

# Documentary juxtaposes both sides of contentious debate on 'comfort women'

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On May 30, three people held a [news conference in Tokyo](#) to speak out against a documentary titled “[Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue](#),” which focuses on the rhetorical battle over the women who sexually serviced Japanese soldiers before and during World War II. The participants included Nobukatsu Fujioka, vice chairman of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which wants history textbooks to reflect the view that the government at the time did not force these women to work in authorized front-line brothels and that they were, in fact, professional prostitutes. This view is disputed by South Korea, where many comfort women were from, as well as by many Japanese scholars. Fujioka and others claim Japanese-American Miki Dezaki deceived them when the director persuaded them to appear on camera to explain their position. At the time, Dezaki was a graduate student at Sophia University, and the participants believed the interviews were part of Dezaki’s academic research. They had no idea they would end up in a commercially released documentary. They also claim the footage was edited “unfairly” so as to distort their views.

It’s a “grotesque piece of propaganda,” Fujioka said, demanding that distribution be halted. Fujioka and six others have decided to take legal action.

However, it’s unlikely the screenings will stop. The movie is a hit — or, as much of a hit as can be expected of a low-budget art house documentary on this issue. Screenings at the venue in Tokyo where it has been playing since April 20 have frequently been sold out, thus attracting the attention of the media, which tends to avoid the issue of comfort women.

In a May 31 [Tokyo Shimbun article](#), Dezaki denied that he misled his interview subjects. He said the release forms they signed clearly included the possibility that the resulting footage could be publicly shown. All interviewees, including those with views that differed from Fujioka’s and his ilk, were encouraged to speak openly and at length. As filmmaker Tatsuya Mori told the newspaper, it is this parity that makes “Shusenjo” different.

“Similar films don’t have both sides in confrontation,” he said.

In fact, there is no confrontation, or, at least, not in the direct sense. Although Dezaki presents both sides of the debate in fairly equal proportion, they’re never in the same room together. The arguments put forth have been established for some time, and Dezaki simply juxtaposes them. It is this aspect of the film that Fujioka and other interviewees object to, suggesting that had they known their words would be scrutinized, they wouldn’t have agreed to participate. Several participants use patently discriminatory terms in the film, especially with regard to Koreans, whom one interviewee describes as being inherently dishonest. Another jokingly says feminists are unattractive by definition.

Dezaki responded to the charges during a [June 3 news conference](#), insisting that some of the interview subjects had an opportunity to raise their objections before the film's release. He sent two of them edited footage of their respective interviews and invited them to pre-release screenings. And while objections would not have changed the thrust of the film, Dezaki would have included disclaimers in the credits. However, no one voiced dissatisfaction until after the movie was in theaters. He admitted the film's structure is that of a graduation thesis. Both sides were allowed to state their views, which Dezaki then analyzes. Significantly, the so-called revisionist position — a term Fujioka and others found offensive but which Dezaki justified semantically — was not touted by any experts, because no experts in that camp agreed to talk to him.

The revisionists on screen are not historians, he said, adding that he thought they were less persuasive because they have been fact-checked by people who have studied the issue.

The scholars who appear in the documentary also broaden their argument with [context about the authoritarian nature of the military government during the war](#), while the revisionists put forth almost pure dogma. The clincher is an offhand remark by one who admits he has never even read testimonies by former comfort women or, for that matter, anything written by someone with a viewpoint different from his own.

Dezaki's goal was not so much to find out what happened before and during World War II, but rather to probe the current ideological divide in Japan epitomized by the comfort women debate. This becomes obvious when he discusses Japan's rightward inclination under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the influence of the conservative lobbying group Japan Conference (Nippon Kaigi), one of whom appeared on screen.

This particular aspect caught a number of viewers off guard. Author and activist Karin Amamiya wrote in the magazine [Shukan Kinyobi](#) that, based on the trailer, which focused on "the statements of right wingers" such as journalist Yoshiko Sakurai and American lawyer/TV personality Kent Gilbert, she thought the film would be a polemic but, in fact, the revisionist position comes across as being "sloppy" and ludicrous.

Writer Rin Kuboki, commenting in the feminist blog [Love Piece Club](#), said she was dismayed the comfort women had no voice in the film. She was suspicious of Dezaki's motives but nevertheless flabbergasted by the intellectual laziness of the revisionists. At the news conference, Dezaki explained that some of the revisionists were initially enthusiastic about the project. One even sent him a congratulatory email when he heard it had been picked up for commercial distribution, but the same person condemned it after the release. Dezaki also claimed that Gilbert was willing to promote the film, and then changed his mind.

"They had expected I was going to make a film that totally showed their side only. I don't really understand why they thought this because I told them all that I would be listening to both sides and gradually come to a conclusion," Dezaki said. "Maybe because they really believe they're right, they think that it's impossible for me to hear both sides and come up with my own conclusion."

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"Shusenjo" is now playing at Theatre Image Forum in Tokyo (screening daily at 18:50 p.m. with English and Japanese subtitles) and cinemas nationwide. For more information, visit [www.shusenjo.jp](http://www.shusenjo.jp).

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