

# Introduction: Behind the Scenes of Media and Legal Responses to the Abe Assassination

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***Abstract:** Since the July 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, Japan has seen a flood of media and legal responses to connections between religion and politics. However, there has been little analysis to date of how we know what we know about developments in religion, law, and politics in Japan that were precipitated by this shocking event. These articles by Saitō Masami and Ioannis Gaitanidis contribute novel inquiries into local-level journalism and lawyers’ activism through interactions by these two researchers with the people who produce media narratives and legal interpretations. This brief introduction situates their insights within readings of opponents and defenders of the Unification Church who have shaped public discourse on intersections between religion and politics since July 2022.*

***Keywords:** Media, Religion, Politics, Abe Shinzō, Unification Church*

## Introduction

Over two years have elapsed since the shocking murder of Japan’s former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (Jiji Press 2024). On July 8, 2022, the country reeled at news that Abe had been shot on the streets of Nara while he campaigned for a fellow Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politician who was running for election to the Upper House of the Japanese Diet (McLaughlin 2023). Public outrage surged as revelations poured forth about the motivation of the gunman, Yamagami Tetsuya: resentment of Abe’s links to the South Korea-based Unification Church (UC), a group now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) that has gained a highly negative global reputation as a “cult” (Kingston 2023; McGill 2022).



**Picture of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification Japan headquarters in Shibuya, Tokyo. Photo by Tomomi Yamaguchi, used with permission.**

Until media attention shifted from around the middle of 2023 to high-profile financial malfeasance involving then Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and his embattled LDP, Japanese broadcast, print, and social media were dominated by exposés of politicians, most notably Abe, his father Shintarō, and grandfather Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, who for decades entertained a quid pro quo relationship with the church. In exchange for electoral support, LDP politicians appeared at UC events and in their publications, signed onto the church’s socially conservative policy platforms, and reportedly insulated the religion from legal consequences for its practices, which have channeled significant amounts of human and material resources into UC-affiliated institutions and toward its Korea-based leaders (Higuma 2022;

Sakurai and Nakanishi, 2010; Shimazono 2023; Yamaguchi 2017).

An outpouring of media exposés of the Unification Church and politicians linked to it was accompanied by television appearances, writings, and other publicity by lawyers who have sued the religion since the 1980s;<sup>1</sup> testimonials by current members and critical former adherents of the UC and other controversial religions who are now best known as *shūkyō nisei*, or “second-generation religious”;<sup>2</sup> advocacy by freedom of religion defendants who defend the UC and other controversial groups;<sup>3</sup> and numerous interviews, posts, articles, and books by academics, including high-profile professors who cooperate with legal experts and victim advocates to push for legal dissolution of the church.<sup>4</sup> Yet up to now there has been scant attention to how we know what we know about the Abe assassination and the developments it precipitated with regard to the UC. That is, consideration of how information about the Unification Church in Japan makes its way to the public and

1 Examples of books by lawyers who have long combatted the UC published after the Abe murder include Gōro 2022; Kitō 2022; and a late July 2022 republication of Yamaguchi 2017. See also Gaitanidis in this issue for numerous other publications by legal experts who oppose the church.

2 Though use of the term *shūkyō nisei* predates the Abe assassination, from July 2022 there was a flood of *shūkyō nisei* testimonials. These were broadcast online and in television and radio documentaries, articles in magazines and newspapers, and books about and by former, and in a few cases current, adherents who grew up within Kōfuku no Kagaku (Happy Science), the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soka Gakkai, the Unification Church, and other groups that are commonly labeled as “cults.” Prominent memoirs by “second-generation religious” who were raised by UC adherents include Kaburagi 2022 and Ogawa 2023. For a perspective by an ostracized Soka Gakkai adherent who wrestles with the *shūkyō nisei* label, see Masaki 2023. For collections of *shūkyō nisei* testimonials and reflections on them by journalists and scholars, see Ogiue 2022; Tsukada et al. 2023; Yokomichi 2023.

3 Unification Church representatives in Japan have published numerous rebuttals of legal arguments leveraged against the religion and work by academics that tracks the group’s exploitative practices. Examples include Sekai Heiwa Tōitsu Katei Rengō Kyōri Kenkyūin 2023 and Uotani 2023. One of the most vocal advocates for the Unification Church publishing in English has been Massimo Introvigne, whose online journal *Bitter Winter* features regular defenses that position the UC as a victim of religious persecution (<https://bitterwinter.org/>).

