

OPEN LETTER IN SUPPORT OF HISTORIANS IN JAPAN

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. Because Japan is a second home as well as a field of research for many of us, we write with a shared concern for the way that the history of Japan and East Asia is studied and commemorated.

In this important commemorative year, we also write to celebrate seventy years of peace between Japan and its neighbors. 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.

Exploitation of the suffering of former "comfort women" for nationalist ends in the countries of the victims makes an international resolution more difficult and further insults the dignity of the women themselves. Yet denying or trivializing what happened to them is equally unacceptable. 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.

There is no easy path to a "correct history." Much of the archive of the Japanese imperial military was destroyed. The actions of local procurers who provided women to the military may never have been recorded. But historians have unearthed numerous documents demonstrating the military's involvement in the transfer of women and oversight of brothels. Important evidence also comes from the testimony of victims. Although their stories are diverse and affected by the inconsistencies of memory, the aggregate record they offer is compelling and supported by official documents as well as by the accounts of soldiers and others.

Historians disagree over the precise number of "comfort women," which will probably never be known for certain. Establishing sound estimates of victims is important. But ultimately, whether the numbers are judged to have been in the tens of thousands or the hundreds of thousands will not alter the fact of the exploitation carried out throughout the Japanese empire and its war zones.

Some historians also dispute how directly the Japanese military was involved, and whether women were coerced to become "comfort women." Yet the evidence makes clear that large numbers of women were held against their will and subjected to horrific brutality. Employing legalistic arguments focused on particular terms or isolated documents to challenge the victims' testimony both misses the fundamental

issue of their brutalization and ignores the larger context of the inhumane system that exploited them.

Like our colleagues in Japan, 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 defend the freedom of historical inquiry, and we call upon all governments to do the same.

Many countries still struggle to acknowledge past injustices. It took over forty years for the United States government to compensate Japanese-Americans for their internment during World War II. The promise of equality for African Americans was not realized in US law until a century after the abolition of slavery, and the reality of racism remains ingrained in American society. None of the imperial powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the United States, the European nations, and Japan, can claim to have sufficiently reckoned with their histories of racism, colonialism, and war, or with the suffering they inflicted on countless civilians around the world.

Japan today values the life and rights of every individual, including the most vulnerable. The Japanese government would not tolerate the exploitation of women in a system like the military “comfort stations” now, either overseas or at home. Even at the time, some officials protested on moral grounds. But the wartime regime compelled absolute sacrifice of the individual to serve the state, causing great suffering to the Japanese people themselves as well as to other Asians. No one should have to suffer such conditions again.

This year presents an opportunity for the government of Japan to show leadership by addressing Japan’s history of colonial rule and wartime aggression in both words and action. In his April address to the US Congress, Prime Minister Abe spoke of the universal value of human rights, of the importance of human security, and of facing the suffering that Japan caused other countries. We applaud these sentiments and urge the Prime Minister to act boldly on all of them.

The process of acknowledging past wrongs strengthens a democratic society and fosters cooperation among nations. Since the equal rights and dignity of women lie at the core of the “comfort women” issue, its resolution would be a historic step toward the equality of women and men in Japan, East Asia and the world.

In our classrooms, students from Japan, Korea, China and elsewhere discuss these difficult issues with mutual respect and probity. Their generation will live with the record of the past that we bequeath them. To help them build a world free of sexual violence and human trafficking, and to promote peace and friendship in Asia, we must leave as full and unbiased an accounting of past wrongs as possible.

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This statement emerged from an open forum held at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting held in Chicago during March 2015, and from subsequent discussions on line among a wide range of Japan scholars. It represents the opinions only of those who have signed it and not of any organization or institution.