

DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG

STORIES THAT MAKE HISTORY

THE EXPERIENCE AND MEMORIES OF THE JAPANESE
MILITARY »COMFORT GIRLS-WOMEN«

*Edited by the Research Team of the War & Women's
Human Rights Center / The Korean Council for
the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan*

Translated by Angella Son

GENOCIDE AND MASS VIOLENCE
IN THE AGE OF EXTREMES



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Edited by Frank Jacob

Volume 3

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ISBN 978-3-11-067029-5
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-067052-3
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-067061-5
ISSN 2626-6490
DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110670523>



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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020938002

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book is published with open access at www.degruyter.com.

Cover image: Copyright by the Korean Council for Justice & Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

Typesetting: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

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Dedicated to

all *halmonis*

beloved grandmothers

and

our *comfort girls-women*

others suffering from sexual and war violence in the world

you and I desiring and taking action for the respect for human dignity for all

Translator's Preface

Fifteen Years Later

Among the estimated 50,000 to 200,000¹ Korean young girls and women who were mobilized as sex slaves for the Japanese military, only 240 of them were registered as *comfort girls-women* with the South Korean government by the end of 2018, and only twenty are still alive today (as of August 31, 2019). Most of them are in their late 80s and 90s. Out of the twelve *comfort girls-women* whose stories are shared in this volume, only three are still alive today. The *halmoni* Kang Il-chul, Lee Ok-seon and Gil Won-ok are in their early 90s. It is dreadful to imagine how much of this “living his(her)tory” will still be alive about ten years from now. It is with this sense of urgency in mind that this book, which is a translation of the original volume into English, is created, a response to a void in these published stories in languages other than Korean. This book is an effort to preserve and make their stories available to the world and an invitation to encourage and ask readers to join in the act of justice and compassion for *comfort girls-women* and other victims of war and sexual violence.

Note that I created the term *comfort girls-women* to replace the widely used term “comfort women,” often placed inside quotation marks. This term has three significant aspects: (1) the italics signify that the word “comfort” has a different meaning – sexual slavery—than its usual meaning in the term “comfort women” of entertaining and providing pleasure to men; (2) the addition of the word “girl” underscores the young age of the victims who were forced into sexual slavery; and (3) the word “women” reflects the long period – about three-quarters of a century – they endured without a satisfactory resolution to their situation. Also, currently, Korean *comfort girls-women* are referred to in Korean as *halmoni*, which means “grandmother” and is a general term for elderly women in Korea.

The notion of comfort women progressed through various transformations, especially during the intense period of heightened war conflict toward the latter part of World War II. Ideally, it was understood as a profession by which

¹ These numbers are estimates because fact finding to ascertain accurate numbers is not possible due to the fact that, to eliminate any evidence of the systemic execution of sexual slavery by the Japanese military, it killed many *comfort girls-women* at comfort stations at the end of war and destroyed many military records. Moreover, the Japanese government has not disclosed the surviving military records about *comfort girls-women*. Some *comfort girls-women* also died on their way back to Korea.

women offered comfort to stressed soldiers during wartime by performing (singing and dancing) and providing companionship. In Chosun, these entertaining girls and women were known as *kisaeng* and were professionally trained in singing, dancing, and poetry. What makes the issue of *comfort girls-women* complex and difficult to engage with “clean” discussions between the perpetrator and victim and among the rest of us is due to the fluidity of the meaning of the term “comfort.” Japan had legalized and normalized prostitution and used the term “comforting” in place of prostitution that is executed voluntarily by women for economic gain. Because of the fluidity of the term “comfort,” used both for what it literally means and how it is a euphemism for prostitution, both activists and scholars seeking justice for *comfort girls-women* emphasized the deceptive, violent and forced nature of recruitment to prove that *comfort girls-women* were not comforting but were forced into sexual slavery. This became common rhetoric for *comfort girls-women* registering with the South Korean government and is evident in most of the stories in this volume.

The research team struggled with this very issue back in 2004 when they were compiling Gil Won-ok *halmoni*'s story. Gil *halmoni* was not taken by force to comfort stations but voluntarily went with her friends to make money to help her father obtain his release from prison. She also went to the comfort station for a second time thinking that she was going to sing at places like bars. The research team initially did not know whether her story could be a part of the book. In the midst of their genuine struggle with the discrepancy between Gil *halmoni*'s story and the existing repertoire of what *comfort girls-women* were in South Korea at that time, they came to a realization about how narrowly *comfort girls-women* were defined because of the patriarchal influence, especially the Confucian virtues. Korean girls' highest virtue is to keep their chastity until they are married and Korean *comfort girls-women* were yet again forced to fit their life into a box, i.e. the involuntary loss of chastity as opposed to an exercise of subjectivity to support their families. It was a time to repent and free themselves from the shackles of entrenched and dehumanizing societal duress from a patriarchal system about which they thought they were already mostly aware. They concluded that, instead of forcible and involuntary recruitment, the conditions at comfort stations should be the main criteria in determining whether one was a sexual slave.

I concur with the research team and propose that Yoshimi Yoshiaki's criteria of *comfort girls-women* should be uniformly adopted. Regardless of how they are recruited and transported to comfort stations, *comfort girls-women* were sex slaves if the conditions at comfort stations warranted it so, conditions such as coerced sexual intercourse, harsh scrutiny, physical violence, an inability to leave, nominal or no compensation, hunger, constant exposure to sexually

transmitted diseases, etc. No debate about the manner of recruitment and transportation should take place. Moreover, no compulsivity about a 100% rule should be used as a criterion for evidence. Sexual slavery is recognized even if there were *comfort girls-women* who had more freedom, made money, or engaged in romantic relationships with Japanese soldiers as these were exceptions and most *comfort girls-women* were subject to sexual slavery. This will facilitate more focused negotiations between the Japanese government as the perpetrator and *comfort girls-women* as the victims. There is no question about the wretchedly inhuman working conditions that *comfort girls-women* had to face day in and day out at comfort stations. The initiation of their work was usually by gang rapes. They were constantly subject to intolerable violence and went without adequate or any pay. They were coerced to have an unimaginable number of sexual encounters, especially during weekends (e.g. Gong Jeom-yeop, Kim Hwa-ja, and Kim Soon-ak had 27 to 40 sexual intercourses during weekends) and were prone to contracting STDs. For instance, five out of the twelve *comfort girls-women* in this book (Gong Jeom-yeop, Seok Soon-hee, Lee Ok-seon, Roh Chung-ja, and Jang Jeom-dol) contracted syphilis. They were perpetually hungry, had no personal freedom to go into and out of comfort stations, and were controlled by a fear of violence and death.

What is alarming is how young *comfort girls-women* were when they were transported to comfort stations; most of them were as young as 11 and they were usually not older than 18. The ages noted in this book use the Korean age system in which a baby is one year old at birth. A Korean age is usually one year older, in some cases two years older, than an American age. It is grossly misleading to talk about *comfort girls-women* only in terms of women since they were children or youths when they were conscripted into sexual slavery. These children and young girls were in situations of extreme displacement from their families, friends, hometowns, language, name, culture, etc. Most of all, they were displaced from their girlhood and humanity. Their girlhood was arrested at the point of arrival at comfort stations. They, in fact, stopped being a human for the most part. They were thoroughly objectified by the horrific experiences of sexual slavery by the Japanese military and were used as a tool to satisfy the Japanese military's needs to the point that their dignity as a human was obliterated, for some, even to the point of non-existence.

They were abandoned by the Japanese military to be used as *comfort girls-women* and no acknowledgment of the treacherous and systematic sexual enslavement imposed on them has come forth from the Japanese government. Tragically, they experienced a second abandonment by the South Korean government, its people, and, in some cases, even their families. They were fortunate enough to stay alive in spite of the efforts of the Japanese military to kill off all *comfort girls-*

women in order to eliminate evidence of the institutional system of sexual slavery just as they destroyed many of the military records. They had gone through extremely distressful situations and risked their lives to return home, but they were at best not welcomed and at worst rejected. The Korean government and people have been too slow to recognize their victimization and accept the innocence of these women and to embrace their pain, sorrow, and suffering and to advocate for justice for them. Some of their families were afraid that they would be the object of shame if their daughter, sister, or mother were *comfort girls-women*. This turning of their innocence into inadequacy or shame, actively by the Japanese government, passively by the Korean government and its people, and helplessly by *comfort girls-women* themselves, compounded their long, miserable suffering for half a century until Kim Hak-soon broke the silence in 1991 with the support of Korean and Japanese activists, even though the first comfort station outside of Japan was established by the Japanese military in 1932 and World War II ended in 1945. After World War II, no part of the war resolution was about *comfort girls-women*. Korea did not claim redress for *comfort girls-women*, nor did Japan offer to pay or provide care for them. Neither United Nations troops nor the United States suggested any reparation for them. It became a moot point and disappeared from people's attention.

In the late 20th century, religious and secular women's organizations in South Korea were very active in addressing women's human rights and societal well-being, including sex tourism from Japan to South Korea. They determined that sex tourism was rooted in the system of *comfort girls-women* in operation during World War II.² South Korean women activists then started their justice work for *comfort girls-women* and founded the Korean Institute on Chongsindae on July 10, 1990 and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan in November of 1990. Yoon Chung Ok and Lee Hyo-chae were their leaders, and these organizations helped Kim Hak-sun bring a suit against the Japanese government in August of 1991. Inspired by Kim Hak-sun, the Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki found some relevant documents which were published by Asahi Shinbun on January 11, 1992. This prompted a statement of apology by the Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi on January 17, 1992, and the Kono statement was issued on August 4, 1993 acknowledging the involvement of the Japanese military in the system of *comfort girls-women* and

² For further details on the discussion, please see my work "The Japanese Secret: The Shame Behind Japan's Longstanding Denial of Its War Crime against Korean *Comfort Girls-Women*" in *Japanese Military Sexual Slavery: The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims*, eds. Pyong Gap Min, Thomas Chung and Sejung Sage Yim (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 291–319.

stations. These apologies have been criticized for Japan's reluctance to take full and legal responsibility for its war crimes. Nonetheless, some successful milestones have been reached at the United Nations, the "Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery" in 2000, and the United States Congress (House Resolution 121) on July 30, 2007 stating that Japan was legally accountable for sexual slavery during World War II. However, in the same year of 2007, the Japanese conservative party, led by the Abe administration, reversed Japan's admission of its guilt in the Kono Statement. Abe stated, "[t]he fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion."³ In addition, Japanese nationalists argued that *comfort girls-women* were willing prostitutes to earn money and no sexual slavery existed during World War II, and thus that Japan is not accountable for any *comfort girls-women* issues.

Moreover, Japan's effort to whitewash its atrocious and horrendous war crimes such as the Nanking massacre and *comfort girls-women* issues started in 1955 by adopting more censorship on textbooks. The government textbook authorization system has been used to reject textbooks including unfavorable depictions of Japan during World War II. In addition, a group of far-right nationalist revisionists sponsored the publication of the *New History Textbook* in 2000 to rewrite history. Makoto Watanabe, an associate professor of communications and media at Hokkaido Bunkyo University, is dismayed by Japan's efforts to revise history and states:

A decade ago, the far right said it was going to "reinterpret" Japanese history, essentially allowing them to put a positive spin on everything. But now they are simply trying to erase things like the Nanjing Massacre and the comfort women from history books. To delete anything that is seen as negative from our history means that young people are ignorant about their own nation's past. And not knowing about Nanjing or other uncomfortable facts means that they are not able to make appropriate decisions on the future of our country.⁴

Influenced by the 1993 Kono statement, by 1997, there were seven textbooks in Japan that contained *comfort girls-women* issues in their content. The number of textbooks decreased under the influence of Abe and other revisionists and there were three and two textbooks mentioning comfort women in 2002 and 2006 respectively. Eventually, by 2012, there were no textbooks that informed

³ Hiroko Tabuchi, "Japan's Abe: No Proof of WWII Sex Slaves," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2007. Accessed March 2, 2019. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/01/AR2007030100578.html>.

⁴ Julian Ryall, "Japan's 'Nationalist' School Books Teach a Different View of History," *DW*, August 15, 2017. Accessed November 6, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/japans-nationalist-school-books-teach-a-different-view-of-history/a-40092325>.

Japanese children and youths about comfort women issues in Japan.⁵ Japan's effort to revise history did not stop with textbooks in Japan but extended to textbooks in the United States. In December 2014, Japanese officials met with McGraw-Hill officials in New York and stipulated that one of their textbooks was erroneous on facts about *comfort girls-women* and other issues and that it should revise the textbook accordingly. In response to this demand from Japan, McGraw-Hill rejected it and released a statement saying: "Scholars are aligned behind the historical fact of 'comfort women' and we unequivocally stand behind the writing, research and presentation of our authors."⁶

On December 28, 2015, pressured by the Obama Administration, Japan and South Korea entered a "final and irreversible" agreement of reconciliation under which Japan was to issue a statement of apology and create a fund of one million yen with which to pay Korean *comfort girls-women* and South Korea was to remove the *Sonyeosang* (peace statue) in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Unfortunately, the agreement was received with fury and indignation, especially by Korean activists and *halmonis*, because the victims were completely ignored in the making of the agreement. The victims did not think that Japan's apology was a true apology since it did not include Japan's admission of guilt. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō confirmed that the apology was not part of the December 28, 2015 agreement.⁷ As a result, twelve of the surviving victims are bringing suits against the Korean government. President Moon Jae-in ordered a review of the agreement which was made by his predecessor Former President Park Geun-hye and made an announcement at the end of the year 2017 confirming the position of much of the South Korean public whereby the agreement did not reflect the crucial voices of victims and thus was flawed. In the meantime, Japan has been urging Korea to stand up to the agreement and, most recently, implemented trade restrictions on chemicals essential to tech industries in South Korea. Moreover, Japan removed South Korea from its whitelist in August 2019 and, in turn, South Korea removed Japan from its whitelist in September 2019. The tension between the two countries is escalating.

5 Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, Tokyo, Japan.

6 Martin Fackler, "U. S. Textbook Skews History, Prime Minister of Japan Says," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2015. Accessed November 12, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/world/asia/japans-premier-disputes-us-textbooks-portrayal-of-comfort-women.html>.

7 *Japan Times*, "Abe Confirms Japan Not Considering Apology Letters for 'Comfort Women,'" October 3, 2016. Accessed March 2, 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/10/03/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-confirms-japan-not-considering-apology-letters-comfort-women/#.WjsPVIWnGpp>.

A note to the reader is in order. In general, stories written by novelists or told by people are usually coherent with respect to time, space, and the progression of plots, and, for the most part, have full information in explicit or implied forms. When readers or listeners are done reading or listening to the stories, there is usually a clear sense as to the intent of the author, although there could be a few questions still begging for the readers' continued reflections. If there is any ambivalence in the story, it is usually created by the willful intention of the author or storyteller. Ambivalence, however, is the major characteristic of the stories of the twelve *comfort girls-women* in this book.

What the readers will find is incongruity in all of the stories even though the research team put their best efforts into compiling coherent stories. It is expected that these *comfort girls-women* would forget some details of their recruitment, transporting, and life at a comfort station and of their return home since it happened fifty to sixty years prior to 2004. Even with some deleted memories, coherence is usually intact in people's memories. However, memories of these *comfort girls-women* are not as reliable as the level that is often expected of storytellers. For instance, Kim Bong-yi suffered from mental disturbance from the trauma of her life as a *comfort girl-woman*, to the extent that she hardly remembers the location of the comfort station, her life there, and the way she came back home. Roh Chung-ja, another *comfort girl-woman*, shared that she was involved in entertaining the soldiers with singing and dancing and that she did not engage in taking "customers" despite having admitted so earlier. It was found out that Roh had dementia at the time of her interviews in 2002.

Whatever caused their partial amnesia or partially tangled memories, the research team has, nonetheless, compiled coherent stories in the background of ambivalence. I encourage readers to suspend their usual expectations of coherent stories, especially if they are seeking logical, sequential, and accurate facts with the eye of an analytical mind. Instead, I encourage readers to receive the life stories of these *comfort girls-women* with both their hearts and minds in the fullest operation and hear the inner stories that they are desperately trying to convey to us today. Their voice was completely denied and resuscitating their sleeping or almost disappeared voices would require further healing in the core of their selves. We thus need to hear their incoherent stories by listening to both what is told and what is left unspoken. We need to be mindful about how sexual slavery alters a person's life forever and inevitably, especially their future relationship with sex. Moreover, reflection and critical analysis are in order when determining what factors contributed to their continual struggle to make their ends meet and try to stay away from abusive situations. When we think deeply and honestly about this, we cannot but be humble to admit that we have overlooked or even were oblivious about their plight. We have put the

least of our trust in the possibility of their transformation from the atrocity of pain and suffering into thriving delight and joy. Their stories ended in this book in 2004, but their life stories continued and the gradual transformation of their lives from pain and suffering to hope and joy followed. Moreover, the transformation of their identity from helpless victims to courageous activists for justice and peace for the world inspired and continues to inspire many to be part of their journey to justice and peace. I thus encourage and ask readers to join in the acts of justice and compassion for *comfort girls-women* and other victims of war and sexual violence.

