

Japanese Government Pressures American Publisher to Delete Textbook Treatment of Wartime Sexual Slavery: An Interview with Herbert Ziegler

Arudou Debito

The debate on Japan's history of wartime sexual slavery (the "Comfort Women" issue) has heated up again, with the Japanese government extending its efforts to revise school textbooks to overseas publishers.

Last November, McGraw-Hill, publisher of a world history textbook, "Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past" Volume Two, by history professors Herbert Ziegler and Jerry Bentley, was contacted by Japan's New York Consulate General. The request: that two paragraphs (i.e., the entire entry) on the "Comfort Women" be deleted. On January 15, McGraw-Hill met with Japanese diplomats and refused to comply with the request, stating that the scholars had properly established the historical facts. Later that month, PM Abe Shinzo directly targeted the textbook in a parliamentary session, stating that he was "shocked" to learn that his government had "failed to correct the things it should have."

In the March issue of the American Historical Association's newsmagazine "Perspectives on History," 20 prominent American historians, including Professor Ziegler, signed a joint letter to the editor entitled "Standing with the Historians of Japan," in which they stated that "no government should have the right to censor history," and they "oppose the efforts of states or special interests to pressure publishers or historians to alter the results of their research

for political purposes."

Professor Ziegler agreed to an interview on February 17, at the University of Hawai'i at the Mānoa campus. An excerpted digest appeared in Arudou's Japan Times Just Be Cause column of March 5, 2015. This is an expanded version of that interview.

1) What has McGraw-Hill been asked to revise?

I know fewer details than you might imagine. McGraw-Hill was contacted separately from me. The thing that sticks most with me from what I know is that McGraw-Hill was contacted in particular not just about the Comfort Women but also about the Nanjing Massacre. I had a paragraph on that in the textbook. The best that I remember is that with the Nanjing Massacre, the offense was not the massacre so much as the inflated number of victims that I cited. It was pointed out to me that even the Chinese president had only suggested about 300,000 victims, and I wrote 400,000. That is not a substantial reason why I should reduce the number of victims. And when this issue was brought up to me in person, I said that it may well be 300,000 instead of 400,000 but somehow that doesn't change much as far as I'm concerned. 300,000 victims doesn't make it a nice massacre. It's like saying the Holocaust

only murdered 4 million Jews instead of 6 million Jews. What is the point of this?

But the original offense that McGraw-Hill was contacted about was the Comfort Women, and I think they essentially wanted me to leave it out, or change it. I got a lot of references and emails about recent scholarship by Japanese scholars that pointed out how incorrect my writing is on the subject. All my writing on the subject is two paragraphs. It was on the Comfort Women, the Nanjing Massacre, and one other small thing that nobody else has talked about but the Consul in Honolulu, and that was unbeknownst to me, actually, in the first volume of the textbook. In one case there is a map that shows the Sea of Japan labeled as such, but in another instance, in parentheses, it says "East Sea." I got lectured by the Consul about how incorrect that is. I didn't even know it was there because the first volume was written by my co-author. I didn't even know it was a controversial subject. But that was the third item that the Japanese government objected to.

2) Have you been personally contacted by the Abe government?

I was contacted by the local Consul for Political Affairs in Honolulu by email in November, wanting to discuss my textbook. I thought it was the oddest thing I'd ever heard. It didn't even register with me what it was on. "Discuss my textbook?" I said I wasn't interested. He gave me times that I could visit the Consulate, and he kept persisting, so I said, "I talked to my publisher about this, and they said to forward your concerns to the publisher, to their public relations department." So I got another email saying, "Well, New York is New York, Honolulu is Honolulu, and I need to see you in person." I

didn't reply right away.

Next thing I know I'm sitting in my office just like you and I are sitting here today – the door's open, I have office hours. I was eating lunch. In pops the Consul, and an interpreter. They literally pulled up chairs and sat down. And then they started talking to me about my fallacies and my problems and so forth, and they wanted me to change things. So I said, and it was a bit spiteful I have to admit, "It's a little late now, the Sixth Edition just came out, and it is unchanged, because I was not aware that I had to change anything." And then we got into this discussion and I said, "Look," and here's the thing I always want to get across: "it's a textbook."

A successful textbook gets revised every two to three years. One reason for revision is that interpretations change, facts may change. The publisher hires probably a dozen specialists to go over this text, and they write critiques and reviews. And I look at them, and I have to decide whether or not their critiques are justifiable, or out of nowhere, and so forth. And then, my co-author and I revise our text, as necessary, especially in regard to recent literature on any given subject matter. So I'm not opposed to revising anything, and if there were 300,000 victims, I will change it to 300,000. But very quickly I try to establish that the issue that I had here had to do with the government. And I said, "I don't care if it's domestic, or foreign, telling me what to write and what not to write." And I told them I found that very offensive. It's a violation of my freedom of speech, and it's a violation of academic freedom. "It's not like you are scholars who contacted me and said, 'We read this book and we think there are a few inaccuracies.'"

