The Position of Sugimura Sojinkan in the History of Japanese Journalism

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Sugimura Sojinkan (1872-1945) was born in Wakayama Prefecture. His real name was Sugimura Kōtarō; Sojinkan was the best-known of his pen names, followed by Jūsei. His father, Šōtarō, a former samurai retainer of the Wakayama domain, died when Kōtarō was three years old, and the boy was raised by his mother. At sixteen, he withdrew from Wakayama Middle School, went to Tokyo and enrolled in later the Tokyo Hogakuin (Tokyo Legal Academy) with the intention of becoming a judicial officer or lawyer. He withdrew in his second year, however, and in 1888 he graduated instead from the Kokumin Eigakkai, a Tokyo English school headed by Dr. Eastlake.

Returning home, he became chief editor of the newspaper Wakayama Shinpō in 1891. (This period is described in detail in "Shimbun Shikaku" [The Viewpoint of the Press] in the Complete Works of Sojinkan, vol. 13.) A year later, he returned to Tokyo to attend a Unitarian college of theology, from which he graduated in 1896. During this time he also did translations from English for the Kokumin Shimbun (The People's Newspaper) and contributed to the journal Seinen Bungaku (Youth Literature). In 1896 he became a teacher at a Kyoto boarding school, Honganji Bungakuryō, and also joined the editorial staff of Hanseioki Zasshi (Magazine of the Self-Examination Society), which would later become Chuō Koron (Central Review). He returned to Tokyo the following year, however, after disagreeing with his superiors over a number of issues, including boarding school reforms. In 1898 he joined the Society for the Study of Socialism and became acquainted with fellow members who included Kōtoku Shūsui, Sakai Kosen, and Katayama Sen.

In 1899 he became an interpreter for the American legation in Japan. While holding this post he worked actively for reform of Buddhism. He joined Takashima Beihō and others in forming the lay organization Bukkyō Dōshikai; in July 1900 he founded the magazine Shinbukkyō (New Buddhism), which continued until August 1915; and he took part in the movement to reform clerical abuses.

In December 1903, he joined the Tokyo Asahi Shimbun, where he worked in the foreign news department and also wrote editorials. He was sent to Europe and the United States several times, and his light and witty dispatches from abroad became popular with readers. (On one occasion, in 1918, he was sent by the Asahi's president, Murayama Ryūhei, to present the Belgian king with the imperial gift of a sword.) In 1911, he became head of the research department, which (at his recommendation) was the first to be set up by a Japanese newspaper. He was also responsible for a number of other innovations: the first reduced-size edition of a Japanese newspaper, which began publication in 1919; the launching of the pictorial daily Nikkan Asahi Gurafu in 1922; and the establishment of a fact-checking department in 1924.

While continuing to write, he served the Asahi Shimbun as an inspector (1919-1935) and advisor (1935-1945). His writing was characterized by its liberalism and its biting wit and humor. His many books include Travels in Great Britain, For the Weak (vol. 26 of the Library of Great Works of the Taisho Period), The Skin of a Sponge, Travels Around the Hemisphere, An Emissary in Wartime, Recent Journalism, Fussy People, and Song of the Lake Shore (all works in Japanese). Most are included in the eighteen volumes of The Complete Works of Sojinkan.

In this paper, I will discuss selected major writings of Sugimura Sojinkan on the press and journalism, focusing on his view of newspapers, especially their ethical aspect.