May the words of *comfort girls-women*, “No more wars!” and “No more victims like us, *comfort girls-women!*” come alive!

Angella Son
August 31, 2019
Madison, New Jersey

Acknowledgments

My work in this project owes deep appreciation to many people and organizations. I am most grateful to the twelve *comfort girls-women* for their willingness to be vulnerable and for their courage to re-experience the trauma yet again in sharing their stories. The sharing of their stories, which are painful and all prefer to forget about, was not a passive act but a result of an agonizing struggle with their sense of shame and fear of isolation. It was their proactive subjectivity to reveal the truth of the unbearable and horrifying nature of war and the abuse of the weak that accompanied the war. Moreover, their fierce passion to prevent any future atrocities that they had helplessly experienced was behind their willingness and courage to bear the unbearable. They are heroes for turning weakness into strength.

I am deeply grateful to the research team and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereafter, the Korean Council) for having produced the original book in 2004 that represents their resilient commitment, scholarly acumen, and profound compassion. Their tireless work wisely kept the mission of the project in balance with the needs of the twelve *comfort girls-women* and readers. They did not compromise the authenticity and well-being of the twelve courageous people for the sake of the ambitious accomplishment of “perfect” testimonies, nor did they insist on “clean” testimonies for the readers. Their sacrifice and dedication are worthy of wholehearted commendation. They left an indelible mark in shaping history by offering a history that is dangerous, piercing, and desolate so that peace and joy may be given birth gradually in the courageous twelve *comfort girls-women*, other *comfort girls-women*, and the rest of us.

I am especially grateful to the Korean Council and Yoon Meehyang, Co-Representative of the Korean Council, for readily giving me permission to translate the original book and for enthusiastically providing their support for the project. In particular, Yoon Meehyang offered support for all my requests, including helping me untangle many difficult expressions and statements as well as making the Korean Council staff available to work with me. Among the staff, I am most grateful to Sung Hee Oh, whose prompt responses and professionalism were immensely helpful. She also helped me with transcribing some Korean, Japanese, and Chinese words and expressions, securing photos of *comfort girls-women* and maps of their transported routes, etc.

My deep appreciation goes out to the Korean Council and Yoon Meehyang for their decision to finance the open access publication of this book. They made this decision prompted by two concerns for justice. One is a justice act of the Korean Council, i.e. making the story available to the world. The other is a

justice act concerning affordability for readers, i.e. making the story accessible to anyone, rich or poor. I appeal to others to join in this justice act by donating to the Korean Council (its new name is the Korean Council for Justice & Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan), and information about donations can be found on the page following these acknowledgments.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Yale Center for Faith and Culture for awarding me the 2017 Open Rank Research Grant funded by the John Templeton Foundation that made it possible for my research travel to interview scholars and activists in Japan, South Korea, and the United States in pursuit of justice for Korean *comfort girls-women* in 2017 and 2018. I am also grateful to all the interviewees and consultants for their willing and enthusiastic sharing of their expertise. They include Chung Ok Yoon, Chin Sung Chung, Heesung Chung, Meehyang Yoon, Na Young Lee, Shinkwon Ahn, Kim Bok Dong *halmoni*, Lee Ok-seon *halmoni*, Lee Yongsu *halmoni*, Seo-kyung and Eun-sung Kim, Young Ae Yoon, Hae Won Kim, Mi Kang Yang, Hongjo Yoon, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, Hayashi Hirofumi, Nakahara Michiko, Kawata Fumiko, Puja Kim, Yang Chingja, Mina Watanabe, Dongwoo Lee Hahm, Ockcha Soh, Jung Sil Lee, and former Congressman Mike Honda. The research supported by the grant raised the level of my expertise both in depth and breadth on the issues of *comfort girls-women* that contributed to more informed and enriched engagement by me with the testimonies in the original volume. The grant immeasurably enhanced the quality of this work, which otherwise would not have been possible, and contributed to making this project a catalyst for transforming dangerous, piercing, and desolate stories into embracing, thriving, and joyous stories.

I am also deeply grateful to the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church for establishing Myung Sung Presbyterian Church Research Grant for Faculty at the Theological School, Drew University that supports the enhancement of scholarship of faculty at the Theological School. I am forever grateful to Dean Javier Viera of the Theological School for awarding me the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church Research Grant for Faculty in 2015 that financed my trip to South Korea for one month, making possible my initial research into the issues of *comfort girls-women* during my sabbatical leave in the fall semester of 2015. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to Reverend Dr. Shari K. Brink, President and CEO of the Blanton-Peale Institute and Counseling Center, where I direct the Korean Care and Counseling Program, for graciously allowing me to carry out my work as the director from South Korea for one month. Without their generosity and participatory passion for justice and compassion, I could not have built up my expertise to conduct such detailed work, including the translation of the seemingly incomprehensible and ambivalent expressions and content of the original volume.

I am also grateful to my Korean students and Suehyun Lim for their assistance with the project. My Korean students helped me with the translations, and they are Hyunduk Choi, Minhwee Kang, Sungsoo Kang, Han Kil Kim, Gwiseok Lee, Hyunmin Lee, Sejeong Park, Sujin Park, Jinkyu Yoo, and Jisu Ahn. Suehyun Lim's assistance to the project was invaluable. She helped me with sharpening English expressions that enhanced the readability of the final product.

My special appreciation goes to Frank Jacob, the *Genocide and Mass Violence in the Age of Extremes* series editor, and De Gruyter Oldenbourg's staff members, including Rabea Rittgerodt, Jana Fritsche and Anthony Wright, for their expertise, professionalism, and enthusiastic support for this project.

Finally, my deep appreciation goes out to my husband who emotionally supported me throughout my work on the project and especially during the last phase of the work when I often had to seclude myself from my family to focus fully on the project. His on-going affirmation of the importance of and the priority due to the project has been an invaluable support. For that, I am profoundly grateful to him.

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Preface

Attempting to Politicize Memory

This book contains the voices of twelve Japanese military *comfort girls-women*. The societal interest in the *comfort girls-women* issue, ignited by the public testimony of Kim Hak-soon in 1991, has been linked to domestic and international activism by groups such as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery (hereafter the Korean Council)⁸ and the research of scholars. The fact that activism and the interest of the academic world kicked into gear and actively sustained themselves over this issue during the past decade was, of course, due to the courageous testimonies of *comfort girls-women*, whom we may refer to as living proof. In 1993, the stories of 19 *comfort girls-women* were woven into a book that was the first volume of testimonies. Since the first compilation of testimonies came out, their stories have continued, and five testimonial books had been published by 2001. If this book is to be classified as another volume of testimonies, it will be the sixth one.

This book was written by a research team of 17 members who came together as a group on May 19, 2002. It is the result of more than several dozen team meetings over a period of two years after the team met for the first time and held a workshop. During the meetings, the team put their heads together and sketched out their thoughts and, when they were not together, used internet discussion boards to exchange their opinions. Our team first examined the five published volumes of testimonies to differentiate between the women who had been included in the five volumes (sixty-six in total) and the women who had not. Among the seventy-six women who had not been included in the testimonial books, we again made our selection, choosing the ones that were relatively easier to approach regardless of their not-so-great current health status, and began to collect existing data on them. Then, the research team members were divided on a regional basis, and the interviews were set up to be shared.

Regarding the basic methods and skills of interviewing, not only did we learn through the formal form of lectures, but we also continued to talk with one another and coordinate our plan of action throughout the whole interview process, from before the interview started to the day that it ended. We held a countless number of discussions ranging from the tastes of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* to the difficulties in interviewing; we also wrestled

⁸ Its current name is the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

with such questions as, “What was missing from the interviews? How should we solve the parts that were hard to understand during the interviews? How should we record and edit? What problems were in each record of interviews?” and so on. The actual interviews were conducted in a flexible manner based on activity schedules for each local research team. Sometimes, extraordinary measures were even employed to ensure the consistent progress of the overall work. When a specialist was needed for the interviews by teams, that is, when the interviews were not going smoothly, I, as the research director, went to Masan, Daegu, Cheongju, Gwangju, Jeong-eup, Gochang or Boryeong as needed. And, if there were unfamiliar terms or names of places among the stories of the *comfort girls-women* for the researchers, or if historical knowledge about war or medical knowledge was required to understand their stories, we invited the relevant experts as external instructors to listen to their explanations and helped each other to understand.

In this way, despite the fact that the book is based on the solid teamwork of and the meticulous preparation and examination of interviews by the research team members, it started with various limitations. First of all, because this study began with the goal of preparing a report to be submitted within a given timeframe, there was not a lot of time to build enough trust between the *comfort girls-women* and the researchers, and this left the researchers bent mostly on collecting materials for a story. Therefore, the research team either gave up on the ongoing interview or made a unilateral decision not to include the interview in the book even though several parts of the interview were successfully concluded – when the *comfort girls-women* dragged on in time while opening up to their stories, when the memories were too blurred to form a consistent story, when the appointment times were changed here and there and the interview was missed, when they showed aggressive attitudes and did not tell the stories we were interested in hearing (i.e. their experiences of the comfort stations), or when they told their stories and the part of the narrative on their experiences of the comfort stations was too limited. In other words, while we could guess as to why these women used various self-expressions such as silence, distortion, exaggeration, avoidance, aggressive language, etc. during their encounters with the researchers, as well as the important meanings implied by these various expression methods, we could not include them in their stories. However, after submitting their report, the research team was conscious of these problems and pondered on them when they were preparing the book. That is, we re-edited their stories so that they could reveal as accurately as possible the intentions of the words of the *comfort girls-women* while they told their stories, and at the same time, we included an Introduction to holistically examine and discuss the research work and an Interviewer’s Commentary to

show the individual researcher's participation experience and their reflections thereon. In particular, in the second part of the Introduction, "To speak about the experiences of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women's* experiences," the characteristics and meaning of the oral acts in which the *comfort girls-women* tell their past, the characteristics of the oral situation, the factors affecting the oral acts, and others were analyzed in detail.

Although the women who were the objects of this project are each given the same label of Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*, their individual life experiences are distinctive and different from one another, not only in their specific experiences at the comfort station but also before and after this period up to the present time, and their present lives are intertwined with their past experiences. Nonetheless, our research team began the research with the constraint that our study could not deviate too much from its nature of a customized production, i.e. a report in the form of a testimonial book which was requested and sponsored by the Ministry of Gender Equality. At the same time that we received a request from the Ministry of Gender Equality, we also requested all the *comfort girls-women* to testify according to the same basic story frame of a testimony. The basic components of each *comfort girl-woman's* story include the following: date of birth, hometown, level of schooling, sibling and other family relationships, how they were drafted, transporting route and means of transportation, life at the comfort station, how they came out of the station, when and how they returned home, marriage and family formation, means and activities of livelihood, types of diseases they may have contracted, present life, etc.

As a result, rather than noticing the complex emotional layers, social relationships, or contradictory understandings and interpretations of their lives – all of which these women had shown while giving their testimonies – and considering these aspects as things of significance in creating a so-called thick description of each of the women's stories, we researchers were at risk of creating a thin description of each of the women's lives in stereotyping each life and focusing only on their life at the comfort stations by eliminating or minimizing them due to treating these thick descriptions as obstacles to the production of the testimonial book. Therefore, as discussed in detail in the third part of the Introduction under the theme of "Problems in the reproduction and editing process of oral statements," we have made many efforts to reduce risks in various ways in this study. For example, in laying down the stories of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, we sought, as far as was possible, not to destroy their memory structures and, at the same time, to expose the interaction between the researchers and the women. That is to say, we have attempted more proactive examinations of methodologies beyond that of the binary perspectives of nationalism and feminism about the traditional *comfort girls-women* while

considering the process of the stratified meaning and interpretation of the oral statements.

The researcher's role does not end with just listening to the story of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, as the researcher is burdened with conveying the story so that readers can easily understand it. That is, the researcher must make an uncomfortable decision of drawing a line somewhere between orality and readability rather than just transferring the tangled stories of the women's past experiences and present perspectives. The experience of our research team, in which we had to repeat the process of editing and revising over several dozen times, delineates such a discomfort. The detailed discussion about this is also shown in the Introduction and the Interviewer's Commentary written by each research team member. In addition, this book does not only introduce the so-called success stories of the interviews but also includes the Interviewer's Commentary on the failed interviews. This reveals not only the diversity of situations, conditions, and contexts of interviewing the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, but also reveals the complex interactions of various factors involved in the process of editing their stories.

This book would not have seen the light of day if it had not been for our research team, who worked hard with diligence, earnest minds and the conviction that the story of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* is not just their story, but our story also, until the very end to make the voices of the *comfort girls-women* heard and to convince us. In particular, after the task of submitting reports had been completed, even when I, the research director, was absent because of unavoidable circumstances, Choi Kija, Kim Eunkyung, Oh Yeonju, and Kang Hyunju embraced the rest of the research team, who were about to disperse, strengthened them and took charge of some of the other team members' share of the work besides their own to lead the process of revisions and editing that was repeated over several dozen times. Without their efforts to the end, this book surely would have become a thin book with less weight. The fact that this book, based on the experiences and memories of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, was able to be made into a thicker book in a new attempt to write history owes thanks to the great contributions of Kim Eunkyung, Choi Kija, and Park Jungae who repeatedly engaged in self-reflection and wove those reflections into the Introduction. Among the research team members, there are those who participated diligently in the first half of the interview work, but due to the various reasons I have described above, the stories of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* that they organized were not able to be published in this book. The researchers Kim Mihyeon, Yang Nayun, Lee Sunyeong, and others belong in this category, but it would be greatly remiss of me if I ignored their efforts. In addition, I want to show my gratitude to the

staff of the Korean Council who, even when hectically busy with their ever-present piles of administrative work, always welcomed our research team members warmly and were never sparing with help, whether it be material or emotional. I also give profound thanks to the people of the Ministry of Gender Equality, who laid down the bridge so that the veiled and hidden voices of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* were able to be conveyed to us.

Those to whom I want to express my gratitude and respect the most are none other than the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* themselves. All the while having to smooth down their pained breast many times over and with eyes brimming with tears, they opened their hearts and poured out their stories that were buried deep inside. And all because of that, we were able to boldly participate in this project of writing a new history. One of the *comfort girls-women*, who told us her life story while emphasizing, “Even if it is just one person, we have to let people know more about this problem of ours,” passed away before the book was published. Saying, “It is like a dream that I survived. But an utterly terrifying nightmare of a dream,” she self-assuredly remembered her past, unlike the other women, saying “There is nothing to be ashamed of. This is because I had to have done something shameful to be ashamed.” Now, looking at the transcript of her story again, I regather my posture.

May 10, 2004

Kim Myeonghye

Director of the War & Women’s Human Rights Center of the Korean Council
for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

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Introduction

The Stories of the Survivors of the Japanese Military *Comfort Girls-Women*: The Making of the Memories and Meaning

Why the ‘Story’?

The oral stories of the surviving victims of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* have been the most appealing evidence in bringing to light the *comfort girls-women* problem as a social issue in our time and in asking Japan to take responsibility for its actions. It is crucial to include the voices of the survivors in the activism to resolve the issue of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*. However, using their testimonies in attempts to raise and resolve the problem of *comfort girls-women* and talking about and listening to their experiences can be considered the same project but at the same time, should be considered different. Testimonies that require accurate facts can be an appropriate way to fill in the blanks in historical records, but they do not necessarily reveal the subjectivity of the oral storytellers who evaluate and interpret their own lives as the subjects of their stories. If we were to limit the interview process in gathering the experiences of *comfort girls-women* to just listening to their testimonies, we could have made the mistake of paying attention to only the stories we as interviewers wanted to hear.

Unlike the serious testimonies that demand the preciseness of facts, the *comfort girls-women*'s spoken words were brought up to the level of story or narrative to emphasize the subjective experiences they carry. This is not only to respect the subjective interpretation of those telling the story but, at the same time, to demolish the formal discourse that has been built differently to that of the victim's personal experience.

For the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, to recall their past means that they are protesting against the power of history, a history which the public at large currently perceives to be the truth. According to Walter Benjamin, the history created by the remnants of the *comfort girls-women*'s memories includes the pluralistic notion of history. And history as pluralism has many gathering points; that is, history may be diverted in various directions and be connected to different futures and presents than what exists now. According to this perspective, this book aims to reconstruct history based on each individual *comfort girl-woman*'s experience and memories to search for critical gathering points of the past, abandoning the conventional view of history that is often objective and inevitable.