I get these emails all year long, and I look into them. Sometimes they're just weird guys saying "The Holocaust never happened." Okay, goes in the trash can. But I usually pay attention. And if I'm thinking, "Yeah, alright, something has changed," I'll revise it. That's what we do. We've revised this textbook for fifteen years. Did you know that in the fifteen years that this book has been out, not one reviewer hired by the publisher to ferret out all kinds of mistakes has ever questioned anything about the Comfort Women. I'd never had a single Japanese scholar contact me, no Japanese newspaper has contacted me. It is only now, all of a sudden. I'm not naïve, I'm aware that this is the Abe Shinzo government's big campaign to what I would consider revision of Japanese history.

I'm not a specialist in East Asian History at all. I teach World History. I know very little about many things. I'm largely a scholar of German History. Germans had to deal with their past, especially during the Second World War. It wasn't easy, it took time, but by and large the Germans have acknowledged and have come to terms with the ugly parts of their past. The Japanese never have. I do not know, but I suspect that young people in Japan grow up without knowing half the time what happened in the Second World War. That's just a guess, I do not know. And maybe in Japan, and I do not know this either, the government has control over textbooks in schools. Not in America. Mine is not the only textbook, you know, so people are free to pick and buy whatever they want.

So to me it came down to this interference of a foreign government in this case. Even if I were 90% wrong about what I wrote, I would not revise it just because the Japanese Consul tells me to. It's ridiculous.

3) Did they listen to what you had to say?

No. Total lecture mode. Everything I wrote was just totally wrong. Actually, they could have decided not to justify or explain, but it became obvious to me what was going on. It didn't matter what argument I might have made that would have convinced them otherwise. It was clearly a one-sided conversation.

You see, if you would have walked in and introduced yourself as a scholar of modern Japanese history, and you wanted to talk to me and you had taken offense at things that I am propagating, we'd sit down and talk about it. That's not how it was. It was a guy in a suit accompanied by a woman telling me I'm wrong, wrong. Retract it. Revise it.

4) Why this book?

I have no idea. I'm going to speculate a little. I mentioned earlier about the woman who came as the Consul's interpreter and I looked into this a little bit. I remember some time ago that she came to my office, I didn't know her well but she was a student at this university, and she asked if I had a collection of World History books. And I do, sort of, just to see what the competition is like. So my whole shelf over there is full of World History textbooks. So she asked if she could go through them and look at them. And now, with hindsight, I'm thinking, "She was on a spying mission." Not that I cared then, but this is my thinking now: This was started some time ago, perhaps. I mean, how does the Consul, who barely reads English

I assure you, read my textbook?

There's one other connection I should bring up, and it's been incorrectly reported in many media. This is a World History textbook, designed for introductory courses at the college and university level. I don't know the numbers, but on occasion the book is also sold to high schools that offer AP [Advanced Placement] courses in world history. So some high school students read the text.

According to the Japanese, they think it's a high school textbook, one that poisons the minds of American high school students. There's a great misunderstanding here. According to the Japanese Consul, my book is sold all over Los Angeles to schools, and I am not exaggerating when I tell you this: I was accused of poisoning the minds, especially of Korean-American children, who now have taken it upon themselves to intimidate and bully Japanese-American schoolchildren.

Now, my thinking is, whether they're Japanese or Korean-Americans, most teenagers aged 16 to 17 couldn't give a flying leap, and wouldn't know anything about this issue at all. So I checked into this whole thing. It turns out, I think, that the textbook may have been used in Glendale, California, where they had the whole issue with the Comfort Woman statue. So that's what I put together after the fact. But they were here telling me that I was poisoning the minds of children against Japan. They acted under the impression that I sold millions of books to high schools. That's untrue. It's a college text, sold in some cases to high schools, probably some private high schools that have Advanced Placement. I don't even know if they've been sold in any public school districts.



Comfort Woman statue in Glendale California, modeled on the statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul

5) As a historian, what do you think about a government getting involved?

I offer an advanced course on Nazi Germany, and this morning before I saw you I was talking about the Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment, and its effort to control public opinion. We talked about how they controlled the press, about self-censorship out of fear for instance, so all of this obviously goes against my grain. Germans nowadays are very sensitive about interference into press and free speech, about being spied upon. You know, German PM Merkel was upset when the NSA looked at her cellphone, for instance. It struck a real nasty chord in Germany, in part because of the Nazi Era, and because of the East German Era where the government would spy on its citizens, control opinion, and control the press. So when somebody wants to control what I write, it's ringing bells. That's what it comes down to.

I understand about how victors write history.

There's a certain amount of truth to that. But I think good historians will strive to uncover something more than just that. But whenever a government takes control, it is most likely self-serving. Therein lies the rub, at least as far as a historian is concerned. We seek the truth, however imperfect this pursuit is. But by definition I think most historians think that whatever the government does must be looked at very critically. Not swallowed wholesale. The odds are that if the government is in control of the historical narrative, then it is self-serving and there is something hidden. There's a skepticism that comes immediately to the fore.

