

THIS WEEK IN ASIA



TOPIC FAME AND CELEBRITY

YAKUZA, DRUGS, 'SLAVE' CONTRACTS: HOW JAPANESE TV STAR ROLA BECAME LATEST VICTIM OF A MURKY CELEBRITY INDUSTRY

Scandal-hit Japanese model-cum-actress is not the first to learn the pitfalls of taking on an entertainment industry that enjoys close links to the criminal underworld

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For a decade, she has smiled, sung, pouted and been the face of countless television shows and advertisements, making Rola one of the most recognisable *tarento* celebrities in Japan. Her career trajectory is what every young wannabe starting out in this nation's voracious entertainment industry would love to emulate.

But her sudden fall from grace is a salutary reminder of the pitfalls that are the less well known side of the industry.

From being a perky-but-ditsy mainstay of Japan's television *tarento* (foreign celebrity) scene six months ago, Rola has moved to the covers of the tabloids amid allegations that her agency has engaged in blackmail, financial chicanery and even plied her with prescription drugs to keep its most lucrative name on its books.

The weekly news magazine *Shukan Bunshun* has reported that the hugely popular 27-year-old actress-singer-model-television talent is locked into a 10-year "slave-like" contract with her agency, Libera Production.

An industry insider and personal friend of Rola, who is an exotic addition to screens here because of her Bengali, Japanese and Russian heritage, told *This Week in Asia* she was "on the verge of a breakdown".

The media has reported that Rola has questions about where her earnings have gone – including money raised for charities – and consequently wants to leave her agency, but that the owner has threatened to publish damaging information on her.



Japanese fashion model Rola. Photo: AFP

And, given the power that talent agencies hold over their assets, it is very likely the agency could effectively end her career by calling on other agencies to ensure that she never gets any more jobs.

Another concern is the agencies' close ties to Japan's underworld groups, who can be quick to resort to violence against anyone who crosses them.

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“The boss of my agency told me that a 10-year contract is basically illegal so I can understand why she is concerned,” said another half-Japanese star of Japan's entertainment scene.

“She is a lovely girl, but she has obviously told some of her friends and they have spoken to other people, so this is how it has got into the media,” said the performer, who did not want to be named.

“This business is hard work, but it is even harder for young women than for men. The girls get paid so little when they start out, but they put up with it because they are told they are going to be stars,” he said.



Jake Adelstein, author of Tokyo Vice: An American Reporter on the Police Beat in Japan. Photo: AFP

Young women are often easy prey for smooth-talking agency executives.

On August 13, Shinya Tsukamoto, the 30-year-old manager of a talent agency, was arrested in Kumamoto Prefecture on suspicion of encouraging a girl of 16 to drink alcohol to the point of incapacitation and sexually assaulting her at a hotel.

The problems facing Rola – and many others in the industry – come as no surprise to Jake Adelstein, author of *Tokyo Vice: An American Reporter on the Police Beat in Japan* and an expert on Japanese underworld groups like the *yakuza*.

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“These talent agencies were created by *yakuza* groups at the end of the war because they very quickly realised that there was going to be great demand for entertainers and they are still essentially run like underworld groups to this day,” he said.

“They have very clear ties to organised crime, they have the industry completely under their control and they are ruthless towards anyone who crosses them,” he added.



Japanese comedian and TV host Shinsuke Shimada bows as he announces his retirement from the entertainment business. Shimada quit show business after being found to have a cozy relationship with a *yakuza* gangster. Photo: AFP

And they do not seem to mind if the police or authorities know it, he said, pointing to the recent release of the memoirs of Kazuo Kasaoka, the former head of a Kobe-based underworld group. Among other experiences, the book details the time he spent working for the head of the Burning Production talent agency, such as threats made against its own stars, the harassment of their families, unflattering stories leaked to the media and pressure on advertising companies and other clients not to hire black-balled performers.

“The police have acted against the *yakuza*, but this is one area that they have really failed to pursue,” said Adelstein.

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There were suggestions in 2011 that the police were beginning to target the entertainment industry, when comedian and television host Shinsuke Shimada was forced into early retirement after it was revealed that one of his closest friends was a senior *yakuza* member.

In a press conference at the time, Shimada revealed he had no notion that his friendship with the head of a splinter faction of the notorious *Yamaguchi-gumi* was inappropriate.

“I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong,” he said. “Personally, I thought it was fine, but I found out the day before yesterday that it was considered unacceptable.”



Miss International 2012, Ikumi Yoshimatsu of Japan, tells the press about the campaign of harassment she suffered. Photo: AFP

More recently, the authorities missed an opportunity to cut organised crimes' ties with the entertainment world when Ikumi Yoshimatsu – crowned Miss International 2012 – went public with allegations that a manager threatened to kill her if she did not sign with a major talent agency. She also accused the head of another agency of stalking her.

“Yoshimatsu was incredibly brave in how she stood up and refused to accept the system, but in the end she was just beaten into submission by their money and influence,” Adelstein said.

“She took on a system that is exploitative, dark and wrong, but organised crime is still strong in the entertainment business here,” he said.

Rola will have learned from Yoshimatsu's experiences at the hands of the agencies that control their lives, but whether she is strong enough to take on the mob is another matter altogether. ■