Up until now, the conflict that arose between the memories of the individual victims and the official memory of “the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* who

had been taken forcefully” resulted in the former being tabooed. And the history of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, which our society recalls, has been confined to the latter. There is no such thing as the suffering of girls who were sold to brothels due to poverty and then taken to comfort stations without knowing what was going on. What difference is there in terms of its brutality and depth in the suffering of girls who were forcefully taken by the Japanese military and girls who were sold to brothels because of poverty, and then taken to comfort stations?

The problem of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* arises at the contact point where the patriarchal system of the *Chosun* dynasty meets the nationalism of Japanese colonialism. Therefore, simplifying the problem of the *comfort girls-women* with the provision of ‘forced abduction’ hinders our understanding of the interactions between various ideologies that are contained within. Such a provision also does not allow us to view the issue of patriarchy and prostitution as another dimension of the issue of *comfort girls-women* while neglecting the experiences of many girls and young ladies who were sold to brothels. These girls and young ladies, who were victims of patriarchy and colonialism, have always been treated as exceptional cases and have been excluded from the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* issue, despite the fact that they were equally subjected to violence through sexual slavery at comfort stations by the Imperial Japanese Army. This is because the concept of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* was formed with too much focus on the enforcement of the forced transporting process. In this book, however, by moving beyond the preexisting understanding of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* that is centered around forcibleness in how they were taken away, we propose that its concept should be reconstructed by focusing on the memories of the *comfort girls-women* themselves and their actual experiences of sexual slavery in the comfort stations.

Being conscious of this problem, in this book, we intend to abandon the modifier, forced seizure, and start highlighting the personal experiences that have been excluded from the framework of national discourse. In other words, we want to reconstruct the history of the individual victims through their story, which has never been publicized within the grand discourse.

However, the historicization of memory does not mean that we erase and place the memory of the *comfort girls-women* within the discourse of nationalism. The process of speaking and listening to the *comfort girls-women* experience in and of itself is a challenge to the existing discourse of history, and it opposes identifying the experiences of the surviving victims of the *comfort girls-women* in a singular manner and as part of the discourse of nationalism. To historicize the experiences of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* is an attempt to bring back their experiences as the history of women that had been owned exclusively by national history, and to see the nation again in the eyes and memories of the victims.

To Speak About the Experiences of the Japanese Military *Comfort Girls-Women*

When the interviewers asked the Japanese *comfort girls-women* survivors for their oral stories, their responses were very diverse. Some were saddened by the fact their stories were not included in the previous books that had been published and asked us why we had to come so late, while others were reluctant to have us even visit them. For those who seemed very welcoming, doing the interview meant that they would become known in their neighborhoods because after being introduced in the media, it is often the case that people start to recognize them and treat them with more respect. There was one who was very proud and had her registration of *comfort girls-women* kept in picture frames and displayed on the walls in her living room. Although, since we assumed that they would still be affected by a long-term victim mentality, we expected that they would be passive in sharing their stories about themselves, it did not take us long before we realized how wrong and hasty we were as we saw them actually lead the interviews. In fact, to these women, their past seemed to be a source of power that allowed them to overcome their present realities. Once they received the certificate of registration that they were *comfort girls-women* and started to share their past, they regained their 'joie de vivre' and, in some cases, were healed even of long-term illnesses. This tells us that the very act of speaking out about their past is in itself a process of healing.

But still, a large number of *comfort girls-women* survivors were not happy about their private lives coming to the surface. Our research team had focused on the surviving victims who had never been included in the past publications, but they were often reluctant to be interviewed. Their main reason for it was that they were afraid of their families and friends finding out about their past. The interviewers tried their best to explain how meaningful this work was to history, but such efforts were powerless against those who cried out, "History is good, but I have to live first." Even in the cases of those who reluctantly said yes to the interview, the interviewers would only be allowed to visit their homes when there was no one else around, or they requested that the interview take place elsewhere, away from their home. In such cases, they started revealing their stories only after they had been assured several times that we would not disclose any information that revealed their identity.

For many of the *comfort girls-women* survivors, their past remained a shameful experience that they should keep hidden in their hearts until their death. They often blamed themselves and experienced guilt for living a deceitful life, keeping their secret from their husbands and their children. Such internal anxiety, even today, sixty years or so after their experience, still manifests

itself in nightmares or mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. Their experience of sex slavery has never been buried with history; rather, it is like a ghost that keeps coming back to haunt them to this day.

It has long been considered taboo for *comfort girls-women* survivors to talk about their experiences. And although it was imposed on them by the patriarchal Korean society, oblivion was *their* way of survival. Their confessions like “although it is unfair, I am being liberated [from my past experiences]” and “I could not live if I were to remember it all” are testaments to the fact that oblivion was their choice and their survival method to endure their harrowing life experiences. Therefore, the process of remembering their “true but unreal and dreamlike” past is a difficult journey for them, like going through a foggy maze, because it is what they had tried so hard to forget. This journey is the process of facing the root of their pain, and their act of telling the story meant reproducing and being re-traumatized by that pain. This is why it required a special decision and a great determination by them to start sharing their past.

But speaking out about the *comfort girls-women* experience in Korean society is not just a matter of a personal decision by them to open their mouths. The oral stories of surviving *comfort girls-women* are intertwined with multiple layers of a complex web. For the *comfort girls-women*, speaking of their past could mean risking a divorce from their husbands, bruising the hearts of their children, and engraving a scarlet letter onto their hearts, to name just a few. Sometimes the opposition from their community members, the so-called other husbands such as their sons, adopted sons, and nephews whom they psychologically and financially relied on, would cause them to change their minds even after coming to a hard-won decision to share their stories.

Even if the restoration of pride, the sense of historical duty, and the subsidies received from the government form an axis that motivated them to voice their experiences, the negative glances of and keeping in check of them by society and their family form another axis that creates anxiety, constantly making them hesitant about revealing their identity as a *comfort girl-woman*. The oral testimonies of the surviving victims of the *comfort girls-women* experience were born out of constant restlessness, conflict, and torments between the two axes. Therefore, the act of speaking out, for the *comfort girls-women* survivors, is the act of breaking out from the aforementioned complex web and rejecting the chain of silence that had been tied around them. To speak about their own lives that they were “ashamed of but are not shamed by” is an act of subjectivity away from the patriarchal ideology that Korean society has been spreading and imposing on them and the rest of the Korean society.

Problems in the Reproduction and Editing process of Oral Statements

Having broken out of their complex web, the stories of *comfort girls-women* survivors enter into the field of history writing as they are textualized at the hands of researchers. The textualization of their oral stories does not mean a literal dictation of what is spoken. It is inevitable that the researchers will intervene in this process because the oral text will include the who, their purpose, and their political intention, from which point of view the story will be heard and reproduced. Thus, the reproduction of the oral story is a collaborative work of narrators and researchers entering together into a new chapter of historical discourse.

If the narrator first reproduced her own experiences and memories through an interviewer, the interviewer would then reproduce for a second time by creating a transcription that includes the description of their gestures, facial expressions, silences, etc. during the interview to minimize the loss or damage to the original story provided by the narrator. Then, the third reproduction or final compilation is the re-edited version of this secondary reproduction based on the transcription with a consideration of its readability for the readers. All of these three steps are reproductions of a story based on one person's experiences and memories; however, they are new productions, each in different forms and domains. In particular, if the transcription is a matter of how well the interviewers remember the interview situation, the editorial process is a question of how effectively the narrator's story is formulated with the reader's understanding in mind.

At the beginning of the compilation process, our research team agreed to formulate the oral text in a way that does not compromise the memory structure of the narrator. What was important to us was not how much or how accurately they remembered the facts. What we wanted to hear from them and what we hope to convey to our readers is not only the factual memory of the narrator, but also things like the structure of the narrator's memory, i.e. who is speaking, what is being remembered, what is being left unspoken within the boundaries of social discourse, and in what form are they recalling their memories? In other words, this book is not the testimony of people who witnessed an event, but a story being told at the present time, many decades after the experience, and thus it is conveyed based on each victim's unique memory structure about what they experienced and how that experience shaped their lives. However, the team gradually realized how it was too much to ask for the readers, who were not present at the interviews, to follow the narrator's memory structure. We realized that in order for us to really empathize with the reader as he or she tries to follow the stories of the narrator, we need to first discern what stories to include and what stories to let go, as some of these stories were provided to us in the forms of entangled memories, distorted

and unclear at times due to dementia, and sometimes cautiously broached due to their politically sensitive nature. So, this book, while it is based on the experiences and memories of the narrators, is a selection of stories according to the research team's understanding and interest, as well as possibly according to how our society viewed the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* in 2003.

Working on this current edition, our research team also came up with new principles for editing. Deviating from our original plans to focus on minimizing the changes to the memory structure of the narrator, we decided instead to incorporate the editing intervention points created by the editor. We came to acknowledge the fact that while the interview process was led by the narrator, the structure of editing had to be under the authority of an editor; and hence, we decided to focus on how we could reveal where the editor's intervention had occurred.

The first points of intervention are indicated primarily by subheadings and titles. Subheadings and titles will serve as a guide to help the readers to read text composed of stories that are not necessarily structured and ordered. Although most of these subheadings and titles came from the narrator's story, the narrator did not necessarily give her story in this context. These are simply signs created by the editor in consideration of the readers to help with the readability of the text.

The second point of intervention we discussed was whether or not to include interview questions. The point was made that it could be misleading not to include the interview questions because this can leave the impression that the narrator is giving her story directly to the readers in a very fluent and structured manner. Needless to say, without the guiding interview questions, it is a very difficult job to put the story together by just hearing what the narrator has to say. Regardless, the interview questions used were deliberately removed during the editing process in order to reveal the subjectivity of the narrator; that is, the narrator herself is the one reproducing her own experience. However, during the interview, of course, the interviewer engaged in the reproduction of the experience by asking questions to stimulate the memory of the narrator and actively intervened throughout the making of the transcripts and edits to bring the experience back to the reader. The most important thing for us to consider was who the narrator is, and to whose experience the story belonged. Even if the authority of editing belongs to the interviewer, the fact that the subject of the experience and representation is the speaker cannot change. If the interview questions used were to be included in this work, there may be confusion between the intention of the interviewer and the voices of the narrators and result in diluting the voice of the narrator as the subject of experience and reproduction. Therefore, in order to clearly communicate the actual voices of the narrators, we deliberately left out the interview questions, and so they are not included.

Instead, we tried to actively utilize square brackets and parentheses to help the readers' understanding. We limited the use of footnotes outside the text to only the things that required a lengthy explanation, while simple dialects, directives, and actions are described in square brackets and parentheses within the text to help the readers' understanding of words and of phrases that require explanations.

The intervening points that replace the questions are also indicated by quotation marks. The idea of using these quotation marks has been borrowed from *The History Rewritten Through Memories, vol. 4: Forcibly Taken Korean Military 'Comfort Women'* (Pulbit Publishing Co., 2001; hereafter Testimony Vol. 4). In Testimony Vol. 4, quotation marks were used to indicate the narrators' direct message to the reader, as well as signs of the narrator reproducing herself in stories. While we accommodated its usage, we extended it to include a broader meaning when compared to Testimony Vol. 4. The quotation marks we used were a symbol that represents the mutual subjectivity of the interview situation and the fragmentation of the transcription due to the removal of the interview questions. In other words, quotation marks were used to indicate the editor's intervention points and restructuring of the story. In addition, readers will be able to observe through the single quotes, or double quotes, in the stories the parts in which the narrator was either struggling to share her story or was actively voicing out. In this way, the quotation marks are symbols that both reveal the intervention points of the editor and the reality of the fragmentation of the oral story.

However, the quotation marks were not used just as a symbol for oral situations. These marks also symbolize the unfamiliarity that cannot be avoided when using the language that expresses women's experiences in our society. Until now, we are so used to hearing men's experiences in the language that they created that we are unfamiliar with speaking and listening to women's experiences. Language comes from recognition. Thus, having no language means one cannot fully recognize the events or experiences they had. For example, most victims of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* can only express their terrible experience of gang rape in the language of "it" or "received," and we have naturally accepted these two languages of "it" and "received." The *comfort girls-women* victims have been influenced not to recognize "it" as gang rape, and therefore, they cannot express their experience as being "raped." We are also so accustomed to recognizing, hearing, and using the phrase "lost chastity," i.e. the responsibility rests on girls instead of the perpetrators, that we would be shocked to hear them saying that they were raped. In this way, under the structure of a patriarchal society, women have been marginalized into having a language that feels strange or unfamiliar when speaking and listening to their experiences. As a result, in spite of the similarity of experiences between women in the past and us living today, we experience unfamiliarity when women or we ourselves put

our experiences into language. Therefore, the meaning of the quotation marks used in this book represents not only the mutual subjectivity of the interview situation and the fragmentation of the transcription process but also the “unfamiliarity” in the process of the linguisticization of the female experience. We trust that this unfamiliarity/strangeness will start disappearing along with the quotation marks once women have a language where their experiences can be expressed.

Finally, the intervention points of the research team appear in the Interviewer’s Commentary section. We included this section to show how this work was completed through the interactions in the narrator and interviewer relationships and by the conditions and situations in which the oral interview took place. Therefore, the readers will be able to find additional information in the Commentary section, such as the personal relationships of the narrator and the interviewer, or a context other than the oral text, for example, a story that was not explained in the text or was forced to be deleted for personal or political reasons. We also included the experiences of the difficulty the editors had to go through in the process of hearing and editing their stories. However, of course, there were personal matters of the narrators that needed to be kept secret, and which could not be revealed even in the interviewer’s commentary. Also, there are cases in which we received permission to interview before the interviews began, but the narrators, having changed their minds by the time the interviews were over, became opposed to having their story published in the book and thus these were not included in the book. Apart from the interviewers’ commentary, we also included the failed cases, because we considered the process and the context of *comfort girls-women* victims rejecting interviews or publications as another form of their testimony. Through the failed cases, readers will find out how difficult a fight it is for the *comfort girls-women* victims to share their experiences and suffering and for others to hear their stories.

There were also some controversies in the process of writing the interviewers’ commentaries. Notably, we had great difficulty in coming to an agreement on how we should refer to the *comfort girls-women*. Each team member insisted on their own reasons for addressing them differently, such as *halmoni* (grandmother), her, or by their names. In general, *halmoni* is the common term used to refer to the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* since *halmoni* is a friendly term and has the advantage of making the *comfort girls-women* more approachable, as they are otherwise associated with a very somber image. However, those who opposed the use of the term *halmoni* argued that *halmoni* has a negative image in Korean society of one who is weak, asexual, and always willing to yield to others in everything. They asserted that using the term *halmoni* contradicts the goal of our work of acknowledging each individual victim as an independent person with dignity rather than understanding them as a single group of *comfort girls-women* by again making the mistake of grouping them into the fixed image of

halmoni. Therefore, some argued for using the pronouns ‘her/she’ instead of *halmoni* to escape the grouped stereotypes surrounding the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*. Nonetheless, the team members that wanted to use *halmoni* claimed that *halmoni* is what we called them during the interviews and insisted that we stay true to our personal relationships with them. They continued to press that that is how it should be presented in the Interviewers’ Commentaries. Moreover, we were just listeners, and the oral speaker/narrator is the subject of the speech during the interview, and it would feel as if we were objectifying them if we were to use the third person pronouns ‘her/she.’ These team members also explained how using the term *halmoni* would not mean that we blindly accepted the stereotype of *halmoni* in Korean society. Rather, it would explain in an active sense what the interview situation was: it was not about our observation of the narrator, but an interaction between the narrator and interviewer. Our research team decided to open up and share this problem with our readers instead of trying to come up with one single term upon which we can all agree.

An Unfinished Story

More than seventy years have passed since the issue of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* was first raised, and it has been more than a decade since this issue truly became an important topic in our society. In the meantime, the survivors of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* have been living their lives in hiding like sinners and appearing as victims. But at the same time, they also stepped up as activists, leading the way in order to resolve this issue. This process of survival was not only a way of confronting and overcoming their sufferings but also a process of healing from their hurts of one another.

But then, what answer have they received for their survival efforts from the Japanese government, the perpetrating nation, and also from our Korean society? Have their voices been given proper attention? The surviving victims are saddened by the few remaining days in their lives, and they talk about the still remaining or newly added wound of *han*¹ in their hearts. They speak of uncompensated pasts, conflicts in their relationships with family and others, and how this society is adding new suffering to their lives by being indifferent to their issue. Surely, this is not because the voices of the surviving victims have been weak for more than a decade. Rather, it is because the Japanese government and the Korean society have either avoided and ignored their voices or distorted the truth.

