

# Media Freedom, Collectivism, Nationalism, Confucianism in Japanese Media

**Han Jinghe**

*School of Verbal Language Arts, Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Chengdu, China*

**Abstract:** *The ecology of Japanese media has always been very unique among the world's media and occupies an important position in the development of the world's media with its unique characteristics. However, the development of Japanese media in its social and political system, China's Confucianism has always been the endogenous driving force for its development. This paper discusses the influence of Confucianism on shaping Japanese media through in-depth analysis of Confucianism on Japanese social culture and political system.*

**Keywords:** *Media freedom; Collectivism; Nationalism; Confucianism*

## 1. Introduction

Being unbiased can be regarded as a cornerstone of media coverage.<sup>[1]</sup> Meanwhile, unbiasedness is a critical way to fulfil freedom.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, being unbiased and freedom are of importance for media to serve its function of enhancing the development of a society. The topic of whether media in Japan is free and unbiased or not is of great concern to academic and media circle. From the state-owned media NHK, commercial outlet TV Asahi Corporation to Kyodo News can rival any top outlet in the world. From live coverage of natural disasters, historical testimony to political events. They are known around the world for their quick response, professional reporting, and sophisticated programming. Meanwhile, media freedom and professionalism has been advocated by Japanese judiciary since 1945.<sup>[3]</sup> At the legal level, the freedom of the press is guaranteed, which is very important for the media. Hence, the unbiasedness of media coverage can also be regarded as being protected. However, the essence of media in Japan is a quite different form from the media of western democratic regime.<sup>[4]</sup> Although Japan's current political system is democratic regime, it is still influenced by its traditional culture. From the traditional social relations to religion and values, these continue to influence Japanese politics, economy, culture and other societal aspects. This article aims to analyse what extent the media in Japan is free and unbiased through cultural and political filters. From my perspective, because Japanese media are pulled and pushed between the inertia of Japanese traditional culture and the western democratic system that Japanese media are only partially free and unbiased.

## 2. The unique culture and different media in Japan

### 2.1. Confucianism and media in Japan

Japan and west world are stemmed from different cultural roots. The essence of Japanese culture is different from western philosophy which claims to find truth by expressing opinions in the 'marketplace of ideas'.<sup>[5]</sup> It encourages the achievement of self-fulfilment.<sup>[6]</sup> Also this set of ideology advocates the stability of a society can be guaranteed by self-government.<sup>[7]</sup> To be specific, the media in Japan has still been influenced by Confucianism, which might not exert influence media directly, but affect the operation of the media through every individual deeply rooted in Japanese society. The Japanese media, while emulating the western media, are naturally embedded with the traditional philosophy and values of East Asia that continue to be far-reaching. From the organisational structure of Japanese media, reporting style of media in Japan to its relationship with the government and society, it is clear that Japanese media attempts to follow the western democratic framework; meanwhile, they have cultivated their own unique media ecological characteristics. In Japanese society, the western democratic system and East Asian traditional values are still colliding and merging. In this context, the existence of collectivism and nationalism extended from traditional culture and historical background provides good entry points to analyse the characteristics of Japanese media. Furthermore, by analysing

the collectivism and nationalism in Japan, what extent the media in Japan is free and unbiased that can be partially illuminated.

## 2.2. *Collectivism and media in Japan*

According to Triandis, the definition of collectivism is a mode of a society which is composed of the close connection amongst individuals who think they belong to social groups; the memberships put collective interests in the first position rather than individual interest, also they advocate the importance of people's connection.<sup>[8]</sup> The deep-rooted collectivism of Japan is dominantly originated from Confucianism. As Confucius said: "let the prince be a prince, the minister a minister, the father a father and the son a son".<sup>[9]</sup> This set of value system not only appears in Japan but in other countries of East Asia are universal. Under this set of value system, law and contract do not seem to be the most important that maintain social stability, but rather the concept of the collectivism. The relationships between family, community and state, which depend on the ties between people, has long been the first position to stabilise Japanese society. People contribute to collective according to their corresponding hierarchy and status.

