

## FEATURE

Excerpted from

# U.S. author recounts ‘lecture’ he got about ‘comfort women’ from uninvited Japanese guests

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Mar 4, 2015

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2015/03/04/issues/u-s-author-recounts-lecture-got-comfort-women-uninvitedjapanese-guests/#.VRL6KOGvMTt>

The debate on Japan’s history of wartime sexual slavery (aka the “comfort women” issue) has heated up again, with the Japanese government extending its efforts to revise school textbooks to overseas.

In November, McGraw-Hill, publisher of the world history textbook “Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past, Vol. 2,” by history professors Herbert Ziegler and Jerry Bentley, was contacted by Japan’s Consulate General in New York. The request: that two paragraphs (i.e., the entire entry) on the comfort women be deleted.

On Jan. 15, McGraw-Hill representatives met with Japanese diplomats and refused the request, stating that the scholars had properly established the historical facts. Later that month, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe 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 historians, including Professor Ziegler, signed a letter to the editor titled “Standing with the historians of Japan.” They stated that they “agree with Herbert Ziegler that no government should have the right to censor history,” and “oppose the efforts of states or special interests to pressure publishers or historians to alter the results of their research for political purposes.”



history professors Herbert Ziegler

Professor Ziegler met with JBC on Feb. 17.

### **JBC: What has McGraw-Hill been asked to revise?**

*Herbert Ziegler: The original offense 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.*

*It was the comfort women, the Nanjing Massacre, and one other small thing that nobody else has talked about but the Consul (for Political Affairs) in Honolulu: In the first volume of the textbook, there is a map that shows the Sea of Japan labeled as such, but in one instance, in parentheses, it says “East Sea.” And I got lectured on how incorrect that is when the consul came to my office. I didn’t know it was there because the first volume my co-author wrote, not*

me. I didn't even know it was a controversial subject.

**JBC: Have you been personally contacted by the Abe government?**

*HZ: I was contacted by the local Consul for Political Affairs in Honolulu in November, wanting to discuss my textbook. I thought it was the oddest thing I've ever heard. "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 told them I talked to my publisher about this, and they said to forward the consulate's concerns to their public relations department. So I got another email (from the consul) 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 problems, and why they wanted me to change things. I said, a bit spitefully, "It's a little late now, the sixth edition just came out and it is unchanged, because I wasn't aware that I had to change any of it." And then we got into this discussion and I said, "Now 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, and the facts may change. The publisher hires maybe a dozen specialists to go over this text, and they write critiques and reviews. When I look at them, 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 regards to recent literature on the subject matter.*

*So I'm not opposed to revising anything, and if there were 300,000 victims of the Nanjing Massacre instead of the 400,000 I wrote, I will*



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*change it to 300,000. But very quickly I try to establish that my issue here had to do with the government. I said, "I don't care if it's a domestic or foreign government 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 of academic freedom. It's not like a few scholars had contacted me and said, "I read this book and I think there are a few inaccuracies."*

*Did you know that in the 15 years this book has been out, not one reviewer hired by the publisher to ferret out mistakes has ever questioned anything about the comfort women? I'd never had a single Japanese scholar contact me, nor any Japanese newspaper, for 15 years. It is only now, all of a sudden. I'm not naive; I'm aware that this is the Abe's government's big campaign to do what I would consider revision of Japanese history.*

*I'm not a specialist in East Asian history. I teach world history, meaning I know very little about many things. I'm largely a scholar of German history. Germans had to deal with their*

*past, especially during World War II. It wasn't easy, it took time, but by and large the Germans have acknowledged and come to terms with the ugly parts of their past. The Japanese never have.*

*I suspect that young people in Japan grow up without knowing half the time what went on 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, so people are free to pick and buy whatever they want.*

*So to me it came down to this interference of a foreign government: Even if I were 90 percent wrong about what I wrote, I would not revise it just because the consul of the Japanese Consulate tells me to — it's ridiculous.*

**JBC: Did they listen to what you had to say?**

*HZ: No. Total lecture mode. Everything I wrote was just totally wrong. It became obvious to me what was going on. It didn't matter what argument I might have made to convince them otherwise. It was a one-sided conversation.*

*You see, if you would have walked in and introduced yourself as a scholar of modern Japanese history, 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."*

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The full text in "Traditions and Encounters" on the comfort women is at [www.debito.org/?p=13103](http://www.debito.org/?p=13103). The full Ziegler interview will be up at The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus website ([www.japanfocus.org](http://www.japanfocus.org)) in a few days. Twitter @arudoudebito. Comments: [community@japantimes.co.jp](mailto:community@japantimes.co.jp)