1 Anger, grief, or resentment that is repressed without any resolution.

March 17, 2004 marked the 600th gathering of the Wednesday rallies in front of the Japanese embassy every week. Every time the Wednesday rally faces its anniversary or the total number of gathering increases by another 100, rally participants grieve with heavy hearts and hope that there will not be another anniversary. However, this will only occur when the Japanese government makes an official apology and offers appropriate compensation. In reality, however, the Japanese government remains unresponsive through their continued silence on this issue. Even worse, they seem to be dreaming of the resurgence of militarism by distorting history and intentionally removing any mention of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* from their textbooks. The Japanese government is poised to repeat their past crimes, as they try with immense effort to rationalize the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* system by telling blatant lies, such as “*Comfort girls-women* were prostitutes” and “There was no forced recruitment of *comfort girls-women*.”

The narrow nationalism in Korean society is also a factor that slows down the resolution of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* issue. As we know, nationalism was the main factor of the rapid growth in the public discussion of the issue of *comfort girls-women*. In the early 1990s, Korean society recognized the essence of this problem as the loss of the nation’s innocent *cheonyeo* (a virgin and unmarried girl/young lady) to the Japanese government due to Chosun’s failure to defend her country, and it urged for a resolution of this issue in order to restore the nation’s pride. In the mid-1990s, this nationalist perspective was attacked by the feminist claim that such a patriarchal nature of nationalism prevents us from seeing the issue of the contradicting sexual ethics of the Korean patriarchy that is intricately intertwined with the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*. However, their cry was not enough to break the existing view. In the dualistic view of sexual ethics that only emphasizes the chastity of girls and women and the male-centered sex culture of Korean society, the problem of sexual ethics surrounding the issue of *comfort girls-women* is still not considered. Korean society only raised the problem of *comfort girls-women* in the category of nationalism, and seriously narrows the scope of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* issue by merely addressing the aforementioned lies of the Japanese government by responding, “*Comfort girls-women* were not prostitutes and innocent *cheonyeo*” and “*Comfort girls-women* were forcefully taken against their will by means of kidnapping and fraud.”

In fact, whether or not *comfort girls-women* were prostitutes, or whether or not they were forcibly taken, is not the essence of the *comfort girls-women* issue. Even those who were already *kisaeng* (professional courtesans with artistic skills) or working at a licensed quarters before becoming a *comfort girl-woman*, or those who thought they were going to be making money at a bar, had no idea that they would be forced to live such an inhuman life in “that place.” They did not know how brutally they would be sexually abused by the Japanese soldiers in such

confined spaces where they could not possibly even think of escaping, and they also did not know how much they were to suffer. Could anyone claim that there is no perpetrator in their suffering if we were to think outside of our stereotypical image of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*? Let us remember that, from the outset, the issue, the content, and the character of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* problem have been revealed by the surviving victims by recalling their memories. What is at the heart of this issue is the fact that girls and young ladies have been subjected to continuous sexual violence and suffered human rights violations at comfort stations that the Japanese military created for the efficient control of their soldiers during wartime. The category of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* should be constructed from the experiences of the survivors, not from the defensive logic against Japanese claims. The voice of the sufferings of the surviving victims will not be heard unless we start reflecting on the dualistic view of Korean society's sexual ethics and the patriarchal attitude of nationalism that our society holds. As long as we see the issue of *comfort girls-women* essentially as an issue of shame for the male-centric Korean nation that failed to protect their girls and young ladies because it had lost its power, as long as this nation recognizes only those who kept their chastity as worthy of protection, and as long as we keep asking victims of rape to prove their chastity and forcedness, the fundamental solution to the issue of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* will not come about.

The huge controversy that stirred in February 2004 around the release of a collection of nude videos and pictures themed around the *comfort girls-women* demands a new reflection on the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* issue. Basically speaking, the *comfort girls-women* issue is a case of state-led systemic sexual violence, but the way this case is being handled in our society is no different from any other case of rape. In other words, the rape case focuses only on the sexual aspect rather than on the victim's suffering. People are curious about the situation in which the victim is being raped and try to meet an individual's sexual fantasies through concrete reproductions of the situation. In the same way, the commercial press, too, is just busy trying to profit by responding to the expectations of the public by using stimulating expressions and titles in reporting the case. The way they deal with the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* problem is no different. While the mass media pretended to care, using the theme of the solemnity of the nation's suffering, they only focused on how cruelly and forcefully the *comfort girls-women* were taken, how many soldiers each had to "receive" in a day, and how helplessly they were exposed to violence, while having no consideration for the victims themselves, whether they were ready to share their stories, or whether it was the appropriate place for sharing them. As they took out their cameras and journals for writing, instead of hearing what

they wanted to share, they poured out only the questions related to what they wanted to hear. We were honestly asking ourselves whether we were stimulated by the shocking content provided by the media. It is most likely that the content creator that planned the themed nude videos and pictures about *comfort girls-women* was also aware of this reality of our society, i.e. numbness to the sexual violation and ensuing suffering of women. The abusive view that our society holds, that even tries to commercialize women's sexual abuse and secretly takes pleasure in the suffering of women, demands our serious reflection and criticism.

How far have we come regarding this issue of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*? Frankly speaking, the social awareness surrounding this issue seems not to have changed much since more than a decade ago, despite various efforts being made and questions raised as the stories of the surviving victims of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* have been made available. In addition to the stubborn nationalist view, dual ethics and hypocrisy in regard to female sexuality, and the patriarchal system that gave birth to all of the above, simply propel us to selectively hear what we want to hear and do not allow us to hear the stories of *comfort girls-women* in the way they render themselves. Unless we can go beyond the limits of our society, the stories of the surviving Japanese military *comfort girls-women* will remain empty cries. We hope that this book does not just become the sixth edition of repeated stories, but a sixth story that broadens the horizon of our recognition and reflection.

May 10, 2004

The Research Team

War & Women's Human Rights Center

Explanatory Notes

Double quotation marks	“ ”	Narrator’s words
Single quotation marks	‘ ’	Words that the narrator quoted directly or used while talking to herself
Comma	,	Used to create a rhythm between words
Period	.	Used after a word to terminate a thought by context or Meaning
Short line	-	Used to emphasize a long-drawn-out pronunciation or when the narrator slurs the end of her sentences ¹
Double short line	--	Used to emphasize a very long-drawn-out pronunciation ²
Parentheses	()	Used to describe the behavior of the narrator or to explain an indexical, simple dialect ³
Square brackets	[]	Used to signify omitted words during the narration
Ellipsis	. . .	Used to signify words of the narrator edited by the Editor
Italicization		Used to signify foreign words, for example, in Japanese, Chinese or English, that have not been established as loan words. The names of places are exceptions.
Line spacing		Used to signify the editor’s judgment that the words should be read differently in a different breath
Footnote		Used for explanations of the content to help the reader to Understand
Korean names and geographical locations		Written in the order used in South Korea ⁴

1 In translation, the use of short lines was eliminated in most places for the purpose of readability in English.

2 In translation, the use of double short lines was eliminated in most places for the purpose of readability in English.

3 In translation, the parenthetical expressions for dialects are naturally eliminated.

4 Added to this translated volume.

Note: Explanatory notes refer to Testimony Vol. 4.

Glossary

<i>Baidoku</i>	Syphilis in Japanese
<i>Cheonyeo</i>	Virgin and unmarried girl/young lady
<i>Choba</i>	Supervising manager
<i>Gagsi</i>	Newly-married girl/young lady
<i>Gunzoku</i>	Civilians employed by the Japanese military
<i>Gwonbeon</i>	<i>kisaeng</i> union and a school where dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments were taught during the Japanese occupation of Korea
<i>Halmoni</i>	Grandmother or a general term for elderly women
<i>Han</i>	Anger, grief, or resentment that is repressed without any resolution
<i>Hanbok</i>	Korean traditional clothes
<i>Hwabyung</i>	Mental or emotional disorder from repressed anger or stress
<i>Jangu</i>	Korean traditional drum
<i>Kimono</i>	Japanese traditional clothes
<i>Kisaeng</i>	Professional courtesans with artistic skills trained in singing, dancing and poetry.
<i>Okasan</i>	Mother in Japanese
<i>Ondol</i>	Korean traditional underfloor heating system
<i>Otousan</i>	Father in Japanese
<i>Sakku</i>	Condom
<i>Senjo</i>	Washroom in Japanese
<i>Tatami</i>	Japanese traditional floor covering made of straw mat
<i>Unni</i>	Older sister or a general term for older female
<i>Wonhan</i>	Resentment
<i>Woolhwabyung</i>	Same as <i>hwabyung</i>
<i>Yangban</i>	Noble class during dynastic Korea

“I Never Dreamt, Not in My Wildest Dreams, That So Many Soldiers Would Come to Me Like That”

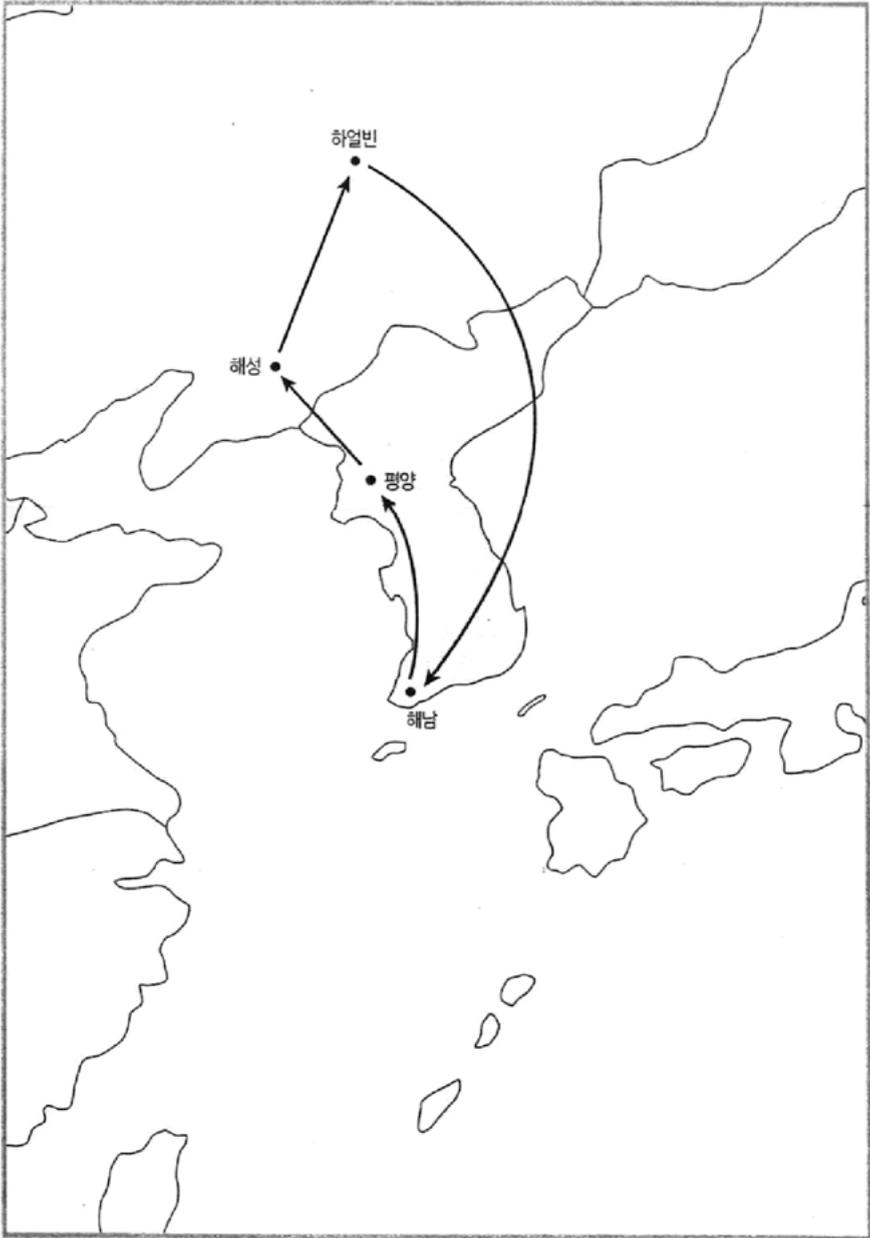
Gong Jeom-yeop



Gong Jeom-yeop.

1920	Born in Jeollanam-do Muan
1935 (Age 16)	Having been deceived, went to Pyongyang Employment Agency Forced into a life of a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> in Haicheng
1943 (Age 24)*	Started living with a man from Boseong in Harbin
1945 (Age 26)	Returned to Haenam in Jeollanam-do with the man from Boseong
1947 (Age 28)*	Married Park in Haenam
1953 (Age 34)	Gave birth to a son
1955 (Age 36)*	Maintained a livelihood as a shaman Park passed away
1958 (Age 39)	Gave birth to a daughter whom she had with a fellow shaman
1962 (Age 43)	Daughter drowned
2004 (Age 85)	Lived in Haenam with son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughters
2016 (Age 96)	Deceased

*Approximately



Gong Jeom-yeop's route: Haenam – Pyeongyang – Haesung – Harbin – Haenam.

“*Wo-mae*.¹ When I, um . . . I think about this and that, or when I cannot sleep at night, I can still see it all clear as day. Whew-- [I think] it is a good thing that I made it out, but how did I ever survive such a place?”

“Destined for somewhere, I was in the car every day. Day and night, we went. And then, later, I did not know where I was, but we had come to a place so far away that it was scary. By what I saw in the snow, I would say that it was maybe about November according to the lunar calendar. White snow was falling. In the olden days, the soldiers used to wear yellow uniforms. Also the hats, they used to put on those yellow hats. The soldiers were training hard in the snow, so fearsome. I did not know then. [No one ever told me] that I would go to a place where I would receive soldiers. Anyway, anyway, I was told only that I would go to Japan to a factory. And I just believed it and followed. In that white snow, the soldiers, so many soldiers, were receiving their training. There were so many – countless. And it was not just on the Korean Peninsula; everywhere I went, there were soldiers. Again and again.”

“‘*Womae*, it is so cold-,’ I thought to myself, ‘If it is so cold in here, how cold-- must it be in the snow?’ But, *o-mae*, *omae*,² I never dreamt, not in my wildest dreams, that so many soldiers would come to me like that.”

The Silk Factory

There were so-- many people. Girls and young women. I just thought that there were so many people because it was a silk factory.

“[Whenever a marriage proposal came in,] it was never from a new groom, but always from a man who had failed to have children. And even then, the proposal was only for a concubine.”

“‘Tell him to marry you after you grow up a little and turn seventeen.’ That is what my father and mother wanted. But, me, I would have rather died. I was up-right by nature, and I would never ever become a concubine even if it means starving to death. I did not like to cause anyone trouble and I did not make people do what is not right.”

“I would have rather died than become a concubine, so I waited for a proper marriage proposal.”

1 A Jeolla dialect interjection that is used to express perplexity, surprise, pity, or even joy.

2 A Jeolla dialect interjection that is used to express sadness, surprise, joy, and other emotions.

“But then, out of the blue, some people, three men to be exact, came into our [home]. One was Japanese: he had a little mustache like this (imitating his mustache); he wore a hat too in a very stylish manner; and he wore, on top and bottom, a black suit just so and a white shirt with this kind of [bow] tie. The other two were Koreans wearing *hanboks* (Korean traditional clothes). Then people wore *hanboks*. Yes, they came: one who interpreted and the other, the head of the village.”

“Just like that, some guys came into our house and said that if I went to Japan, to a silk factory, I would be able to weave silk and make a huge amount of money, I would be comfortable and well, it would be easy to return home to Korea, and, if I made a lot of money and sent it to my parents, they would be able to buy rice paddies and fields.”

“As I listened to what they said, it sounded plausible enough. Now, my family was very hard off financially, so if I were to go to Japan, to the silk factory, I could make some quick money and send it to my parents. Then, they could breathe a little easier.”

“But, even so, I did not think I could do it. I could not summon up the courage to go to that place. I mean, maybe I could if I knew the language (Japanese) at all, but as it is. Because I did not think that I could do it, I hesitated.”

“When I said, ‘I can’t do it. I just do not have the confidence in myself to do it,’ my father yelled loudly, ‘You can see for yourself, can’t you? You do everything because you learn to do it. You do not come out of your mother’s belly knowing everything already! Others are going too, so you should go with them. Go. And learn what you can where you can. Then, from what you have learned, you can make money. Or, are you just going to loaf around the house for the rest of your life? And complaining all the time?’”

“As soon as my father said these harsh words, as he severely scolded me, I replied, ‘*Ah-ee-go* father, I will go, even if I die. I will go. What else can I do? I would have to go even if I die.’ When I said that I would follow them, the two [Korean] men (who accompanied the Japanese man) were only too quick to get excited. The Japanese man did not say a word.”