Benedict concluded that the cornerstone of Japanese family, social and state relations is their strong belief in the concept of the collective hierarchy, which is contrary to the emphasis of western democratic philosophy on individual and freedom.<sup>[10]</sup> Therefore, under the background of such traditional philosophy, Japanese media have different characteristics from western media. Such as Japanese value 'the firm as one family' (kigyō-ikka) and familistic management" (keiei kazokushugi).<sup>[11]</sup> Because of these social values, the mutual loyalty between employees and employers in Japan leads to the lifetime employment, which has fostered a strong self-identity of journalists with their media companies. It is undeniable that these beliefs can benefit the internal operation of the institution. However, it can limit the freedom of media. When there is a conflict between media interests and the truth, individuals will fall into the dilemma between professional ethics and moral ethics. Under the standards of collectivism, freedom of journalists is easy to be separated from the interests of the media and equated with individualism, which could be judged as selfish, and harmful to the collective in the Japanese context. According to Gudykunst and Nishida, this phenomenon is related to a famous saying in Japan, 'A protruding stake must be driven into the ground'.<sup>[12]</sup> Also, the seniority system significantly reduced the job mobility of media staffs, and it is difficult for them to find another job with the same salary. In other words, the freedom of journalists can be seen as limited. Most media staffs are often forced to compromise to the collective interests when facing such conflicts between being unbiased and collective interests. Therefore, the media cannot indeed be free and unbiased in Japan.

Collectivism not only affects individuals in the Japanese media but also has a profound impact on the formation of the Japanese media organisations so that influence the freedom and unbiasedness of media in Japan. A very typical example is the Kisha club that is a type of informal organisations run by journalists from specific mainstream news outlets, which play a pivotal role in the communication between the government's officials, law enforcement, large enterprises and other major media institutions. People from different backgrounds establish their social networks in the Kisha clubs; they collaborate and cooperate to achieve their goal. Moreover, the standards of Kisha clubs are based on social relationships or subjective judgment by a small group of people, not objective institutions. Besides, the process for applying to the Kisha club is not open and transparent. The freelance journalists, foreign journalists or journalists from tabloid are hardly allowed to join most of Kisha clubs which need certification of membership. For minor media, if they cannot join the Kisha clubs, which means it is quite difficult for them to obtain the first-hand information. The Kisha club, an exclusive organisation, established by the mainstream media and ruling elite, also displays the elitism developed from Japanese collectivism, which is the collectivism of a small number of people. Thus, the media's access to news resources is unequal and unfree for media.

Meanwhile, the relationships between Japanese media staff and massive politician and economic elites can be seen as very familiar.<sup>[13]</sup> It is widely accepted that the mainstream media also self-censor themselves when they are reporting news about a relevant politician and economic elites. To be specific, they have attempted to avoid the content that might be negative for the institutions and individuals with which they are closely associated. For ensuring that their relationships with the government, enterprises and political parties can maintain. Gibson depicts that mainstream media in Japan would rather like to propagandise the government's policies than be free and unbiased; also, they admit it is unnecessary to deliver information to society.<sup>[14]</sup> Such admission can be seen as the media's disappointment with government or the exhaustion of its passion for defending freedom and unbiasedness. Even though

Mainstream media enjoy the privilege of first-hand news source through the Kisha clubs, their freedom and unbiasedness are still limited. Pharr claims that organisational elements of media can undermine media independence.<sup>[15]</sup> Then, under the framework of such a special media organisation, the independence of the media cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, it is tough for the media to indeed remain free and unbiased in Japan.

Moreover, collectivism still has an impact on the freedom and unbiasedness of reporting content. According to Merrill, under the orientation of collectivism, the media will naturally do its best to promote the balance and stability of the society and hold people together instead of causing social conflicts or chaos.<sup>[16]</sup> It is undeniable that the positive media coverage contributes to the maintenance of national stability, the promotion of social solidarity and the increase of a collective cohesion. However, when the media coverage tries to highlight social harmony, such positive and optimistic reports are likely to pull the media from a free and unbiased position to a one-sided report to some extent. For instance, when comparing the reports of the earthquake in Kobe, Japan in 1995, it is observed that although the media from the two countries are both under the democratic regime; nonetheless, there are still differences between their news contents. Reid described that while the American media focused more on individual stories, such as the injuries and treatment of ordinary people, the Japanese media prefers to present broader scenarios, such as how the government organises rescue efficiently and effectively, and how societal institutions and citizens united together to overcome the disaster.<sup>[17]</sup> By such a comparison, it does not mean that the Japanese media should not emphasise unity and collectively. In such a particular period, as a part of a society, it is justifiable to encourage solidarity. However, when media contempt of individual suffering, which possibly implies the media is kidnapped by collectivism. Hence, when both the news media and the public are distorted by collectivism, it is reasonable to conclude that the media is no longer free and unbiased.

