

**Japanese Scholars' Reply to the American Scholars' Comfort Women Statement:  
In search of a constructive dialogue based upon facts  
August 6, 2015**

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, one hundred and eighty-seven American-based researchers of Japan issued a statement on the comfort women issue titled, "Open letter in support of historians in Japan" (hereafter, "American scholars' statement"). It is our understanding that, subsequently, the number of signers increased to some four hundred and sixty people. In response to the challenge proposed by the American scholars' statement, we Japanese scholars respond with the following views.

**<1> Complete agreement that events should be viewed in their historical context, and weighed carefully in the balance**

We were struck by this passage from the American scholars' statement:

"[...] we believe that only careful weighing and contextual evaluation of every trace of the past can produce a just history. Such work must resist national and gender bias, and be free from government manipulation, censorship, and private intimidation."

We are sympathetic to this suggestion, which we believe to be an important, fundamental principle of historical research. It is cause for celebration that researchers in both Japan and the United States are in agreement on this point.

That we are attempting a response here is due to our having detected, in the American scholars' statement, a willingness to deal constructively with historical facts that has previously been lacking in American debate on the comfort women issue.

**<2> Who are the "historians in Japan"?**

The above-mentioned agreement on a fundamental principle of historical inquiry notwithstanding, there remain aspects of the American scholars' statement that we find puzzling, or that cause us to harbor grave intellectual reservations.

The American scholars' statement is titled, "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan," and begins:

“The undersigned scholars of Japanese studies express our unity with the many courageous historians in Japan seeking an accurate and just history of World War II in Asia.”

It is unclear, however, whom the American scholars mean here by “historians in Japan.” Academic freedom is guaranteed in Japan, which means that there exists a broad diversity of scholars and researchers. According to the explanation provided by the American scholars who compiled the statement, they were influenced by a statement issued in December of 2014 by the Historical Science Society of Japan (*Rekishigaku Kenkyūkai*, commonly abbreviated as “Rekiken”).

This Rekiken statement includes this assertion: “The forced abduction of comfort women is a fact. Comfort women were sex slaves.” It would seem that this assertion is almost completely different from the current American scholars’ statement, which includes neither the phrase “forced abduction of comfort women,” nor the phrase, “sex slaves.”

Furthermore, Rekiken is a Marxist organization that has opposed the Japanese-American Security Treaty. (See link for their April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013 statement. <http://rekiken.jp/appeals/appeal20130401.html>) Were the American scholars aware of these positions when they signed their May, 2015 open letter?

### <3> History must not be used for political purposes

In the American scholars’ statement, Japan’s “comfort women” system is understood to be “one of the most divisive issues” of historical interpretation. The American scholars write:

“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 well.”

“Yet problems of historical interpretation pose an impediment to celebrating these achievements. One of the most divisive historical issues is the so-called ‘comfort-women’ system. This issue has become so distorted by nationalist invective in Japan as well as in Korea and China that many scholars, along with journalists and politicians, have lost sight of the fundamental goal of historical inquiry, which should be to understand the human condition and aspire to improve it.”

We wish to ask the American scholars whether they are seeking unanimity of historical interpretation between the United States and Japan. We ask this because we believe it impossible to achieve unanimity of historical interpretation among differing nations and peoples when that interpretation goes beyond the level of historical fact. This impossibility is self-evident when one considers, for example, the differing historical interpretations of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki between America and Japan.

We affirm the American scholars' statement when it points out the problem of Korean and Chinese nationalistic rhetoric. We, too, oppose nationalistic rhetoric without basis in historical fact when it is deployed by any country.

From this perspective, we are compelled to point out that in the United States, too, one is able to find a mistaken understanding of the facts of the comfort women issue. In their statement, the American scholars allow that, "the precise number of 'comfort women' [...] will probably never be known for certain." If this is truly the American scholars' position, then it should be an imperative, based upon this admission of great uncertainty as to the actual number of comfort women, to correct the erroneous passages in the McGraw-Hill textbook without delay.

But the McGraw-Hill textbook is not the only site for the perpetuation of mistaken information on comfort women numbers. The stelae accompanying the comfort women statues erected throughout the United States also state unequivocally that "two hundred thousand ordinary women were abducted and forced to work for the Japanese military."

In addition to these falsehoods, in the Coomaraswamy Report filed with the United Nations, as well as in United States House of Representatives Resolution No. 121, the Japanese military stands accused, not only of abducting comfort women, but also of drawing and quartering them, and of slaughtering them *en masse* in order to cover up the evidence of their crimes. What we are asking for here is simply the correction of statements such as these that are so greatly at odds with fact.

We believe it is our mission as scholars to bring facts to light exactly as we find them. We must not allow ourselves to be drawn away from our scholarly preserves and into the realm of politicization, as doing so would hinder the kind of dialogue and cooperation that are necessary for solving the many problems that we now face.

#### **<4> There is no basis for singling Japan out among the twentieth-century history of wartime sexual violence and military prostitution**

In their statement, the American scholars conclude that the Japanese military's comfort woman system was "distin[ct]." Thus,

“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.”

If the American scholars see the comfort woman system as one of prostitution carried out in the service of an army, then we are in agreement on this point. In order to prevent rape and other sexual violence in theaters of war, and in order also to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted disease, the Japanese military permitted brokers to procure comfort women from Japan as well as the Korean Peninsula, which at the time was part of the home territory of Japan. In addition to granting permission for this to take place, the Japanese military also helped expedite the process of procurement.

We object to the singling out of Japan for special opprobrium on this score, especially when one compares Japan’s actions with those of the Soviet Union’s Red Army, which permitted the rape of the women of defeated populations in Manchuria, Germany, and elsewhere; of the United States military, which used as prostitutes Japanese women provided by the Japanese government under the American Occupation; and of South Korea, which forced its own countrywomen to work as prostitutes for the sake of South Korea’s American allies during and after the Korean War.

Leaving aside for a moment the horrors of raping defeated populations, we feel that the American and South Korean actions described immediately above show just how common and universal was the “exploitation of young, poor, and vulnerable women.”

As a result of the poverty in Japan and on the Korean Peninsula at that time, parents took out loans with prostitute brokers and made their daughters work for these brokers as repayment of those loans. Such tragedies are now regarded as violations of the law. However, one can still find such tragedies occurring with terrible frequency all around the world. Human trafficking is a booming business and is still the result of poverty and famine, such as the case of the North Koreans who flee into China in order to escape the crushing conditions in their home country. As a United Nations report lays out, women in North Korean political prisons are subjected to appalling sexual abuse. Women’s rights continue to be trampled upon, even as we write.

We consider it incumbent upon all of us to strive to eliminate such tragedies without any excuse or prevarication. In order to realize this aim, we must examine, from the perspective of women’s rights violations, all of the facts from the past through to the present in an empirical and academic way. We must not allow nationalism or political objectives to distort our view of the facts. ■

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