4 Academics in Japan whose critiques of the UC have gained the most publicity include Sakurai Yoshihide, a professor of the sociology of religion at Hokkaido University, Shimazono Susumu, professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of Tokyo, and Tsukada Hotaka, a scholar of contemporary Japanese religion at Bunkyo University. Sakurai in particular was proactively engaged in anti-UC activism for many years before the Abe murder. These three academics garnered especially elevated attention from July 2022 through media appearances, online posts, and publications that amplified public awareness of advocacy by academics against the church. Recent books by them that target the UC include Sakurai 2023 and 2024; Shimazono et al. 2023; and Tsukada et al. 2023.

the import of legal, media, and political initiatives occasioned by the murder of Japan’s most powerful lawmaker.

The two articles in this short special issue provide penetrating insight into how Japan’s media and law have taken shape since July 2022. They essentially serve as reports from the front lines that detail how the public has come to understand Japan’s religion/politics nexus over the past two years. Saitō Masami, a sociologist who is herself active in the local media scene she illuminates, gives us a ground-up perspective on intimate bonds across ideological and professional boundaries forged by journalists in Toyama Prefecture who investigate the Unification Church, local politicians tied to the religion, and ways church adherents and lawmakers have collaborated on elections and policymaking. Ioannis Gaitanidis, a scholar of religion in contemporary Japan at Chiba University, draws on his fieldwork with members of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales and meticulous analyses of legal documents to demonstrate ways court decisions and legislative initiatives since July 2022 reshape legal and political dispositions toward the category “religion” that are driven by concerns about fiscal responsibility.

Insight into the production of information on religion/politics intersections helps us make sense of dramatic shifts that have unfolded since the assassination. Public sentiment changed quickly from shock at Abe’s murder toward sympathy for Yamagami as Japan’s media was saturated with testimonials by former members of the Unification Church who spoke of traumatic experiences growing up in the group. Former, and in some cases current, adherents of the UC and other intensely demanding religious groups have come to be known as *shūkyō nisei*, or “second generation religious,” an identity that coalesced quickly in print and common parlance after the Abe murder as synonymous with “cult survivor.”<sup>5</sup> Equating a childhood in a high-demand religion with an abusive upbringing cemented in

5 For one example of many media treatments of *shūkyō nisei* that solidify this cognitive association, see the NHK drama “Second-Generation Religious: Murmurs from the Children of God” (NHK 2023).

popular and political discourse thanks to advocacy by lawyers, lawmakers, anti-cult activists, victim groups, sympathetic academics, and other commentators who were thrust into the media spotlight from July 2022.<sup>6</sup> These advocates promoted *shūkyō nisei* testimonials as they urged the Japanese government toward enacting new laws that promise compensation for financial losses to exploitative groups and an unprecedented, and potentially precedent-setting, use of Japan's Religious Juridical Persons Law to dissolve the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification as a religious corporation.

The Abe assassination thus decisively heightened concerns about the presence of religion in the public sphere and shaped legal and media responses to perceived transgressions. Anxieties about an insidious presence of “illegitimate” religion active in Japanese life reached a level not seen since the sarin gas attacks by the apocalyptic group Aum Shinrikyō in the mid-1990s. Only this time these anxieties were propelled by social media, which broadcast the voices of victims and their advocates and amplified pressure on lawmakers and Japan's courts to move into new legislative and legal territory. At the time of writing, media coverage focuses largely on blowback following investigations of slush funds concealed by factions within the Liberal Democratic Party and the decision by Prime Minister Kishida to not run for another term as LDP party president after his term expired at the end of September 2024. However, the specter of the Abe assassination will continue to hang over Japanese politics as it has since July 2022. Indeed, revelations about Abe Shinzō meeting with UC leaders at LDP headquarters just before the 2013 Upper House election punctuated the race to replace Kishida in late September 2024 (Asahi 2024). While the slush fund scandal drove Kishida's approval ratings to new lows and apparently finalized his decision to step down as Prime Minister, he and his successively reshuffled cabinets never recovered the public's trust following widespread outrage about the LDP's long-term ties to the Unification Church (NHK 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most prominent anti-UC advocate who linked these groups together was the journalist Suzuki Eito. See Suzuki 2022.