“I was sixteen years old then.”

“They said that I would go directly to Japan, but they took me to Pyeongyang instead.”

“There were many people. Girls and young women. I just thought that there were so many people because it was a silk factory. But, the men said nothing. They did not even talk to us about silk weaving. Nor did they show us the factory. Only then did I start to worry, thinking, ‘[Why] don’t they tell us to weave silk?’”

“As I observed carefully, they led the girls and women here and there when other men came around. And, according to what they were saying and doing, it did not seem like we were at a factory at all.”

“The men were clutching at [the girls’] bodies. So, I [knew] in my heart that it was not a factory. So, every day, every day, all I did was cry, and I could not stay there anymore. I begged to be sent far away, to some other place, to any other place.”

“I said I did not want to stay here where Koreans lived.”

“When I said I wanted to go somewhere far away, they obliged and sent me there. To Haesung. To Haesung, China.”

The First Customer

I, a person who had never slept with anyone, whose lower part was too tight for men to enter, received seven men as my first customers.

“One day, they said that something was approved, that they had gotten permission. ‘What permission?’ I asked. So this was how it was. They explained to me that because they had contacted my father and mother in my hometown in Jeolla-do, by telephone through legal means and received my father’s approval, the authorities issued a permit, and now I would receive customers.”³

“Even though so many [soldiers] came, since there were a lot of girls and young women, I did not think that each girl or young woman was to receive multiple customers like that. (With a dumbfounded expression on her face) I wondered if they came [to me] because they did not want to go to another person. Or, because they were told that it was my first time, they did not go to another but sought me out. What-- was going on? I could not tell. There was no time. One came and slept with me, and right after that person, another knocked on the door, saying, ‘Hurry up, hurry up. Come out. Blah, blah, blah.’ One man asked me to wash his penis. (Hitting the wall) As if I was not infringed on enough-- and I felt like dying already, he would not leave unless I wash his penis too. The person behind the door was knocking for the man to come out fast, but what the hell do I wash it with? When I said in Korean that I did not know how because I had never done it before, the man grumbled that I did not wash him.”

³ The Japanese military *comfort girls-women* had no conceptual idea about sexual slavery or sexual violence due to their young age and the patriarchal system of Chosun cultural understanding. Gong Jeom-yeop and other *comfort girls-women*’s use of the word “customers” as well as “licensed quarters” should not be taken literally nor seen as volitional participation in prostitution for monetary gain but rather as her learning of the use of the systemic term during her life/captivity at comfort stations.

“In November of the lunar calendar, it was terrible how much it snowed. It was the coldest season of the year. The snow poured out of the sky. It was too much. But, by all means, when they told me again to wash and come back, I washed myself, applied some ointment, and came back. When tears flooded endlessly-- out of me, and I just wanted to die, [a soldier] scolded me why I had to put him in a bad mood by crying so much.”

“I was lonely and unable to talk or have a conversation. If they were Korean, I would have said this or that. But, I could not even do that.”

“I was young, and I had never had a romantic relationship to speak of. But they took an innocent and inexperienced person like me and made me receive so-- many men that I almost died and had to go to the hospital.”

“In one day, I, a person who had never slept with anyone, whose lower part was too tight for men to enter, received seven men as my first customers.”

“*Omae, omae*, I should have just become someone’s concubine. If I had waited, I could have married a single man or, barring that, even being taken as a concubine would have been better. Then, at least, I would have been spared this humiliation.”

Scary Sunday

When Sunday approached, my heart would already start pounding like this.

“Each time I received a customer, he would put a *sakku* (condom) on his penis, like putting on rubber gloves, before we would do it. If the *sakku* did not tear, I would go to the washroom, [just] wash my private part, and apply ointment, a white slimy gel, before coming back. If the *sakku* tore, I would go to wash myself in hot water with disinfectant and apply the ointment. Then, I would come back. They told me to do this so that the next customer would not be offended. If I received the next customer without washing, the owner said that the customer might not like it and would ask for a refund and leave. Whew- so they ordered me like I was a child. So, I just did what I was told. What else could I do? I felt like I could neither die nor live. [Helplessly] I did what my owner made me do.”

“When Sunday approached, my heart would already start pounding like this. When I think about it, really-- I was totally helpless.”

“[On Sundays] *Omae, omae*, there was nothing to say when hundreds of thousands were sent out. Although there were a lot of girls and young women, one house was just not enough. There were several quarters of that kind of place. Like, Quarter X and Quarter Y. There were many of *those* houses, I tell you. But because they sent out so many soldiers, to begin with, each girl or

young woman had to receive a multitude of customers. At one point, I received up to twenty-seven soldiers in one day, that is just shy of thirty.”

“Really-- at such times, (with an astounded look on her face, as if she can see the soldiers waiting outside at this very moment) they stood in one line that stretched and stretched, and without even having the time to take off their shoes, one by one, they hurried to put on a *sakku*, came in, had intercourse, and then went out again. The ones that could do it fast and leave were the best. Imagine how it would be when you are visited by one who was drunk and could not get it done quickly, that was the worst. You had one guy at the door knocking and knocking for the other guy to come out quickly, yelling and hurrying him on. They all stood in line: as one-- went out, another came in. As one put on his clothes and left, another took off his and came in. It was then that I was fed up the most.”

“Oh my goodness but I suffered so much. It is only because I survived that I can express that sentiment in words at least. Phew-, when I think about the fact that I survived, it seems like a dream. When I acted a little off because I became dizzy and my head felt like it was spinning out of control after having received seventeen customers in one day, a customer asked whether I was drunk. I told him I could not drink. Back then, I did not drink. Not even one drop. But, under the circumstances, even if you do not drink, you can have a headache that feels like it would never stop. So they say.”

“Even when I was out of breath, gasping for air as if I was indeed drunk, the bastards did as they pleased, hell-bent only on satisfying their rapacious appetites. It was at times like these that I really suffered to the point of death.”

“After you receive so many customers, everything starts hurting, but especially your back. And as for your stomach, it feels like it is on fire. (Pointing at her lower abdomen) Here, my intestines felt like they were going to burst at any minute. I tell you, they were going to burst at any minute and I would die on the spot. And a man with a short thing was okay. I say that a man with a short plump thing was bearable. But a man with a long, thin one, how could I bear the pain of it! Well, I had to apply ice packs so-- much. I suffered a lot when I received men with long dicks.”

“Oh, how I suffered! *Womae, womae*, they would apply an ice pack there (indicating her vulva) because I had to recover within a week, they said. *Omae, omae*, they used a whole block of ice. Do you know the mosquito netting for babies? There was a machine that looks like that. If you hang ice in it, after a few hours, that block of ice would all melt. And when the ice melts down into here (vulva), it freezes rock hard and the painful part of my body would go numb. All day long I would have to do this, over and over again, until the big block of ice all melted. Then, it would be a little less painful for the next few days. But if I received another man with a little bit of a long one again, which reached to the far inside, I would be excruciatingly sore there all over again.”

Backscratching

The hospital, the soldiers, the people of high position, and even the law col-
luded hand in glove with the owner. All of them were of one mind and one will
and were all in it together.

“[The owner] prepared every meal and I did not have to do the laundry or
work, but I was a little worn out from having to learn and then follow their
customs.”

“Quarters, where the number of [girls and young women] was the highest,
[had] twenty, otherwise, there were about seventeen or fifteen. A quarter with the
least number had thirteen. There was a Japanese licensed quarter where there
were only Japanese women. In the Korean quarters, there were only Korean girls
and young ladies. Also, there was a Chinese restaurant.”

“During the daytime, [military] people of high ranks came out to visit, and sin-
gle [ordinary] men often came. But, not so many people came [in the daytime].”

“People like us were [called] *gagsi* (a newly-married girl/young lady). [Not
only] were we called by the general name of *gagsi*, but also each of our names
was written down. On the bulletin board in the big-- room, all our names were
written down. Then, if there was a name that the men recognized, they would
ask for her. If it is Sadako, Sadako. if it is Jeong Ja, Jeong Ja. It was in this way
that the men would look up the names of the women they knew.”

“[I was] named Maeng-ok. My Japanese name was Sadako. My name is
Gong Jeom-yeop now. I am Gong Jeom-yeop, but there, they named me Maeng-
ok at the time.”

“When I was receiving a customer, I told the next person to wait since I was
with a customer. Then, the person would wait standing there like that in line, I
tell you. If he went to another *gagsi*, that would have been fine by me. But if the
man made up his mind to find me, he waited standing there all right.”

“When soldiers were sent out, there was a Japanese commissioned officer who
would provide everything – (pointing at her private part) *sakkus* to put on here and
a piece of paper.⁴ If it was a short thirty minutes, for thirty minutes. If it was fifty
minutes, for fifty minutes. They gave everything including the paper for money to do
it. So, the men brought with them everything they needed to come and to return.”

“It would be less than five dollars in current currency. Soldiers received a
discount. Just ordinary individuals paid ten dollars, but for the soldiers, it was

⁴ According to Gong Jeom-yeop, a piece of paper used in place of money was called a *menjo*
in Japanese at that time.

half of that: five dollars. If a soldier gave that piece of paper, no one, neither the *choba* (supervising manager) nor the owner, said anything.”

“That [piece of paper] was money. There was a place where the owner had to go to exchange that.”

“It was like a present-day bank. Some sort of an association or that kind of place where you exchanged it, but I never went there. The owner did this and that; it was not for us to bring it to exchange it by ourselves.”

“When soldiers came out, it was designated to be a day for soldiers only, since they came in droves. If many ordinary customers came on the same day, the soldiers would have been offended. So, when the soldiers came, we could never accept ordinary customers. On the days that [the soldiers] came out, on Sundays, we collected a lot of money since there were so many of the soldiers to receive, even though they did pay a much cheaper price, half the price that the ordinary customers paid.”

“They could not send out the soldiers without letting the owners know, so the owners communicated with each other. It did not matter which quarter or which owner, everyone knew. (In a low voice) And, they could not carry on without letting the law know, so the law was always in on it. When something bad happened to a customer, they called the police, then a cop would come down and take care of all business before he left. The hospital, the soldiers, the people of high position, and even the law colluded hand in glove with the owner. All of them were of one mind and one will and were all in it together. So, that is how it was: the law gave permission and allowed the customers out.”

“When syphilis was widespread among the girls and young ladies, only then were we told not to receive customers. Because if we did receive customers, it would have been a catastrophe. So, they called the hospital to come and take those that were infected. Then, the people from the hospital would come and took the girls and young ladies and [treated them] for three or four days there until they were well. How could they do all that without everyone being in on it and having constant communication [with one another]?”

Rat Poison

It got so bad that I tried taking rat poison, and I tried hanging myself.

“When I told them where it hurt, they injected me with opium from that little yellow bottle. They gave us each a shot and also medicine to take by mouth. . . . While getting that shot, the world became like heaven, the most comfortable and peaceful place to be in.”

“[I became] syphilitic, but syphilis did not show up on my genitals. It rather became a lump right away.”

“Through my stomach, it traveled and became a lump. The lump was about this big (the size of a fist), about this size.”

“The lumps grew right out of my sides. Here (showing the surgical scars on both of her groins), here is one, and here is the other. I have two scars in two spots.”⁵

“Those lumps were very painful. No matter that I was injected with the shot and took the medicine so that the swelling would go down, it did not work. . . . 606 arsphenamine was the most potent medicine at the time. It was the strongest and the most expensive.”

“Then they cut the lumps one after the other [at] the hospital to drain them, like this, and they applied the strong medicine there, into the surgical cut. It was so painful I thought I was going to die, so painful that I could hardly breathe. And then the cut area turned green, and when it was being disinfected, it was literally boiling, and the pain was hellish and more than I could bear.”

“[The girls and young ladies who were there together with me] said that getting better, even if it was after such an operation, was a good thing for me. By the way, those who did not go through this painful treatment, they would always contract syphilis, which affected their genitals. There were marks like an octopus’s suckers on them. They were all red and some things like grains of millet were inside. It was really gross. But, this made her unable to receive customers, because it hurt.”

“Only when new flesh grew over the surgical cuts could I receive customers again. If new flesh did not grow over, I could not receive them. It took about a month for me to recover. But, the days that I could not work were all-- written in an account. It all became debt. I cried my heart out. I cried in the hospital too. Who-- on earth would come, who on earth would come and take care of me?”

“There were many who were badly beaten after they tried to make an escape after they had been caught trying to jump over the wall. Lordy, even when told it is useless to try anything like that, there were people who dared. There were many. It became so-- bad that I, myself, tried taking rat poison, and I, for my part, tried hanging myself. Me, I did that too. I felt like dying. Dying.”

⁵ Syphilis often occurs in the groin area, and at that time the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* called it *yokone*. The nickname *yokone* is written even in modern medical publications regarding syphilis. Gong Jeom-yeop seemed to undergo this kind of *yokone* surgery twice, and there are clear surgical scars on both of her groins.

“Because I was practically dead, I tried to die in reality. I bought a small tube of rat poison and took off the lid and pressed it a little hard. Then, a red paste came out, like toothpaste being squeezed out of its tube. I cried a thousand times, no ten thousand times after I took it with me to eat it.”

“Up until that moment, I suffered and worked for about two years to make a load of money for the [owner], but I was not able to send one-- piece of coin to my father. I was told that I should receive as many customers day and night since I still had a long way to go [before I could pay off my debts]. It was absurd and I felt like dying. If Sunday was just once in a month, it would have been somewhat bearable at least. But, Sunday came three, four times a month, and I could not take it anymore. So, I took [the rat poison] to die.”

“I was totally out of my mind, as [the rat poison] entered the stomach. It was terrible. But, a person, who did not go to bed, must have heard the sound as I collapsed. Other girls and ladies at the same [comfort station] heard about it and came to the bathroom; they found me stretched out on the floor, dying. So, *aheego*, they told the owner to turn on the light right away, and they started blaming the owner for being responsible for causing such a good and gentle person to die. They called the hospital to have the ambulance take me there. They pumped the poison out of me and gave me an injection, so I came back to life. Then, I went back to that house [again], and since there were still many days left, since there were many months left until my debts were paid, I had no choice but to start work again.”

“*Aheego*-- if, at that time, the person [who had not been sleeping] did not notice, [if I did not go to the hospital], I would have died for sure because my insides would have been burnt.”

First Love

We were so-- so much in love. So, so much.

“There was a person who was very close to me.”

“That man, too, did not possess much knowledge and started working for a place where they made guns and knives secretly in the mountains. The man was my age, and he was from Boseong in Jeollanam-do.”

“That man was such a determined man that he did not even once sleep with a woman when he was there (at the prostitutes’ quarters). Although he came once in a while, he did not have sexual intercourse with anyone. So, I thought he must have been a eunuch, but he was not. He said that people in these kinds of places tended to have contagious diseases, so he thought he

should be careful. Besides, you can sleep with someone if you are not going to live [together] with them, but you have to be careful with a person with whom you can see yourself living [together] in the future. So, without sleeping together, it went on like that for three years. He visited once in a while, but he was only with me in mind and heart.”

“But one day, because the man was working in a big company in Harbin, I went to Harbin to see him. A close friend told me that if we went to Harbin, we would find many customers, and that money was in plenty supply there. Also, because it was a good place, big and wide, there would be many other *gagsi* as well, so off we went. I would have gone to Harbin even if it was just on account of my friend.”

“I want to go somewhere, anywhere. So, send me out just for a little bit.’ If I did not make much money for them, they would not have let me go. But, since I did make [a heap of money] for them, they did let me go. And I told them that, with the owner’s approval, even after I [transferred to another place] I would obtain permission as soon as possible to receive customers.”

“I was in Haesung for two years and in Harbin for a year, and also in Shanghai for half a year. So then, I had been away for several years.”

“After I went to Harbin, the man paid my debt, what little of it there was left, and took me out of there. Then, I lived with the man.”

“I was with him for three years, without sleeping together when I was receiving customers. Then I lived with him for another three years after I left the prostitutes’ quarter. So, I was with him six years altogether.”

“We were so-- so much in love. So, so much.”

“But I did not get pregnant. Of course, it was hard for me to be pregnant at that time. I mean, I did not take any medicine, but I was always sick and so it is no wonder that I could not get pregnant.”

“[The man] always wondered when we were going to make a lot of money so that I would be able to have herbal tonics and become a healthy human being again. We had a real, real hard time. So, we loved each other desperately with our hearts. We had a precious love together. There is no man like him.”

“He was my first love. That man.”

“I cannot forget him. That man. I can never forget him. He said I was his first love, too. He had never been in a relationship with a woman before.”

Farewell

I told him. Go and find a nice place to settle and make a living for yourself. So, he did it (stole the straw bag of barley) himself and [ran away] alone.

“After I had lived with the man for about two years, the country was liberated, so I got out of China.”

