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A Counter Response and Proposal to the "Open Letter" written by 187 Historians

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To the 187 historians who jointly signed the Open Letter,

On May 5, the "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan" was released and rapidly circulated around the world. This Letter was signed by 187 historians and researchers mainly in the field of Japan studies from the United States and western countries. The Open Letter accused the Japan's military comfort women system before and during World War II. The Letter was a thinly veiled demand for an apology from the Prime Minister of Japan.

Note: As of the end of May, the number of signatures had grown to around 460, but out of respect for the original signatories I will only address the first 187.

I read the letter with an open mind, and, as a Japanese citizen, I would like to express my candid opinion. Please note that I do not represent any Japanese organizations or agencies, and the following is purely the personal viewpoint of a scholar who has been keeping abreast of the comfort woman issue since 1992.

My feelings of disappointment and encouragement

I experienced mixed feelings upon reading the Open Letter. On the one hand, I was disappointed, but on the other hand I was encouraged by the positive opportunity that the open letter presented.

I will first explain my disappointment. There are many well-respected scholars among the 187 historians and researchers who signed the Open Letter, including scholars who are very well-known in Japan. Some of their works have been translated into Japanese, and they have had a profound impact and influence on both Japanese scholars and lay readers.

Books written by the signatories, such as Ezra Vogel's "Japan as Number One", John Dower's "War without Mercy", Andrew Gordon's "A Modern History of Japan", and Ronald Dore's "Education in Tokugawa Japan" have been translated into Japanese, and this was just a random sampling off the top of my head. In fact some of these translated works have been more widely read in Japan than in the country in which they were written!

The signatures of such scholars, it seems to me, added weight to the Open Letter. But, if you expect, by their presence, it would lead to gaining more support from a greater number of Japanese, I am afraid that you have decidedly failed to understand the perception prevailing in Japan over the comfort women issue. The significant portion of the Japanese people will never share the basic premise of the Letter.

I say this because there are simply too many people in Japan who have already reached their own understanding about the “comfort women” and suspect the whole comfort women story might have been fabricated as a political tool to attack Japan. For example, the fact that criticism of Japan regarding the comfort women issue might be built on a very flimsy factual basis became apparent following the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun's* retraction last August of its thirty-two years' worth of bogus reporting. This now-retracted reporting is a very large part of what started the whole comfort women story.

Therefore, any Japanese person with minimal awareness of the controversy who reads this Open Letter, including even an ordinary *salaryman* or housewife with no special academic qualification, would feel that the Letter is based fundamentally on a misconception of historical reality.

However, I must also write about my other reaction to the Open Letter, in that I feel that its release represents a great opportunity. As I noted previously, it is my opinion that Japanese citizens on the whole are better informed about the reality of the “comfort women” problem than are American-based “Japan Specialists,” and this means that our two nations have become divided, not only by the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, but also by an equally vast “information gap” on certain subjects.

And yet, I do not believe that all of the Open Letter's signatories supported it out of ill will or bias towards Japan. The contents of the statement never descend into prejudice and consistently adopt an attitude of fairness. It is plain to see that its authors exercised discretion and attempted to base their statement on universal values. For instance, one portion of the Open Letter read as follows,

"Postwar Japan's history of democracy, civilian control of the military, police restraint, and political tolerance, together with contributions to science and generous aid to other countries, are all things to celebrate."

As a Japanese citizen, I am pleased and highly grateful to the signatories of the Letter for their recognition of the value of Japan's contributions to world peace since the end of World War II.

As a whole, this Open Letter appealed to universal values of democracy, liberty, and human rights. I concur wholeheartedly with these principles, which, indeed, should be cherished above anything else. It is precisely because of the importance of these universal values that

one should fight against prejudice and bias based on historical misconceptions and attempt instead to maintain one's fairness and objectivity.

However, the "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan" has exposed the information gap that exists between Japan and the United States, thus presenting us with an excellent opportunity to close it. I am writing this letter in the hope of making a small contribution towards filling that information gap.

Errors in the McGraw-Hill textbook

One example of this information gap appeared in November and December of last year, when the Japanese government asked for corrections to be made in a world history textbook in use at American high schools, McGraw-Hill's "Traditions and Encounters." The request was made on the grounds that the book's description of the Japanese Army comfort women was highly inappropriate. Nineteen American historians then struck back with a message published in a US academic bulletin criticizing the actions of the Japanese government.

On March 17, in response to the nineteen American historians, nineteen Japanese historians pointed out what they felt were grievous factual errors in the textbook's description of the comfort women, and they, too, politely asked McGraw-Hill to have the errors corrected.

