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In His Reporting, Japanese Journalist Yuki Imai Revealed a Fascination With Russia. Then He Was Arrested.

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Yuki Imai. **Social media**

In his last dispatch from Russia, the recently arrested Japanese journalist Yuki Imai reflects on the rising number of North Korean laborers in the country's Far East. On the street, one asks him for a cigarette, while he sees others singing Soviet-era songs at a restaurant and buying jewelry in a shopping mall.

"Japan has no diplomatic relations with North Korea, but here on Sakhalin, I find myself catching glimpses of a people who otherwise remain entirely out of reach," he writes, referring to the large, far-flung Russian island where he did the bulk of his reporting.

North Korean workers are some of the biggest victims of labor abuses in Russia, to say nothing of the isolated country's shadowy involvement in the Ukraine war.

While the report makes no mention of those issues, the recollected encounters show how Imai, 34, didn't shy away from the kinds of politically sensitive topics that have landed other foreign correspondents in trouble with the Russian authorities.

At some point, that reporting may have angered the wrong people.

Two weeks ago, a group of masked men broke into Imai's hotel room in Sakhalin's largest city, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and wrestled him to the floor. They were Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, arresting Imai on espionage charges likely related to his journalistic work. He is now awaiting trial in Moscow's notorious Lefortovo Prison, where he faces up to 20 years in prison.

In Japan, his case is enveloped in secrecy. Few who knew Imai — including his employer, the Hokkaido Shimbun newspaper — are willing to talk publicly about his background, the kind of journalist he is and what motivated him to report on the ground in a contentious region, despite the mounting risks for foreign correspondents.

But a review of his limited online presence and published articles reveals a picture of someone who was deeply fascinated by Russian culture, had family connections to the Far East and was committed to explaining the complexities of his home country's relations with Russia.

The Hokkaido Shimbun declined to comment for this story, saying that it was still "gathering information" about the criminal charges against its journalist. In an open letter signed by Editor-in-Chief Takeshi Yamamoto, the newspaper said it was "responding with our highest priority on ensuring our reporter's safety."

Foreign correspondents are often criticized for parachuting into unfamiliar territory, firing off a quick report and leaving without ever developing a deeper understanding of their subject. Imai wasn't that kind of journalist.

An acquaintance of his told the exiled news outlet IStories that Imai first came to Russia in 2014 for Russian language studies at St. Petersburg State University. According to the report, he also took an interest in Russian politics and literature.

It doesn't appear that interest waned, even after Imai reportedly returned to Japan to continue his studies.

In recent years, Imai channeled his curiosities through journalism. He started reporting for the Hokkaido Shimbun, a daily newspaper located in the capital of Japan's immense northern island of the same name. Owing to its proximity to both the Russian mainland and the disputed Kuril Islands, the newspaper publishes a robust section focused on Russian affairs, with a particular emphasis on bilateral relations.

The Far East is a geopolitically complicated region. Both Russia and Japan claimed and contested large areas of territory there during the 19th and 20th centuries before World War II largely sealed the matter, handing the Soviets control over most of it.

The enduring disagreement over ownership of the four southernmost Kuril Islands, which are controlled by Russia, has prevented the two countries from formally signing a peace treaty to end World War II.

Imai's articles interrogated the conflict's legacy and Japan's absence from the islands that were once its territory, reporting on everything from the construction of a controversial war monument to the recent demolition of a disused Japanese government-funded medical clinic.

He also covered developments in politics and defense, from Russia's recent parliamentary elections and relations with North Korea to the rise in military drone production on Sakhalin.

It's unclear if any of these stories were the reason for Imai's arrest, but it's easy to see how officials might have felt his coverage was prodding at delicate topics, even if it wasn't particularly intrusive.

For Imai, Russia and Japan's fractured relationship was not merely a subject of professional fascination. He had roots in Russia's Far East, noting in an article published this summer that his grandfather had lived in the Sakhalin town of Kholmsk — then called Maoka — before World War II, something that drew Imai to the same place a decade ago.

"My grandfather had lived in Maoka before the war," he wrote, "and I wanted to see the remnants of Japan that remained in the town."

The "remnants" he referred to are the long-abandoned buildings of a former Japanese paper factory. In the same article, Imai writes about the melancholic experience of walking past this area in August of this year after the factory was demolished. Gazing at the lot where the factory used to stand, he felt "as if a part of the town's history had been lost."

'Most of the population doesn't know his name'

Outside of his social media account and articles for the Hokkaido Shimbun, details about Imai's background are scarce. That may come as a surprise to outsiders who remember the blitz of news coverage surrounding the arrest of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich in Russia on spying accusations in spring 2023.

In Imai's case, there has so far been no public outcry and no media campaign spearheaded by colleagues or family, as happened with Gershkovich and other foreigners arrested in Russia on dubious charges in recent years.

Related article: What Is Russia Trying to Achieve by Arresting a Japanese Journalist?

Aleksandra Bielakowska, the advocacy manager of Reporters Without Borders' Asia-Pacific Bureau, said this is a common tack the government and families take when a Japanese reporter is arrested overseas.

"Usually how it works in Japan is that the Japanese government takes the lead, and they very rarely allow anyone else to intervene with any type of engagement," Bielakowska said. "They will be very strict about not sharing any information or insight into what's going on."

In the past, that's extended to even naming the individual, she added. The only reason the Japanese public knows Imai's name in this case is because it was released by the Russian side. Publicly, Japanese officials have still not acknowledged that he was the person arrested.

In a statement to The Moscow Times last week that did not name Imai as the detained individual, Japan's Foreign Affairs Ministry called on the Russian government to release the journalist and treat him in a "humane, fair and impartial manner." On Tuesday, the Hokkaido Shimbun announced that officials from the Japanese embassy had finally met with Imai after nearly two weeks of no contact.

Part of the reason for this secrecy comes down to deeply rooted cultural norms.

"It's just sort of the Japanese way of doing everything. They always prefer to avoid any sort of loud confrontation. They always prefer to deal with things behind the scenes," said James D.J. Brown, a professor of international relations at Temple University, Japan Campus.

But that quiet approach could backfire by encouraging Russia to target others, Brown argued.

"This poor guy is being locked up, and most of the population doesn't know his name. I also feel that if you don't publicize it, there's more risk of other people falling into the same danger," he told The Moscow Times.

The biggest unanswered question is what Russia wants from Japan. Japan doesn't hold any Russian prisoners that the Kremlin would like to see returned home. Still, Brown speculated that Imai could end up as part of a multinational prisoner swap, similar to the 26-person exchange in 2024 that freed Gershkovich.

However, Brown thinks Russia may care less about a prisoner swap and more about punishing Japan over larger policy issues.

Authorities in Tokyo have made a series of recent decisions that have unsettled the Kremlin about security in the Far East, including hosting American Typhon intermediate-range missiles.

Japan has also helped pay for weapons for Ukraine through a NATO initiative, while Japanese companies, like the drone manufacturer Terra Drone, have started doing business with the Ukrainian military.

"I think that, for all of that, Russia has decided that they want to apply pressure on Japan," Brown said. "And frankly they regard Japan as likely to concede, so they feel they probably have a good chance of forcing some concessions."

"It's almost certain they will," he said, referring to Japan giving in to at least some of Russia's demands, whatever those may end up being. "That also explains the low-key approach. They want to perhaps have the freedom away from the public eye to cut a deal."

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