“While getting out of China . . . by car [with household goods], we were robbed of every single thing by [Chinese mounted bandits]. But, it was said that they not only robbed people but also killed them by stabbing them with knives. I was in shock, at first, and then enraged after being robbed of our money. I could not sleep all- night at all, and my eyes (putting her fists around her eyes) were swollen like this. My anger surged up, all the way up to my eyeballs, and my eyes were all swollen, so I could not see anything in front of me. The man [my first love] put a rope around his waist, and then also a rope around (pointing to her waist) [my] waist telling me to follow him wherever he went. So, I followed him like a blind person while coming across the 38th parallel.”⁶

“Since we lost everything we had, we were penniless. We had nothing with us.”

“No doubt my family had moved and were settled somewhere else, hopefully somewhere nice, but I could not figure out where they were and I did not know any acquaintances. But, I knew that in Masan-myeon⁷ lived my father’s younger brother. So I went to find him.”

“I asked him to lend us a bag of rice or barley so that we could exchange it for money and do some business selling salted seafood. We could then save some money and after that, we would pay back the original loan amount to my uncle, and we would live with the money left over, even if we had to eat only porridge for every meal. I wished he would have done that for me, but he would not. He said what could he possibly get back if he gave to people who had nothing.”

“[My uncle] treated us so harshly that the man suggested this – that we steal a straw bag of barley at night and hide it in the mountains in the back, and then take it with us somewhere and start a business. Then, after saving money from the business, we would pay the debt to my uncle and apologize to him. I should have done that. That is what I should have done. I should have done as he proposed, but, up until then, I had ne-ver in my life stolen anything nor lied about anything; that was the kind of person I was. So, I said I would rather die than do that. What do you say to that? I asked. And then [the man] asked me would I still not be able to do it, would I still not be willing to do it, even if he were to break up with me over it. [I] said that even if we were going to split up over it, I had no choice: I could not do that. So, if he really had to do it, then he should do it by himself and go.”

⁶ Gong Jeom-yeop calls the border between Joseon and Manchuria the 38th parallel.

⁷ Jeollanam-do Haenam-gun Masan-myeon (Masan Town, Haenam County, South Jeolla Province).

“I told him to go out by himself somewhere and make a living somehow and to forget about me. To just cast me aside. I am a woman who cannot even have a baby, if he stays with me, he will ruin his life. So, go alone and live your life. I told him. Go and find a nice place to settle and make a living for yourself. So, he did it (stole the straw bag of barley) himself and [ran away] alone.”

An Old Man

He was twenty years older than I. And he looked it – like an old man.

“[An old lady in the neighborhood] told me about the man who would become my son’s father, who was living in another man’s house, but who knew nothing but work. Although he was old, he worked hard; so it would be good for me to live with that old man. I counted up the [old] man’s age, and I figured out that he was twenty years older than I. And he looked it – like an old man.”

“The old lady, who arranged the match between us, gave us a rice cooker, two rice bowls, two sets of spoon and chopsticks, and a comforter to live on. The old man was living as a laborer where, after a year of work, he was to receive a rice field of about 1,487 square meters. This would be like the annual salary given to a farm servant. Since that annual salary was not enough [for a livelihood for two], the house owner gave us a straw bag of rice and about one full handcart of firewood. So, we [lived] in a tiny room in another person’s cottage.”

“There was no wedding.”

“While I was living there, the man, [together] with whom I came across the 38th parallel, came back [again] to find me.”

“He came to me to propose living together again, but it had not been that long since I started living [together] with the old man. Even though he was old, how-- could I just abandon him and follow the man?”

“At the time (when we were living in China), I was forced to be doing that thing, that dirty business, but now, as I got to thinking, I was like a housewife, though it had not been that long.”

“Anyhow, since you never got married, you can start fresh and get married, have a baby, and live your life. I can’t have a baby, and it seems I will not be able to have a baby no matter what.’ But it is no good ruining someone else’s life. I told him everything. I always did even when we were living [in China]. ‘You cannot live just for love.’ If I were to live only for love, then I could not part from him, indeed I could not. But, I knew I could not live only on love. On top of that, I was always ill and felt tingling pain in my muscles and joints,

and my heart was suffering; it was all too hard. Also, my thing (sexual organ) was as black as coal, and I had not recovered no matter how many times I applied ice packs to it. I told him in detail about my situation so that he could steel his heart against me and meet a good woman and live a good life with her. I told him to go get married and live his life.”

“[The man] said that he could never part from me. Never. Even if he were to die--.”

“He said that it would be okay even if we had nothing. It would be okay if we never have children or grandchildren. Maybe, later, we could adopt someone else’s baby and raise him. Let’s do that, he said. He cried his heart out, but eventually, we did split up, and time has passed, and now I am old like this.”

“When we were crossing that 38th parallel together, with my having lost my eyesight temporarily, we walked for over a month. When we were suffering together so, I was sure we were meant to be [together]. But even though we were meant to be together, I had to harden my heart against him and split with him.”

“I think I made the right choice, but at the same time, I also think that I made the wrong choice. In any case, whenever I am having a hard time, [I think] of him.”

“I later found out that he was doing well, and that made me feel good, even though I was not doing well. Yes, it is good, but if I had not been able to have my son, I probably would have been singing the blues more than now and crying day and night, but, whether I like it or not, at least I have that son of mine.”

“At least because I had that son of mine, people call me mother. If I had not had him, who would call me that?”

A Shaman

I pray. I am a person who prays.

“I thought I would never be able to have a baby; I really thought I would never be able to do that. But, after I came back to Korea and met my son’s father, I ate the meat of five goats, strong goats. So, I became healthy, like a normal person. And I became a good person.”

“My eyesight became better, the tingling pain went away, and the heavy menstrual pain also got better. And that is why I got pregnant with my baby. If not, I would never have been able to conceive him.”

“[But] it took a while for the baby to be conceived. It happened when I was thirty-four years old.”

“After the baby was born, when the baby was three years old, the old man was about fifty-five or fifty-six years old when he passed away.”

“[When he passed away], he was less than sixty years old. Even though he suffered from serious illnesses, he kept working, which made his illness worse. So eventually all he could do was roll around in pain; he could never do any [practical] work. So it was up to me to go to work, but I did not know how to work for wages, go begging, or [even] be in domestic service. I wished I could do all of those things, but I never had done those kinds of things before. Until that time, as long as I had lived, even though I never had anything to speak of, I never went near anything like work. That was why I had to learn this (shamanism); I had no choice. And since my father and mother were shamans, it was not as if I had no knowledge of it at- all. So, after I learned it, it is the thing that I have been doing until now.”

“I learned it for about five months.”

“If you want to learn this kind of thing, you need to learn for several years before you can graduate. There were so- many things I had to learn: to wear a conical hat like a Buddhist priest at a Buddhist temple, to wear a uniform, and to read all- kinds of sutras. I had to read it in the mountains, and at home, read at children’s birthdays. And even though I did not completely learn everything, I paid a lot of money to the husband and wife who taught me. Every day, I cooked steamed rice to make wine and cooked rice to feed them, while copying from books to learn . . . I learned a lot and thoroughly.”

“I am not a fortune-teller. I am a shaman. A shaman who learns from books, I tell you. I am a shaman who performs exorcisms. So, there is not a person who does not know about me [in this village.] Of course. It has been twenty years now since I came here. At the time when I became a shaman, my village used to buy my services as a shaman, and this village hired me and sold to the village people by using the sales method of rice patches. So, I came here with my two-year-old son then and have been doing this (shamanism) ever since. I go around praying for birthday wishes to come true. I go when that 100-year-old man asks me to come. . . . I do not go around telling anyone’s fortune. People say all sorts of crazy things, like fortune tellers are possessed by demons, but I am not that kind of person. There is no one who is possessed in my family. My family members are all shamans. My father, mother, my uncles, and my aunts.”

“I pray. I am a person who prays.”

Tiresome Men

Whether they were young or old, the men went crazy for me. They hounded me to live with them. It was so- tiresome.

“I gave birth to a daughter. But, when she was five years old, she followed some kids going to take a bath in the river and drowned there. I wanted to save her, but I could not save her, and she died.”

“When [my son] was six years old, [I had a baby girl].”

“After [the old man] passed away when my son was three years old, I met another man and gave birth to a daughter. If not, I could not have born her.”

“I had her with another man. When the old man passed away, I had to work as a shaman, but I had no one to carry all the accouterments of my trade for me across the long distances that I had to travel. At that time, after the Korean New Year’s day, every house did a yearly exorcism to ward off evil. Doing the yearly exorcisms was the toughest, toughest time of all. Also, the distance that I had to cover carrying all the stuff to do it with was quite far. I had to do an exorcism for seven or eight houses a day. Really, I had to do them all. If I began at noon, I could do a few houses in the afternoon, and a few houses at night, but I would not be able to finish until the next morning. And then, the next evening I would have to start all over again. So, how could I manage all those things without a man?”

“The man (the daughter’s father) had also met a widow and had born four children in his past. I tried to leave because [the children] hit him day and night, my son that is, because he was young. When the adults went out to do exorcisms and left the children behind at home, they tried to kill my son. But, [the daughter’s father] did not let me go. He bought medicine that he kept at his bedside, saying I could go only after I held his funeral. I felt very sad, but I had no-- choice: to spare my son’s life, I left the house with the baby. I told him that I would give the baby [the daughter] back after I raised her and took her with me. I told him not to come to our home and not to look for us. Then, I raised [our daughter] until she was five years old. But, she followed other kids going to take (a bath) at the river and died. That is what the children told me. I went to the river and fished her out of the water so that she would live. But she did not live.”

“After that, I got another man. They said that the man had two wives and their kids, so, [I] tried like the dickens not-- to live with him. He was heavily in debt and had no money. On the other hand, I saved a lot of rice, and money too. So, smelling the money I had, he went around trying to persuade people to persuade me to live with him. When I was young, I rejected the very idea of becoming someone’s concubine; ever since I was little, not regarding anyone who became a concubine as a proper human being, I said I would rather die than become a concubine. But even so, he came into my house. That man.”

“Just to make me pay his debt--. Before three days had passed since [the man] came into my house, moneylenders began to hound us.”

“I had no-- choice but to pay the debt of that tiresome man. And it was a lot of money too. But as soon as I paid all-- his debt, without even a word that [the man] was leaving me, he crawled back out of my house and left. *Womae, womae*, I am a woman who has had that kind of wrong done to them. I lived through a hell of a lot. But, after the man left, whether they were young or old, the men went crazy for me. They hounded me to live [together] with them. It was so-- tiresome that after that I cut off all-- contact with men. And before I knew it, I became so old, as you see me now. You know, being old is a blessing; it is a comfort not to have to see that kind of tiresome thing.”

“*Womae*, but it was not easy living alone.”

“When it is time for your period, you feel pain in your back and your stomach. While I was sleeping, I could smell the cigarette smoke. Where is it coming from? (Imitating someone poking a hole in the rice paper of a door and then blowing cigarette smoke into that hole.) It was like someone was blowing the smoke that woke me up. But, as soon as I woke up, my back seemed to shrink and my lower stomach hurt like it was being cut in two. As if I were giving birth, I lay on my face and crawled around saying, ‘*Womae, womae*, I am going to die, I am going to die. *Aheego*, my stomach. *Aheego*, my back.’ I lived like that for over three years, but I never slept with [another man.] I was so-- sick, so sick of men.”

Investigation

Ahee-go, how on earth can I talk about receiving many customers [in front of men]! I mean, really!

“There were so many investigations. People came from the township office, from the military, and even from the press, the journalists came.”⁸

“I moved here and there [in China] for five to six years.”

“Even though I had been there for five to six years, because I felt ashamed, hot under the collar, and disgusted with myself, I told [the people who came to investigate] that I did that only for four years. Although I am not so quick with a lie, because I was so embarrassed, I covered up the two years.”

“Having to say even four years made my face flush with shame; it was horrible. It is a little less hard when talking amongst us women. But, when men

⁸ After Gong Jeom-yeop reported her past as a *comfort girl-woman* to the government, many different people came to verify her statements.

came to investigate and wrote about my stories, it was the worst. It was so-- so embarrassing that my face flushed crimson red, and I was so ashamed that I could have died on the spot.”

“*Aheego-* how I wish that [investigators] would not come anymore. But, it is much better [now] because you are a woman. I feel more comfortable telling you these things. *Womae, womae*, but I felt my face flushed so much that in my mind’s eye, it became so red that if I looked into a mirror, it would crack.”

“Ahee-go, how on earth can I talk about receiving many customers [in front of men]! I mean, really!”

Resentment

If my father did not do what he did, why would I have gone?

“[After I came out of China] I went to see my father’s younger brother at his home.”

“He was shocked and thrilled to see me. ‘I heard that you were dead, so until now, that is what I thought. Where were you and what took you so long?’”

“He knew what I did. (In a low voice) He knew I went there, I tell you.”

“*Aheego-* he told me that my father sent [his permission] from here.”

“Once the permission was given, he could not lie about it because of that permission. My father told all of my family and relatives. So, [my uncle] knew that I was a *comfort girl-woman*.”

“[My uncle] said that [my parents] moved to Muan, Heuksan-myeon.⁹ So, I went to find them. When I went there, they were living in a single rented room in another person’s house.”

“Even now, you do not have a house of your own? You have to live in this little rented room?”

“I heard that you were already dead. Are you really alive? Or is it your spirit that has come?”

“Why on earth would my spirit come here? I came here because I am alive. I came to find you because I am your child, if I was not, would I be here? How far do you think [China is from] here? I already came out of China, I came out a long, while ago.”

“Do you know how-- much I resented you, [my father]?”

⁹ Jeollanam-do Muan-gun Heuksan-myeon (Heuksan Town, Muan County, South Jeolla Province).

“If my father did not do what he did, why would I have gone? (Silent for a moment) It was when I received the most customers that I [resented my father] the most. I thought he had already passed away. I did unspeakable things, so what gave him the right to live as if nothing had happened? (Getting louder) ‘You told me that you thought I was dead, but it is you who was dead. I thought you had passed away, father, but how come you are not dead but still alive? Me, I have come back, but you have no idea how much I have suffered.’”

Interviewer’s Commentary: Self-Censorship and Lies

Choi Kija

Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni*’s blackened skin, juxtaposed against an undershirt faded to a yellowish color, had a strong smell of poverty and a life force that had enabled her to tenaciously overcome that poverty. Every time she jumped out into the courtyard in her bare feet, wearing that sunlight-faded undershirt, to welcome me, I felt a strong affection for her and what she had lived through.

Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* lives in Haenam, on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, where Ttangkkeut (Land’s End) village is located. During the long time that it took to arrive in Haenam, rather than feeling the burden of having to extract the memories of a *comfort girl-woman* with painful experiences, I rather had expectations, leading me to ask, ‘What kind of a woman will I meet this time, and what kind of a life would she have led?’ This may have been because of a sense of mystery and excitement surrounding Land’s End village or because of the confidence I had in already having experienced meeting other *comfort girls-women* in the past. My previous experience of meeting other *comfort girls-women* (during the collaboration with Pulbit Publishing Co. in publishing *Testimony Vol. 4*) made me realize that the group called *comfort girls-women* consists of individuals, each with her own uniqueness. And instead of making me afraid of meeting them again, it aroused a bit of curiosity in me. I wondered what unique color the grandmother in Land’s End village would have.

Gong *halmoni* lives with her son, daughter-in-law, granddaughter, and great-granddaughters in a house that was newly renovated with the national subsidy that she received several years ago. Before the renovation, the house was so small that she had to live alone, but now things have become a little bit better. According to her self-praise, this is because she did not lie but lived an honest life. She self-praised herself, saying, “She is finally being blessed in her later years.” She also praised the government for helping a poor, elderly woman, saying that she does not know how she will ever be able to repay the

favor. No matter what the reason, she seemed blissfully happy to be living with her son, which goes to show just how lonely she had been all this time. She said that her son worked by day to breed dogs and to help with all sorts of matters in the village, but the money that he brought home did little to contribute to their living standards. Actually, the family was living on the small national subsidy given to *comfort girls-women*. Moreover, despite the fact that she was in her eighties, Gong *halmoni* did not rest for a second from supporting her family by feeding the dogs, doing sesame farming, and other such activities. Her crooked back and tanned skin represent all the hard work she has done throughout her lifetime, but the fact that she continues to have a positive attitude in life is testified by what she says about herself. She says that she is a healthy person with good vision and hearing.