The Japanese historians who authored the statement, represented by Professor Hata Ikuhiko, a leading expert on the comfort women issue, summarized the textbook's mistakes in eight areas. I will outline four of them here:

(1.) The textbook stated, "The Japanese army forcibly recruited, conscripted, and dragooned as many as two hundred thousand women," but the only Japanese scholar who the nineteen American historians cited as endorsing their viewpoint was Yoshimi Yoshiaki, who stated on a Japanese TV talk show that, "There is no evidence for forced recruitment of comfort women on the Korean peninsula." The nineteen American historians seemed not to be aware of this.

(2.) Concerning the number of comfort women, the textbook gives the figure of "as many as two hundred thousand." However, Professor Hata estimates the true number at around 20,000, based on documentary evidence including statistics compiled by Japanese government agencies.

(3.) The textbook states that "the 'comfort women' catered to between twenty and thirty men each day," despite having already declared that the total number of comfort women was 200,000. If this is the case, then Japanese soldiers received between four million and six million sexual services per day. The total overseas troop strength of the Japanese Army requiring such services was one million, at warfare peak in 1943, meaning that each soldier went to a comfort station four to six times per day, according to the textbook. At this rate,

Japanese Army soldiers would have had no time to prepare for battle or even live normal lives.

(4.) The textbook claimed that, "At the end of the war, soldiers massacred large numbers of comfort women to cover up the operation." It is doubtful that this statement is based on historical documentary evidence. If it was, then a case should have been taken up by the postwar Tokyo Trials or by one of the B/C-class war crimes trials, and yet there is no record of that having occurred. It should go without saying that one cannot write in a textbook where, when, and how many people were killed without any supporting evidence. The textbook has thus portrayed a possibly baseless accusation as being an undisputed historical fact. Teaching American students in this manner is not truth-seeking but is instead an imposition of propaganda, a practice which is contrary to both freedom of scholarship and freedom of thought.

The written request by the nineteen Japanese historians (which I also signed) to correct the textbook's errors was immediately sent to McGraw-Hill. Though we have yet to receive a reply, the newspaper *Sankei Shimbun* reported on May 16 that McGraw-Hill had responded to a question from one of its correspondents, indicating that it had no intention of making any corrections. Thus, McGraw-Hill has made no effort to confront the facts presented by reputable Japanese historians, so the Japanese government has every reason to object to the teaching to American high school students of what the Japanese consider to be lies.

Even though our written request did not make McGraw-Hill change its ways, it seems that it did have some impact on the academic community after all. I say this because the message of the nineteen American historians made reference to "state-sponsored sexual slavery", but that expression does not appear anywhere in the "Open Letter." Nor does that Open Letter mention the textbook's figure of 200,000 comfort women. These were significant changes from the insistence of the nineteen American historians that the numbers used in the textbook not be altered.

The actual results of the military's "systematic management"

However, even though the open letter of May 5 does show some progress towards common sense, both of the statements by foreign scholars still view the comfort women system in fundamentally the same way. Their basic viewpoint can be summed up in the following quote from the Open Letter:

"Among the many instances of wartime sexual violence and military prostitution in the twentieth century, the 'comfort women' system was distinguished by its large scale and systematic management under the military, and by its exploitation of young, poor, and vulnerable women in areas colonized or occupied by Japan."

Before making a single country the target of such sweeping criticism, a considerable amount of careful, fact-based research and analysis of comparative data should be a prerequisite. My question to the signatories of the Open Letter is, "Did you undertake a careful investigation of this sort before producing your statement?" To shed light on this matter, I would now like to take another look at several of the claims made by the Open Letter.

First of all, concerning its scale, I already mentioned that there is a controversy over whether the number of women working within the Japanese Army's comfort women system was closer to 200,000 or to 20,000. Here the Open Letter simply states that the number of comfort women "will probably never be known for certain" and makes no attempt to pursue the matter further. How could the Open Letter have concluded that "the 'comfort women' system was distinguished by its large scale" if the scale "will probably never be known for certain?"

Secondly, the phrase "systematic management under the military" is simply a misunderstanding. The comfort women were hired by brokers who ran the brothels. The working conditions of comfort women may have been harsh, but they were paid high wages. At the time, a Japanese Army private first class soldier earned 10 yen per month, while a comfort woman in Burma was making an average of 750 yen per month. Comfort women who worked for a whole year were even able to buy new houses for their parents back at home. The essence of the wartime comfort women system was the extension of peacetime brothels onto the battlefield. Their customers were Japanese soldiers.

