

Spector says there is little desire in Japan for political satire.

“They’re too comfortable with each other here,” he says. “Abe is taking media people out to dinner all the time. Japan is so small you run into each other all the time — it’s not like Washington, where you never see those people.”

Most people understand why Kuwata apologized, he says: appeasement. “It’s his management company that issues the apology — it’s a way of getting the rightist groups off your back, because they don’t stop. People here are savvy enough to know that if you don’t apologize, they keep going — just move on.”

The lack of a major forum for mockery has pushed those in Japan with a taste for edgy, offensive humor to cyberspace. Thousands of tweets have been posted since last Tuesday lampooning Islamic State with digitally altered photos of the two Japanese hostages and their Islamic State tormentor.

In one, the knife in the hands of the man widely believed to be “Jihadi John” has been replaced with a camera on a stick as he takes a selfie. Another shows the jihadist using his knife to carve meat from a kebab stand.

As The Washington Post noted, with two men facing a gruesome death, the hashtagged images “may seem silly, perhaps even reckless.” But they also, perhaps unconsciously, tap into a long tradition of poking a stick in the eyes of people who would otherwise have us cower in fear.

Naturally, the tweets have provoked controversy and criticism. It seems that many people like the fact that Japan’s humor is generally considerate and respectful. The problem is that some people in power don’t deserve respect. Or consideration.

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