### ***2.3. Nationalism and media in Japan***

Besides, nationalism has also had a numerous influence on the freedom and unbiasedness of the Japanese media. According to Lawrence, nationalism is the universal expression of individual identification with society and its culture.<sup>[18]</sup> Nationalism is also a kind of development and extension of collectivism. In the history of Japanese society, the emperor had ever been the absolute leader of the country and nation. The emperors of Japan was long deified as a religious role in Japanese society until the end of World War II. The emperor once played a crucial role as a religious and political leader in triggering nationalism and thus manipulating society and the people. During the World War II, Japanese militarism launched the war in the name of the emperor. Nationalism still affects the aspect of Japan today. Although nowadays the Japanese emperor is only a symbol of the whole country and nation, does not have real political power. The emperors and the traditional Japanese culture still play an essential role in Japanese society.<sup>[19]</sup> For instance, The Shintoism still profoundly exerts impact on contemporary Japanese society Especially for the Japanese media, nationalism to some extent regulates the boundaries and moral standards of Japanese media coverage. The Japanese media has always been prudent in its coverage of the royal family. While a cultural taboo of criticising the royal family has been gradually fading after the death of Showa emperor, this traditional cultural taboo continues to influence the Japanese media.<sup>[20]</sup> Notably, at the time of emperor's death or princess's wedding, the Japanese media would turn into reporting with one voice and directly or indirectly guide the public to mourn or celebrate. Furthermore, during the traditional festivals or important state affairs, the media also tend to highlight the emperor as a glorious symbol of the nation; which can be seen as one of the causes of Japanese nationalism, but also the result of Japanese nationalism. Such uncritical reporting is more likely to be influenced by self-regulation under the influence of nationalism than by self-censorship. It is possible for the media to assume that the image of the emperor is consistent with that of the nation, and they have to avoid news that tarnishes the emperor's image. This self-regulation also curtails the freedom of the Japanese media. Also, Japanese nationalism emphasises the unity of the nation and the purity of the royal blood. Such different reports confirm that nationalism still affects the Japanese media, and also show that the Japanese media is biased in their reports on the Japanese royal family. Under the influence of nationalism, Japanese media is possibly hard to be free and unbiased.

The influence of collectivism and nationalism serve the function of shaping the Japanese media, from the media practitioners to the organisation of the media to the way of media reporting. In the context of Japanese culture, collective interests are above all else. When collective interests conflict

with media principles, the former always takes precedence. Unlike in the United States, where the media or news plays a fourth estate role, the Japanese media seem to like to remain subordinate to Japan's political economic and cultural entities. Thus, it is tough for the media to be exactly free and unbiased in Japan.

### 3. The protection of the constitution

Although the traditional philosophies have influenced the Japanese media for a long time, it is still theoretically free. Japanese society has long attached importance to the independence of the media. A century ago, the Meiji constitution stated that all Japanese deserves the freedom of speech, writing and publishing, also the freedom of association and assembly within the law. The contemporary Japanese constitution also emphasises that 'Freedom of assembly an association, as well as speech, press and all other forms of expression, are guaranteed'.<sup>[21]</sup> To be comparable with the statement of the Meiji constitution, the new statement fro significantly promotes the free development of the Japanese media. Although the disadvantages of Kisha clubs have been analysed above, the media organisations can be united as a counterbalance to the government and defend the media freedom in the account of the regulations of the constitution. The media can work more efficiently and effectively through Kisha club; when a media organisation reports in a biased way, other media can supervise and provide suggestions, thus ensuring the unbiasedness of the media. By doing so, the media can serve the function of supervising government more efficiently. For example, the media played a vital role in exposing the corruption of Ichirō Ozawa and Seiji Maehara by cooperating with other media organisations and social institutions.

It is also based on the statement of freedom of speech and freedom of publication in the constitution, Asahi Shimbun can bravely stand up and reveal the truth when reporting the Korean comfort women issue, NHK produced a documentary to uncover the biological and chemical weapons research of Japanese unit 731 in northeast China. Although these practices are sometimes met with resistance from the Japanese government. The media have the right to express a different stance due to the framework of the constitution. Therefore, under the regulation of the constitution, media are possible to be free and unbiased.

### 4. Conclusion

To be conclude, Japanese media has developed a unique media structure and media culture between traditional culture and democratic system. On the one hand, under the framework of democracy and legal system, Japanese media plays the role of government watchdog to supervise the better operation of the government and promote the development of society. On the other hand, traditional East Asian philosophy still influences every individual, thus shaping the characteristics of the unique Japanese media. Collectivism has more shaped the organization structure and operation mode of media, while nationalism has more influenced the relationship between media and society and politics. Through the analysis of Japanese media, it is easy to see that the composition of a media is often complicated, and there are various factors affecting the freedom and justice of the media. Therefore, it is difficult to say in which country the press is completely free and unrestricted. They are free and unbiased towards the media. Because of the combined influence of traditional East Asian philosophy and western democracy, the media in Japan still are developing on its own unique way.

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