The fact that the comfort women were paid prostitutes rather than sex slaves was fully acknowledged by an official report of the US Army. "Japanese Prisoner of War Interrogation Report No. 49," written by the US Office of War Information Psychological Warfare Team in Burma, states right in its opening preface that, "A 'comfort girl' is nothing more than a prostitute or 'professional camp follower' attached to the Japanese Army for the benefit of the soldiers."

The Japanese Army's involvement in the comfort women system extended into three areas: signing contracts with and giving permits to brokers for the establishment of comfort stations, enacting regulations at those comfort stations, and having army doctors administer regular health checkups for the comfort women. The objective of the Japanese Army's regulation of the comfort stations was to protect the rights of comfort women by imposing safeguards on exploitative brokers. Without the Army's involvement, the working conditions of the comfort women would probably have been a lot worse. Both the relationship between the Army and the brokers and the relationship between the brokers and the comfort women were governed by contracts, and thus it was a lawful system comparable to those of contemporary nations which regulates public prostitution.

The comfort stations were put in place with the twin goals of keeping the sexual urges of frontline soldiers in check so that they would not harm local women and preventing the spread of venereal diseases from the use of local, already established brothels.

The tendency among American historians is to view military involvement as an unprecedented and impermissible policy. In the United States, it was typical for military personnel to take advantage of established, local brothels. For example, there was a red-light district in Hawaii called "Honolulu Street," where prostitutes brought in from San Francisco took one hundred customers daily. The United States even made use of brothels that the Japanese government set up for American soldiers during the postwar US occupation. Likewise, since the start of the Korean War, American soldiers stationed in South Korea used local brothels that the Korean Government set up.

Nevertheless, this merely represents a difference in customs between our two nations, and it does not change the fact that the objective of both systems was to find a way to manage the sexual urges of soldiers near the battlefield. The Japanese comfort women system was itself based on the system created by Germany during World War I. American historians have taken the United States' own special method of wartime sexual management and upheld it as the perfect model, criticizing all other methods used by other countries. This is actually a naive sort of national chauvinism.

By way of comparison, the American method, involving the use of local brothels, suffers from its failure to control the risk of contracting venereal diseases. For instance, US Army units stationed in Kunming, China, used local brothels in the early 1940s, and as a result almost half of their soldiers and mechanics were stricken with sexually transmitted diseases and unable to work. In situations where battlefield conditions were harsh, like during the Vietnam War, the US Army created brothels under its virtually direct control when local brothels were unavailable.

The Japanese comfort women system was generally successful at achieving its designated goals. There were almost no rapes perpetrated by Japanese soldiers in occupied areas and few children of mixed nationality were left behind by the Japanese Army.

By contrast, American soldiers who had been stationed in Japan after the war left a great number of mixed-raced children behind them through liaisons with Japanese women. In Vietnam, the children of South Korean soldiers and Vietnamese women are known as *Lai Dai Han*, and there are estimated to be several tens of thousands of them.

Turning our attention back to World War II, the largest incident of mass rape occurred during the capture of Berlin by the Soviet Red Army. About one million German women were raped by Soviet troops, and it is said that 200,000 of them died. Many children were produced through acts of rape by Soviet forces. The Red Army also raped and massacred Japanese women in Manchuria immediately after the surrender of Japan. As an instance of

wartime sexual violence in the twentieth century, why haven't the 187 historians taken up these transgressions, given that the scale of the atrocities was far greater?

It is certainly not true that Japanese men have unusually high sex drive in comparison to other people. Comparative data have consistently ranked Japanese males as being less lustful than other people in the world.

Fake atrocity stories and the credibility of testimonies

The third point I want to bring up is the claim in the Open Letter that, "the 'comfort women' system was distinguished by... its exploitation of young, poor, and vulnerable women in areas colonized or occupied by Japan." This is a major misconception. Most of the Japanese Army's comfort women were prostitutes from Japan. Hata Ikuhiko's calculation breaks down the total number of comfort women as being forty percent from Japan, thirty percent from the local area of occupation, twenty percent from Korea, and ten percent from other places. The number of Japanese and Korean comfort women was proportional to their relative populations.

It is likely true that these women were poor and vulnerable, and, if we imagine their individual circumstances, all of them deserve sympathy. However, it would be wrong to assume that the comfort women system cruelly forced them into a fate more inhumane than the alternatives. Women working in brothels in peacetime are also poor and vulnerable, and some former comfort women have even recalled that they sought out the army for more favorable conditions, which they felt were preferable to peacetime brothels.