In Japan's case, I predicted this would happen. The Koreans and Chinese got wind of the fact that the Japanese were here. You probably can imagine how they reacted to this. I gave a two-hour interview to CCTV, Chinese TV. I know what CCTV is. They didn't interview me for two hours about academic freedom. The angle they wanted was the interference of a foreign government into the domestic affairs of a sovereign state. Which is of course, the Chinese party line. So now the Japanese are giving them fodder for this.

I got a letter from China, and it said that hundreds of millions of Chinese just saw me for I don't know how long on TV. I don't know how they edited it, they did a voice-over, but I'm sure they used it as a club against the Japanese. The Koreans, the same thing. They're very sensitive about the Comfort Women issue. I have requests left and right. Why did Abe Shinzo not think about this? I got invitations from China to speak on the issue, in China, all expenses paid. I turned every one of those things down, because I know what the purpose is. But Abe didn't invite me for three nights in Tokyo to convince me to change my mind on the issue of the Comfort Women.

Instead they resorted to pressure tactics.

The thing about Japan, and the Germans tried this too, is the victimhood narrative: Initially there was a sense by many Germans at some point in time that they were the real victims of the Second World War. There was mass rape by the Russians at the end of the war, which is documented medically. And for a long time, German historians and journalists could not write about it, because the moment they wrote about the mass rape of German women, the victorious powers would censor it. But times have changed, and now these things are no longer taboo. They're discussed, and it's recognized that yes, in some cases, Germans actually were victims. But that does not change the overall narrative.

So with Japan, do they really think that everything that has been written outside of Japan is incorrect, and is an effort by the victors of 70 years ago to shape Japanese history in such a dark fashion? I don't understand it, actually.

Never mind me, and the difficulties with my book. Does Abe really think that this will change China's view on the subject of the comfort women? Or Korea's view? Maybe he thinks he can influence some American scholars who didn't say the right things or were misguided or misinformed. But we know that the Chinese are not the same way. They have their view of what happened and they won't change it. There's a total disagreement with the Japanese.

What will happen this summer? It's the 70th Anniversary. I bet China will have big parades,

and they will drown out anything the Japanese Government has to say about the war. The Koreans will do the same. So it's a little hard for me to understand what the Japanese think the odds are of succeeding with this enterprise?

Here's an interesting factoid: I've been mentioned by Reuters, Bloomberg, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, CCTV in China, Korean newspapers, all over the place. But no Japanese media -- no newspaper, no TV station -- has picked up this story. I'm thinking to myself, "This is bizarre." Do their newspapers not monitor UPI or AP or Bloomberg, Reuters, BBC, whatever? How can they not know this is going on?

6) Last question: In an ideal world, how would you like this all to conclude?

I will try to become better informed on the subject, for instance, of Comfort Women. One of the things the Japanese accuse me of all the time is, "You have no footnotes." Well, it's not a scholarly monograph. It's a textbook. There are no footnotes in a textbook. Then they argue, "We should give different positions." But you don't do that in a textbook. I decide which is the most judicious, most consensus-based interpretation on any given subject based on the most recent research that I regurgitate for college freshmen.

But what I do know is that there are very few reliable records of any sort. The same thing is true about the Nanjing Massacre. If I'm not mistaken, a lot of these records were deliberately destroyed by the Japanese. That creates a situation where every Tom, Dick, and

Harry can bring in their own interpretation. My point is that without reliable records, everything is an estimate, based on this or that assumption, so the number of victims is almost impossible to determine. But, you see, that gives room for revisionism. What should not be forgotten are the testimonies from the victims of these wartime atrocities, particularly as they are aging and dying.

Thank you very much for the interview.

The two contentious paragraphs in "Traditions and Encounters" on the "Comfort Women" can be read in full [here](#).

Arudou Debito is a writer, activist, blogger (www.debito.org), and columnist for the Japan Times. He is the author of [Japanese Only, the Otaru Hot Springs Case and Racial Discrimination in Japan](#) (Akashi Shoten, English and Japanese), and coauthor, with Higuchi Akira, an administrative solicitor in Sapporo who also is qualified as an immigration lawyer by Sapporo Immigration, of the bilingual [Handbook for Newcomers, Migrants and Immigrants to Japan](#) (2nd edition). Find more details on this and other books by Arudou [here](#).

Related articles

Masako Shinjo and Summers Robinson, [My Story: A Daughter Recalls the Battle of Okinawa](#)

Standpoint

Uemura Takashi with an introduction by Tomomi Yamaguchi, [Labeled "the reporter who fabricated" the comfort woman issue: A Rebuttal](#)

Nishino Rumiko and Nogawa Motokazu, [The Japanese State's New Assault on the Victims of Wartime Sexual Slavery.](#)

Yoshimi Yoshiaki with an introduction by Satoko Norimatsu, [Reexamining the "Comfort Women" Issue. An Interview with Yoshimi Yoshiaki](#)

Uemura Takashi (translated by Norma Field), [Journalist Who Broke Comfort Women Story Files 16.5 million Yen Libel Suit Against Bungei Shunju: Uemura Takashi's Speech to the Press](#)

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, [Addressing Japan's 'Comfort Women' Issue From an Academic](#)

Yoshiko Nozaki, [The "Comfort Women" Controversy: History and Testimony](#)