Moral panic over the presence of the exploitative, and conspicuously Korean, Unification Church in Japan's domestic politics was propelled by what became the largest social media event in Japan's history. Anger over a narrative of “cults infiltrating Japanese politics” that was powered by an undercurrent of xenophobic bitterness exploded into an estimated ~450 million tweets pertaining to Abe and his assassin's motive (McLaughlin 2023). Many of these tweets recirculated reports in print and broadcast media on ties between politicians and the church. As we learn from Saitō Masami in this special issue, national-level broadcasts and newspaper reports on these revelations, along with information that fed a social media explosion, relied to a large extent on the efforts of journalists at local media outlets. Saitō brings to life the work of journalists in regional outlets who have been unafraid to confront lawmakers about their compromising relationships with the Unification Church, often reporting with a boldness that seems to elude their colleagues at national-level broadcasters.

While Japanese media was saturated by high-pitched outrage at the Unification Church, in efforts to regain public confidence after reshuffling the cabinet and a September 2022 state funeral for Abe Shinzō failed to raise approval ratings, at the end of 2022 the Kishida government rushed through new laws and amendments to current legislation aimed at curbing the activities of organizations like the UC and aiding those targeted by them. Amendments to existing consumer affairs law and newly drafted legislation promised compensation for and protection from “spiritual sales” and related practices that saw the financial ruin of the Yamagami family; Tetsuya's mother had donated more than the equivalent of US\$750,000 to the UC, resulting in the family's bankruptcy and a childhood of poverty for him and his siblings. From October 2022, Kishida directed the government to follow heretofore unimplemented clauses in the Religious Juridical Persons Law by mobilizing agencies to convene advisory committees under the Consumer Affairs Division and Agency for

Cultural Affairs to investigate the FFWPU for the purpose of dissolving its religious juridical persons status.

Ioannis Gaitanidis details ways lawyers and other activists who have combatted the UC for decades seized their moment in the limelight after the Abe murder to support lawmakers who actualized their long-cherished goals for legislation and court decisions that make many of the church's revenue-generating activities illegal. While reporting on the UC has largely centered on its political ties and the travails of second-generation religious who were raised in the group, legal efforts against the religion have mostly treated the church's practices as problematic consumer affairs. Gaitanidis's article reveals that by concentrating on lawsuits seeking damages from "spiritual sales" tactics employed by the Unification Church, lawyers and lawmakers engaged in anti-UC activism have influenced both interpretations of "religion" as an operative category and default assumptions about the nature of the Japanese consumer. He argues that, because legal efforts against the UC have focused on consumers, in part to avoid accusations of violating constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, "religion" is relegated in court decisions to a realm of interior belief that is conceptually separate from social interactions that include financial transactions. And, due to anti-UC efforts producing judicial decisions that pertain to consumer affairs, the baseline for a consumer now presumed by Japanese government agencies has shifted from a rational actor to a vulnerable would-be victim who needs protection from malicious fraudsters. In short, the Japanese judiciary's diversion around religion toward money will likely produce widespread effects that extend beyond efforts aimed at the Unification Church to businesses, other religions, and other types of organizations.

This special issue's articles affirm that developments since July 2022 broadcast through media and argued in the courts have built on collective enterprises that are decades in the making. Saitō Masami reveals how Toyama Prefecture's journalists have cultivated

long-term social bonds to boldly investigate malfeasance by the UC and the prefecture's lawmakers and create award-winning coverage. Saitō provides a self-reflexive account of ways media outlets, particularly those above the prefectural level, have treated collaborations between the UC and conservative politicians on anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-gender equality measures as matters of secondary importance. She highlights ways matters pertaining to gender are consistently marginalized by reporters at all levels of Japanese media, even though gender is a central concern for media consumers and the Unification Church. Her investigation otherwise supplies us with a rare glimpse into a cordial relationship between a TV correspondent and a Unification Church reporter who respect each other's commitment to the life of the journalist. Saitō's article reveals that the close ties and accompanying tensions inherent in small communities have the potential to produce in-depth reporting that can sway national media narratives that in turn contribute to global understandings of religious/political friction, and she explains the mechanics of how these investigations play out. In other words, her article provides English-language readers with a precious chance to understand the inner workings of Japanese media from the ground up.

These two articles thus deepen our understanding of how law, media, religion, and politics in Japan are shaped, who shapes them, and why.

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