When the Korean Council called to visit Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni*, the public officer in charge of her, working in the Women's Welfare Division at the Haenam district office, was greatly concerned that a man might come to interview her. When she first reported herself to the government, the officers from the Ministry of Health and Welfare who came to investigate were men. Now, on the evening that she was first raped, she had "received" seven customers; but when she tried to say that in front of the male investigators, her face flushed, and her heart pounded so much that she lied and said that she only received three men. On the day that she first met me, Gong *halmoni* said, "Since we are all women, I can actually tell you this," but still she kept repeating several times that she was embarrassed, even when there were only women present. Then, she asked the public officer from the Women's Welfare Division whether the woman (who came to investigate two years ago from the Korean Institute on Chongsindae, hereafter the Institute) was single or married. When the officer answered that she was married, Gong *halmoni* said, "*Aheego*, I felt so embarrassed to tell my story because I thought she was single . . ." and let out a big sigh of relief. Then, she asked me right away. "Are you single? Or are you married?" At that moment, I quickly calculated in my mind that my status would determine the success or the failure of the interview, so I lied after a slight hesitation. "*Halmoni*, I am married. Do not worry and feel free to speak." Later, when I was criticized during the report of my activity to the research team, I had to give an excuse that I had no choice but to lie, not only to ensure the success of the interview but also to put her at ease. While the interview progressed, Gong *halmoni* persistently asked me what my husband's name was, what he did for a living, and where my husband's family lived, and every time she asked, my lie grew bigger and bigger like a snowball. She, who was a shaman, even prayed for me to have a son every time she met me. If she happens to read this essay, she might feel a sense of profound betrayal.



Gong Jeom-yeop.

Maybe thanks to the lie, the interview went smoothly. Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* was an amazing storyteller. It was as if she were chanting a narrative song: she had a melodic intonation and a range of facial expressions, she used her entire body to aid her descriptions, and she was richly expressive of her emotions. Listening to her story was like watching a drama: I was hypnotized by her so that, at times, I laughed with her, and at other times, I cried with her; I was completely pulled into her story. The vivid memories and descriptions of her life at the comfort stations after more than sixty years were surprisingly copious and bold. This was in sharp contrast to the way that the majority of the other *comfort girls-women* bound their past experiences tightly in their memories. The interview with her progressed favorably as she led it to the point where I hardly had to ask a question. Also, she spoke for three or four hours straight without any rests and only stopped when the recorder I brought with me ran out of tape. The story of how she met and parted from her first love, told heart-wrenchingly for over an hour, was especially long. But because the extent of the narrative was so great, we could not put it all into the final edited version, and I feel that that is a shame.

Toward the end of it, however, the interview under Gong *halmoni*'s leadership ran into a wall. In our last interview, saying that she had never told anyone this until now, she said that, in truth, she had not gone to a comfort station in China

from the beginning, but she had stayed in Pyeongyang for a year and a half. Changing my attitude from that of a mere listener, I began to press her relentlessly about that year and a half in Pyeongyang. At the same time, there was much confusion and many doubts that arose in my mind. What was the meaning of her experiences in Pyeongyang for the *halmoni* who even had experiences of being a *comfort girl-woman*? Why could she still not tell her Pyeongyang story as actively as she had told her other stories? What made her control and censor herself when she was speaking about her own experiences there?

It seemed that Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* was strongly internalizing the stereotyped images of *comfort girls-women* that Korean society has approved of, for instance, images like ‘taken by force’ and ‘the pure daughters of Chosun.’ Thus, although she was aware of the reality during that time when there was no other choice but to be sold by her father because of their poverty, it might still be very difficult for her to go as far as to acknowledge it. She seemed to feel that people wanted to listen to a dramatic story like this: “Only when I arrived there, after having been deceived by the Japanese who said that I would earn money if I went with them to a factory, did I find out that it was a comfort station.” But she thought that they did not attach any importance to a story like this: she wandered for a year and a half here and there at the Pyeongyang Employment Placement Agency. In addition, it seemed that she had some anxiety that her Pyeongyang story might threaten her ‘official identity’ as a *comfort girl-woman*. So, until now, her Pyeongyang story was an experience that had to be covered up by silence and an experience that was treated as socially taboo. However, on the other hand, the fact that Gong *halmoni* cautiously brought up the Pyeongyang story at our last interview might have been because she wanted to question the stereotyped images of *comfort girls-women* that our society had generated. As I had been confused and plagued with doubts in my mind after hearing her Pyeongyang story, she was also confused by the discourse on *comfort girls-women* that made her censor herself when speaking about her experience in Pyeongyang. Although her confusion made her bring up the subject of Pyeongyang, she could still not come clean completely. When the subjects of experiences do not have the authority to lead the discourse, does the confusion, which comes from having the very language with which they explain their experiences stolen from them, make them waver inside?

I am not confident that this edited version of her testimony is representing the unique color of Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* very well. She was a woman who unraveled her story boldly and graphically enough to make me feel unnerved while listening to “those horrific” experiences. But she was also a woman who always had to be comforted by a shot of soju after each interview because of the anguish and distress. And nowhere in her edited testimony was I able to

make room for that fact. I also could not include the fact that, in her memory, the seemingly interminable suffering she endured at the comfort station coexists with the longing for her friends with whom she got a tattoo on her wrist as a sign of their never-to-be-forgotten friendships and about whom she did not know whether they were alive or dead. And I could not put into the edited version her warm heart that I experienced every time I visited her. She presented me with sesame oil that she made with her own hands for both my mother and mother-in-law, as well as her warm-voiced and skillful singing that reminded me of ‘Finding Our Own Sounds,’ despite the fact that these characteristics came from her unique color. Since the testimony book about *comfort girls-women* is limited in pages and only allowed to reproduce an individual’s experiences and memories just through text, it was not easy to lift up Gong *halmoni*’s unique color and deliver it to the readers. But the bigger wall that we ran into while making this edited version was not the limitation of content in terms of amount and medium, but that we had to limit the *comfort girls-women*’s individual experiences and memories within predefined frameworks that the current Korean society demands in 2003. No, maybe even long before I made this edited version, she might have been hurt by the wall of reality that *comfort girls-women*’s experiences could be verbalized in Korean society only after her Pyeongyang story and my self-censorship and lies, such as, “Do not worry because I am married,” were shuffled. But, compared to ten years ago when Kim Hak-soon *halmoni* testified for the first time, Korean society has learned that there are many different colors of *comfort girls-women*. And so, while acknowledging that numerous limitations and frustrations have been put before us, we continue to meet *comfort girls-women* to tell their stories to the world.

“You Japs, Without Your War, Why Would We Have Gone There?”

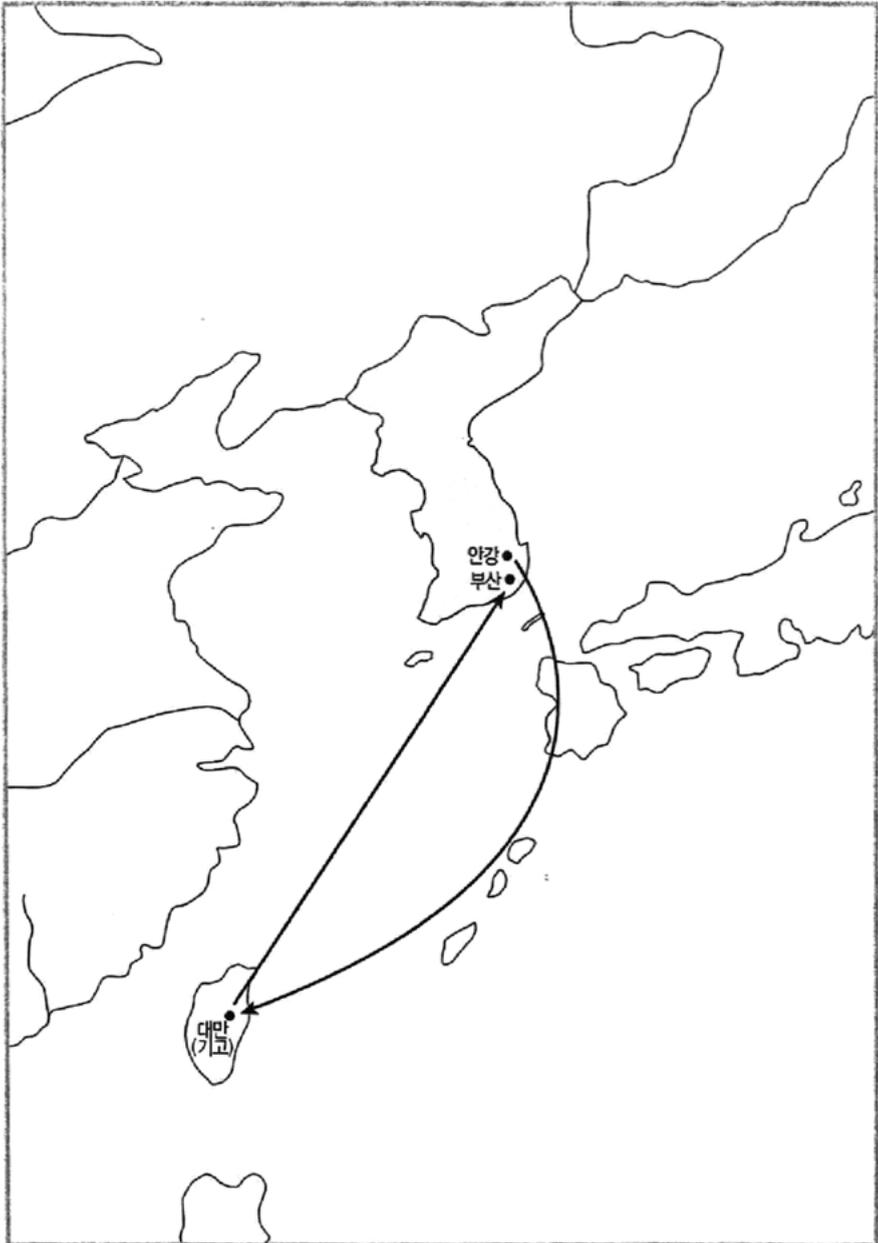
Kim Hwa-ja (Pseudonym)



Kim Hwa-ja.

1926	Born in Gyeongsangbuk-do Angang
1942 (Age 17)	Having been deceived, was taken to the police Worked as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> in Taiwan
1946 (Age 21)*	Returned to Busan, Korea by ship
1948 (Age 22)	Lived with a married man, Hwang, and worked in selling silk cloth
1960 (Age 35)*	Adopted a boy
1968 (Age 43)*	Hwang passed away
1970 (Age 45)*	Worked as a housekeeper
1975 (Age 50)*	Worked in restaurants
1999 (Age 73)	Settled in Daegu
2000 (Age 75)	Registered as a <i>comfort girl-woman</i>
2004 (Age 79)	Lived in a rented apartment in Daegu Deceased

*Approximately



Kim Hwa-ja's route: Angang – Taiwan – Busan.

“How dogged they were in hurting us, those Japs! *Aheego*, do not even talk to me about it. But why do they say that they did nothing wrong? This was their dirty little war that they waged, doing all kinds of fucked-up things.”

“*Ha-ee-goo*, you Japs, you Japs. After all that you have done, unspeakable things by other people’s standards, to hundreds and hundreds of people, you still have the gall to want to open your eyes in the morning, eat, and continue living? You Japs, without your war, why would we have gone there?”

“Why can’t they just admit it? Very bad bastards.”

“When we have planted the harvest, they would take all our produce, everything. Terrible poisonous snakes. There is no one like a Jap: they are pure poison.”

“They took all our brass bowls, to make bullets, they said. . . . Is this what you call living? I was out of my mind. I thought, what would be the point of living like this; I thought I was going to die soon.”

“If we buried a little rice under the kitchen floor, they would even search for that, dig it up, and take it with them when they would leave.”

“The way that we lived then, back in the olden days, do you think that is living?”

The Four-Eyed Mr. Kim

I did not know. I did not know where I was going. I thought I was going to a factory to work on sewing machines.

“In my family, there was my father, there was my mother, and there were seven of us children. There was an older sister above me; I was the second; and below me, I had five younger brothers.”

“I did not have a Japanese first name, but my last name was changed to Kaneko or Kaneyama. There were people who called us Kaneko, then there were other people who called us Kaneyama.”

“We were farmers. Farming was what we did, and my father reported to the Japanese rice mill for work.”

“We continued to live in Angang.¹ . . . [I] weaved and made straw bags. They were very strict with the quota. I would be weaving the straw bags, but if I did not make the quota, they would come at me with a stick and hit me over the head with it.”

“My sister got married early. My parents married her off when she was sixteen years old, otherwise, she would be taken forcibly to become a slave to the Japanese

¹ Gyeongsangbuk-do Gyeongju-si Angang-eup (Angang Town, Gyeongju City, North Gyeongsang Province).

soldiers. That is what people said at the time. . . . My parents kept saying that they would marry me off too. They said that it was too dangerous, so they would marry me off, but, in the end, I was taken. . . . But even so, the thought did not even enter my mind that I would be taken there. . . . I did not know. I did not know where I was going. I thought I was going to a factory to work on sewing machines.”

“I was making a straw bag . . . and they called me. In those times, the Japanese spoke a lot of Korean too. The Japanese who were in Korea, that is. Many of them spoke Korean. They said, ‘Good things are going to happen to you. Let’s go and see. Let’s go.’ That is why I went. And when I did go, there was the four-eyed Mr. Kim with his glasses.”

“There was a Korean who went around with the Japanese; he was a Japanese collaborator. His last name was Kim of the Gangwon-do Kims. There was not a soul who did not know the four-eyed Mr. Kim with his glasses. Everyone knew him in Angang.”

“Next to the station, there was a building. . . . There was a room like an office, with chairs too, where people came and went. When I opened the door cautiously and entered, there was a chair there. I was in there for a little over an hour. Or, maybe it was about two hours?”

“He brought me there, sat me down, then proceeded to come in and out of the office several times, and then finally said, ‘Okay, you will be sewing *heitai-san* uniforms (Japanese military uniforms), and while you are at it, you will learn how to use sewing machines and make money; it is going to be better than making straw bags.’ So I asked him, I did, ‘Then can you send money?’ Then, he said, ‘Of course, we will send the money. When you receive your monthly income, we will send it to your home.’ I thought, ‘*Haeegoo*, that would be much better.’ That is what I was thinking inside. Then, he said, ‘Go home and I will contact you soon.’”

“So I came home. And the four-eyed Mr. Kim came and told me that it would be very nice to learn how to use sewing machines to make the Japanese uniforms and that I must go. ‘If he says, “I must go,” then I got to go, right?’ To this, my mom even said, ‘*Aheego*, it seems like that she is going to go.’ Thinking that leaving was a good thing, I stayed two more nights at home and left.”

“They did not ask me whether I was going to go. There was no asking whether I was going or not going. It was more, ‘You must go.’ You must go because there are not enough people for the war effort. The war is getting more heated than ever, and women must help by doing something like this. When he put it like that, how can I not go? Whose command is it that I disobey to go? There is not even a choice. No way. Even if the Japanese took a Korean and beat him to death, if it is just one, no one can even say anything. *Haeegoo*, do not even talk to me about it. At that time, the Japanese were always in the right and the Koreans were pieces of shit.”

Asama Maru

It was the biggest ship sailing from our country to Japan.

“I cried and cried that my parents did not let me go to school until they sent me. Since I enrolled in school when I was thirteen and was in the third grade before I left, I must have been seventeen.”

“I think it was spring when I left. We did not even have rice. *Haeegoo*, we gave all our rations and had nothing left, but [my mom] made me several pieces of rice cake about this big (indicating her palm), gave them to me, and told me, ‘Have some when you are hungry.’ She also boiled black beans . . . and mixed some sugar in them. . . . I put the food in plastic bags and later ate some. But, after two nights, or was it one? . . . when I tried to eat more of it, it was about to go bad. . . . I do not remember if it was day or night, but I do remember that the rice cakes tasted a little funny. It had gone bad, I thought to myself. Now, that, I remember.”

“[The four-eyed Mr. Kim] came alone to pick me up. But when we arrived in Angang . . . when he put me in a car and was sending me off, there were some Japs.”

“I do not remember if I took the train or a truck. Sometimes I think I took the train, but at other times I think I took a truck.”

“In any case, when I was in the car, who do I see but Ms. Lee (her friend from her hometown) lying down because of seasickness. I asked, ‘What are you doing here?’ She said, ‘I went to do laundry, but on my way back, the clothes were knocked over, so I came.’ That is, a [Japanese policeman] kicked the laundry basket and knocked over the clothes.”

“She was going because they came to pick [her] up too to go to the factory to make military uniforms.”

“It was a day trip. We did not sleep but went straight to Busan. When we arrived in Busan, we might have spent one night, or we might have spent two nights. In any case, we slept there.”

“We went to a motel to sleep, either a motel or a boarding house. There were six people. Unmarried Chosun girls-. Six-.”

