



Lights, Camera ... Cut! Japan Soul-Searching Over Freedom of Expression

By Reuters

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TOKYO — Withdrawn endorsements for films and art exhibitions are re-igniting a debate in Japan over self-censorship, exposing a struggle to balance freedom of expression with a cultural penchant for avoiding conflict.

The latest controversy arose when Japan last week canceled its endorsement of an art exhibition in Austria commemorating 150 years of diplomatic relations. The collection includes work that critics say paint an unflattering picture of Japan and its prime minister, Shinzo Abe.

"We made the judgment that the contents of the exhibition did not promote the mutual understanding and friendly relations between Japan and Austria," Seiichiro Taguchi, director of the foreign ministry's Central and South Eastern Europe Division, told Reuters.

The exhibition, titled "Japan Unlimited", opened in late September and will run to Nov. 24, now without the official Japan-Austria anniversary year logo.

It includes a video of a likeness of Abe apologizing for Japan's wartime aggression, as well as a satirical depiction of U.S.-Japan relations through a rendition of a famous photograph of wartime Emperor Hirohito posing with U.S. General Douglas MacArthur, who led the Allied occupation of Japan after World War Two.

Public broadcaster NHK and other media carried news of the government's withdrawal of its backing for the Vienna exhibition, igniting a clamor on social media - with many people, including lawmakers, supporting the decision.

Self-censorship is not new in Japan - film distributors famously cut out newsreel footage of Japanese soldiers committing atrocities in Nanjing from Oscar-winning film "The Last Emperor" in the late 1980s - but a recent worsening of relations with South Korea has unsettled nerves over the topic of Japan's wartime actions.

COLD COMFORT

The discourse over artistic freedom reached fever pitch this year when the Aichi Triennale art festival pulled a statue symbolizing so-called comfort women - girls and women forced to work in Japanese military brothels - after organizers received threats.

Some of the Japanese artists featured in the Vienna exhibition had also shown their work at the Aichi festival.

Comfort women were also the subject of documentary film "Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue", the screening of which was initially canceled at a film festival last month.

Organizers later reversed the decision, apologizing for caving in to threats and after security measures were put in place.

A few months ago, Shibata city in northern Japan made news when its board of education refused to back the screening of the 2017 biographical film "Park Yeol", about an early-20th century Korean anarchist and independence activist that includes scenes critical of Emperor Hirohito.

The movie also touches on the massacre of ethnic Koreans by mobs after the Great Kanto Earthquake that leveled Tokyo in 1923.

The organizer of the event then sought - and got - the support of the city's general affairs division to show the film.

"I think Japanese people have a tendency to over-think things - 'what would happen if we did this or that,'" organizer Tetsuo Saito told Reuters. "As a result, we take the safest route instead of trying to break new ground.

"I feel a sense of cultural limitation in that sense. But on the other hand, there are people - even if it is a minority - who are taking up the challenge, so not all is lost."

(Reporting by Chang-Ran Kim; Editing by Robert Birsell)