Fourthly and finally, I will spend some time discussing one issue which I am certain influenced the thinking of the scholars who signed the Open Letter, and that is the "testimonies" and its credibility of former comfort women, in the context of wartime sexual violence. One can see in parts of the Open Letter that its signatories accepted that unbelievably cruel acts were perpetrated in the Japanese Army's comfort stations and that the comfort women were victims of sexual violence. The Open Letter refers to the "brutalization" of comfort women and states that they were "subjected to horrific brutality" by the Japanese Army.

In 1996 the United Nations Human Rights Council approved the *Coomaraswamy Report*, which included the following testimony from Jeong Ok-sun, a North Korean who claimed to be a former comfort woman:

"[The Japanese soldiers] took off her clothes, tied her legs and hands and rolled her over a board with nails until the nails were covered with blood and pieces of her flesh. In the end, they cut off her head. Another Japanese, Yamamoto, told us... 'since those Korean girls are crying because they have not eaten, boil the human flesh and make them eat it.'"

Japanese people would find stories like this ridiculous. Japanese people do not engage in such morbid habits and, of course, have never practiced cannibalism as a custom. These sorts of tales can be found abundantly in Chinese history books, which, in turn, have had a cultural impact on the Korean Peninsula. The former comfort women are simply relating stories based on those shared in common by nations within the Chinese cultural sphere.

It was also written in a resolution passed by the US House of Representatives in 2007 that “mutilation” was one of the brutal deeds perpetrated by the Japanese military. Mutilation or dismemberment was a terrible punishment traditionally practiced in the Chinese Emperor's harem, but it has never been practiced in Japan. Anyone who is a real expert on Japanese history and culture would surely support me in this statement.

The first former Korean comfort woman to testify about her experiences did so in 1991, more than forty years after the end of the war, and since then over fifty have come forward. Even so, not one of them has convincingly claimed that they were forcibly recruited without contradicting themselves. There are even some former comfort women who have said that, "I was taken to a comfort station in a jeep", or "We were especially busy around Christmas time." The Japanese Army had no jeeps, much less celebrated Christmas, so we have no choice but to conclude that the "victimizers" of these comfort women were American soldiers, not Japanese soldiers.

Therefore, using the testimony of comfort women as evidence just because they tug at our heartstrings (and they surely do tug at our heartstrings) cannot be permitted in any society governed by the rule of law. Allowing untested testimonies to prevail against Japan can only be described as discrimination against Japanese.

My proposal for academic conferences

The signatories of the Open Letter aspire to make sexual violence a thing of the past and to forge a world where human rights will be respected by all. I have no reason to question their motives, and in fact I share in this agenda and completely support it. Still, in pursuit of such aims, I do not quite understand why the signatories have chosen to deal with and condemn only the Japanese comfort women system, which ceased to exist more than seventy years ago.

To this day, we confront the existing reality that girls from poor families in Southeast Asia are sold and sent around the world, including to the United States, suffering from sexual abuse. China is engaging in large-scale ethnic persecution in Tibet and Xinjiang, which includes assaulting women. In North Korea's concentration camps for political prisoners, some inmates are subjected to dreadful sexual torture. Following the recent earthquake in Nepal, sex traders went to work, and it was reported by British media that 15,000 Nepalese girls were sold off to places like India and South Korea.

In order to truly create a world without sexual violence, should not our work be focused on preventing the far more urgent crimes that are ongoing as I write these words? Japan would surely provide financial assistance and humanitarian aid in support of this goal. Is there any reason why the Japanese Army's alleged mistreatment of the comfort women over seventy years ago, which may not have even occurred, is an issue that is more important than the violations of women's rights which are happening around the world at this very moment? I sincerely hope that the "Open Letter" was not being influenced by the Korean and Chinese "nationalist invective" that it criticizes.

In conclusion, I would like to propose that a series of serious academic conferences be held between Japanese and American scholars in order to have a dialogue on issues like the nature of the Japanese Army's comfort women system, international comparisons on how nations managed their soldiers' sexual activity on the battlefield, and the serious human rights problems plaguing the world today. The tone of the discussion would be dispassionate and scholarly, based on evidence and logical analysis.

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs could provide a forum for such a discussion, or, alternatively, it might be preferable if a private foundation took the initiative. There is no better time than now to have a mutual dialogue through which we can learn from one another. Together we can make the twenty-first century a "Century of Hope."

Note: Most of this letter was previously published in the Japanese language magazine *Seiron*, July 2015 issue. However, this English language letter was modified from the Japanese version for addressing an American audience.