“When we arrived there, there were two. One was Yoko. . . . Another was Hanako. We were trying to come up with new names for ourselves . . . Hanaka, Hanatsuru, Hanazono, Hanae, Hanayoshi, and my name was Hanakiku. So, we were six altogether. All attached the prefix Hana.”

“We went to Busan, slept one or two nights, then boarded the ship. But as soon as we were on the ship, Ms. Lee, that one, looked like she was totally-- going to die. Well-, she threw up everything continually and could not touch anything resembling food because she was so seasick. But me, I never got seasick. The ship was so big. . . . I would eat some food and go out onto the veranda-like deck and

look at the view, entertaining myself with this and that. Then I heard someone say, ‘This ship is the biggest ship sailing from our country to Japan. There is no ship bigger than this.’ The ship’s name was Asama Maru. That is what I heard.”

“Dang-, but it was big. They loaded her up with a lot of cargo too. On top of that, well-, the ship was full- of soldiers, all marked with red stars. (She speaks forcefully.) No darn good, none of them, the men who were drafted.”

“I did not know how long I was on the ship, whether it was several hours or a week. We sailed and we slept on the ship, and I did not keep count on my fingers.”

“There was one leader, a Korean.”

“He led us from Busan and handed us over to someone else, and that one handed us over to yet another, and after that, we were handed over two more times.”

“We had no idea where we were going.”

Kagetsu

If we raved, we got beaten so much . . . beaten to the point of death.

“We continued on the ship, then got off when we reached Taiwan.”

“[The leader] gave thirty won² or maybe twenty won³ as fare for the boat ride anyway. But it was a Taiwanese man who rowed the boat. . . . Then, when we got off, we arrived in Takao in Taiwan.”

“So, the name of the town was Takao. From there, we took a Tenma,⁴ another small boat, and we went to another town.”

2 Thirty won in 1942–1945 is worth approximately \$181.00 today. Monetary value of Korean money from early 1940s till 1965 is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain because of two currency reforms in 1953 and 1962 and because official monetary values are not established until 1965 in South Korea. Monetary value for today noted in this book are estimated by the Korean Council which took into consideration of two currency reforms and consulted various sources including Economic Statistics System, Bank of Korea (<https://ecos.bok.or.kr/jsp/use/monetaryvalue/MonetaryValue.jsp>) and a newspaper article by Kyunghyang Shinmun (“Ten Thousand Won in 1945 Is Worth One Billion Won,” January 2, 2005, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=200501021754491). For years between 1945 and 1965, monetary value in 1965 is often used by the Korean Council. Applicable years are also determined by the Korean Council. For the exchange rate from dollar to won, one dollar for 1,179.92 won determined by Bloomberg Markets at 1:12 pm on February 6, 2020 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/quote/USDKRW:CUR>) was applied to the Korean monetary values today provided by the Korean Council.

3 Twenty won in 1942–1945 is approximately \$121.00 today.

4 A short name for a boat which transports cargo between ships or between a ship and land and has no sails.

“We went to the town where we came to live. . . . And the name of the house was Kagetsu. I cannot forget anything about that. There was a sign like this, on which was written “Kagetsu,” that they hung [on the front door] ever so nicely. When we first arrived there, how could something like that happen to us? I could not communicate; even if I tried to talk, it did not work. . . . If I did not follow what they said, they would tell me, ‘You, get out of here.’ But where could I go without a boat? And even if I dared to go, who knows whose hands I would be in and who might beat me to death? I could not live, and I could not die. What was there for me to do but stay stuck to that place? (about to cry) And suffer the humiliating thing.”

“They said there were many divisions of soldiers, and even though we heard it from everywhere, we forgot about it because it is a thing that we could not even dream of. If it did not concern us, we did not want to hear it. We just did what we had to do, and that would be the end of it.”

“There was another place [like Kagetsu].”

“There were two places in the town where I was. And in Takao, there were several places like ours there.”

“[The room] was *tatami*, it was called *tatami*. They set it up with wood.”

“There were only two rooms on the second floor.”

“Ms. Lee was in one of the rooms and . . . (thinks for a little bit) . . . Hanae was in another room? Right. Right. She was there. We were downstairs.”

“Downstairs, on the first floor too, every room was occupied except one big room or maybe two that was available. So, the number of rooms was six, no, eight; it was eight rooms including the upstairs.”

“All the rooms were on the side, and the wooden hallway extended all- the way down, and on this side too. It was \sqcap -shaped. And the rooms for the soldiers were further inside. And if we needed to wash our clothes . . . there was space in the courtyard.”⁵

“A [room] was given to every- person. *Tatami* was about four and a half sheets or was it five sheets? That is all it was. If you spread out a futon, this much space was all that was left. That is how small it was. They had to make the rooms small so that they could make more of them.”

“There were walls, at that time, the walls were made of wood. So what if [the person next door] could hear you? They did it in the open, for Pete’s sake.”

5 The rooms attached by a wooden hallway were laid out in the shape of the Korean letter \sqcap , with the girls’ quarter in a straight line as you enter the building (the | side of the \sqcap) and the soldiers’ quarter on the inner side of the building (the — side of the \sqcap). The rest of the area in the building was the courtyard, which was directly accessible from the hallway.

“The old woman was from Jeolla-do, and the old man was from Gyeongsang-do.⁶ The old woman said, ‘Harimodo, Harimodo,’ so their last name was Chang. The old woman’s last name was Chang, and her brother’s last name was Chang, too.⁷ The two siblings [were] there together.”

“The old man told us to call him *otousan*, so we called him father. *Otousan* is father in Japanese. And since we just called the old man father, we did not know what [his] last name was.”

“And *choba* (the supervisor) was the old woman’s younger brother.”

“*Choba* was old. He might have been forty or fifty years old.”

“*Choba* was responsible. That is why they needed him. The one who organized everything and took the tickets, his title was *choba*. They called him Harimodo *choba*. That is why I knew him.”

“Even if they did not give us any money, it was okay, just as long as they did not beat us up. We were so young. We only did as we were told. What did we know? We were relieved if they just fed us properly and did not beat us. . . . Do not even talk to me about it.”

“If we did the least bit wrong, they severely- kicked us. Kicked us with their shoes on. . . . And beat us like dogs.”

“If we were not sick and [did not] have any diseases and received the customers, the soldiers, pleasantly, they were pleased. But if we were the least bit sick or weak, they said they hated us.”

“We got beaten at the drop of a hat. If the number of customers we received was few, then we got beaten for that.”

“Everyone got beaten. Who there did not get beaten?”

“When I asked, ‘Why do you lie?’ [*Choba*] said, ‘I do not know about that. But if you do not comfort the soldiers, how are they going to fight in the war?’ What could I say to that? He said, ‘Then, do you want us to send you farther away than here, like Singapore?’ That is what he would come back with. . . . *Haegoo*-. If we raved, we got beaten so much . . . beaten to the point of death. And we would have no choice when the soldiers came but to receive them.”

Bizarre Bastards

There was nothing else wrong except that I was bleeding from my uterus.

⁶ Kim Hwa-ja called the couple who ran *Kagetsu* an aged person (the wife) and a respectable old man (the husband).

⁷ Korean people with Chang as their last name had to take a Japanese last name, which was Harimodo.

“When we were first stationed in Takao, they gave us all [gynecological] exams. [During the time that we were being examined], we did not receive any customers, but two days later, we would receive soldiers.”

“At the beginning, age-wise, I was just about to turn sixteen (American age). . . . Something might have been torn down there or something, so I was bleeding. There was nothing else wrong except that I was bleeding from my uterus. After it happened to me. After it happened to me for the first time. When you are too young, and it happens to you for the first time, and you walk, you feel like the wind was blowing up in there or something. What else could it be? It was not like I could not walk at all, it was just that [my lower part] hurt a little.”

“At nine am, we would eat breakfast.”

“At ten am, by our time, we would face the soldiers.”

“After we had washed the dishes and cleaned up everything, we would go to work. In the evenings, there was no time even to eat dinner. And we would carry on until late at night.”

“The soldiers kept rotating to take leave for maybe- three hours at a time. So, that is how they would come in.”

“About twenty of them would come and go a day until evening. If they had more tickets, they would come back to sleep with a girl again in the evening time.”

“At night, if soldiers had more tickets, there were some soldiers who would stay the night. There were many. You would rarely sleep by yourself. This was because the soldiers would save their tickets and present them all at once, then they could sleep with a girl all night.”

“They kept coming in endlessly. There was no end. If one bastard went out, another one came in. Well- some bastards would be sitting outside yelling at the top of their lungs that it was taking too long (laughing).⁸ What bastards they were (laughing out loud). Ah-, do not even talk to me about it.”

“On Sundays, there were always many more of them. This was because they sent more of the soldiers on leave.”

“On days like that, there were countless numbers. I want to say that there were more than thirty maybe. They came in quickly and went out just as quickly.”

“But if it took near twenty minutes, all hell would break loose. Outside, they would swear, all kinds of fucked up things.”

“Fifteen minutes is taking too long.”

“There was not any time-. After I sent a customer away, if I was hungry, I would shove in a spoonful of rice, which had been scooped out into a bowl, into my mouth, even if it was just sweet potato rice, then go right back again

⁸ Paradoxically, Kim Hwa-ja often laughed when she was talking about the soldiers.

because then came the time for the soldiers. (In a weak voice) Back then, I had to hurry as much as I could just to avoid one less beating [from *choba*]. If we were slow to get going, we would get hit on the forehead or slapped on the ear. There would be no avoiding that.”

“Laundry too, we would do it quickly during our mealtimes. . . . If we did not receive soldiers because we were doing our laundry, which he would consider engaging in a personal matter, he would beat us to death for sure.”

“It was enough to make you want to die.”

“Was there anything to do? Would they even let us go out? . . . Nope, we could not go out anywhere. Aside from getting [gyno checkups], did we ever go out? Other than that, we could not go anywhere.”

“All day long, I was always just running in circles in that house; besides, there was not much time just to play. [The soldiers] came like crazy.”

“When they were drunk, they took their knives and pointed at people. They did that kind of horrific thing.”

“The privates, now, they thought that they were sure to die [at the front], so- they would talk big and gulped down their cups of wine. . . . They would entertain themselves as they pleased.”

“I do not want to talk about it; it gives me a headache. (Silent for a little while.)”

“We took turns making our own meals. Was there anyone who was going to do it for us? Do you think that we even made proper side dishes? We just ate whatever we had.”

“*Ha-ee-goo-ya*, I was happy if they just used white rice and made proper rice. I was happy if it was not sweet potatoes and a little bit of rice mixed together, what we called sweet potato rice.”

“[As for soap], when we had used one all up, and there was nothing left, then they would give us another one. . . . They gave soap to clean our faces with, and they gave us detergent to do our laundry. We left them in the bathroom, and several of us would go together to wash. Did we think that they were going to give us something good? Not at all. We only received bad things.”

“Did they make us clothes every six months? Yes. They did. They would have to give us wages for us to purchase clothes for ourselves. Where would we get the money? Since they did not give us any money, they had to at least put some clothes on us so that we could greet [the soldiers].”

“So, that was that as far as clothes went. But, it was hot in Taiwan. Short sleeve dresses with sleeves coming up to about here (indicating the length of the short sleeves), that is what they tailored for us.”

“*Kimonos*? How were we to receive customers with such fancy clothes? When we got those dresses, well- you could just pull them up (pretending to pull up the dress to the knees) then [the legs] would shoot out just like that.”

“They gave us a few tips, now and then. And when they had left, we would save the tips . . . and buy us some cream with a putrid smell, and that would be the end of our money. . . . If we bought a soap bar yea big, we could make it last a while by using it sparingly. That is if we had the money to buy it.”

“Was it common for them to give us tips? No, it was not. The privates that we received, where would they get any money? The person who often received soldiers who had a little bit of rank, those that wore the long swords, would earn a few tips here and there for her to spend. If you were lucky enough to have met a higher ranking officer who would maybe seek you out once again, then twice, he would give you a little out of pity.”

The White Pill

That was the medicine that they gave you to never get pregnant.

“Once I had a discharge, and I was treated for two weeks. Two weeks, I had to go to the doctor’s office.”

“A discharge from the uterus, it was severe. Bad stuff came out.”

“Because we keep washing ourselves in cold water, the uterus got cold too. . . . When I developed a discharge, I went to get myself checked out, and they said, ‘You have the chill,’ and so I had to receive treatment for several days. But I had no other diseases to speak of.”

“After you were done with one person, there was the *senjo* where you would go to clean your private parts. And you would stir in some medicine in the water that would turn the water red.”

“If you had a heavy discharge, or you caught a disease or something, then they would plaster a note on your door that said that this room cannot receive guests. Once you have that note put up, you keep going to the hospital whether it be for two weeks or three. Once a day, you would go. Once a day.”

“If they said, ‘Hurry up! Why aren’t you getting better?’ you might feel resentful and cop a slight attitude toward *choba*. Then, he would beat you to a pulp.”

“We did not contract any diseases. We used *sakku*. *Sakkus*. . . . If they did not use one, [we] would just chase away [the Japanese soldiers]. If they said they did not want it, we would say then leave.”

“We would say ‘we are going to get pregnant. So, go,’ then they were chased away, and they had nothing to say to that. I think that it was set as law.”

“The *sakkus* were provided by the house. They gave them all out to use, they did, because we told them that we would give them to [the soldiers when they came].”

“Because we received so many men, we had to use condoms so that we girls would not contract diseases.”

“There was no concern with the tearing up of our [lower parts] or anything. Just go on and receive them. But it became too painful to do. There was the cream that we could apply, you know. If you put that on, your lower part becomes slippery. They gave them all out, the cream included. . . . If we had just cleaned ourselves, but then right after we had to receive them and receive them again, then we would have no choice [but to put on] the cream after the washing.”

“If we did not put that cream on after just having washed, then the contact of the rubber [of the *sakku*] would really rip our skin apart.”

“So, we girls did not know a world where living with men was a pleasure. (In a quiet voice) Even if they had to come and go so quickly, it was just the soldiers who enjoyed themselves.”

“[For venereal diseases], we went to Takao to get a checkup once a week. There was an army surgeon who did it.”

“Once in a while, he gave us a shot of #606 (arsphenamine). There were #01, #02, #03, #04, #05 and up to #06. That is why it was called #606. #606 was very strong medicine. And he gave us a shot of #03 at every checkup when we were done, as we were leaving, even though we did not have any diseases.”

“Once a week, then no more after that. Sometimes every other week or once every three weeks. The medicine was so potent that it could be harmful to people.”

“It was put into our veins. It smelled a lot. . . . It was given to us so that our bodies would not contract bad things. Also, they continuously gave us one white pill that looked like a button once a day. If you took that, the baby house inside you would shrink. . . . That was the medicine that they gave you to never get pregnant.”

“Whether there were not many side effects, I did not know.”

“The [hospital] facility was not very good. . . . According to today’s standards, it was more like a shanty shack. They would not build nice facilities. . . . All we did was go and get checkups. That was it. . . . When they called our names, we would go in, get examined, then come out, and that would be the end of it. No one even asked how many army doctors there were. There was no need.”

Suicide Attempt

Even with drowning, I found, you can only drown if you are possessed by spirits. Otherwise, you cannot drown.

“The girl who was close to me was younger than I and was very immature. . . . With the cleaning too, I would do one of her duties for her more than I had to because she was so young and all.”

“Because she was so young, she would cry at the drop of a hat after coming in here. I asked, ‘How did you come to be in here?’ She said, ‘What else? I came to earn money. I came because they told me I would go to a factory to make military clothes.’ It seems they brought her too by telling her she would make clothes.”

“They were all lies to take us away. Who would come if they knew the truth?”

“That is how they got me too, *haeegoo*- (with a deep sigh). I was looking at the water to drown myself in it, but even with drowning, I found, you can only drown if you are possessed by spirits. Otherwise, you cannot drown.”

“*Haegoo* – Even if I was suffering so when I thought that I had to see my parents once more before I died, I could not kill myself. How could I die?”

“Although I wanted to kill myself by drowning and thought what else can I do, eventually I talked myself out of it and forgot about it. . . . *Ha-ee-go*, no matter what I do, the world will go on. In the end, when I die, that will be it. I can count it as a blessing if I get to go back home and see my parents again, that is what I kept thinking to myself. I did not think of anything special. You see, I had no hope. What would we do? Would we be able to go out somewhere and get married or something? There was no chance of that. Now that we were all- ruined already . . . all we could ask for now is to go back to our hometowns or anywhere else where they would take us, and if they would take us as house-keepers, to eat the food that they offered us until we die. Then, that will be the end. . . . ‘I want to live a comfortable life. I want to get married.’ I had no such thoughts. All the girls who were there, we were all- of the same mind. Not just me. All were the same.”

Talking in Whispers

We did not hear anything about the liberation, well-, well-, we just stopped seeing the Japanese soldiers.

“There was a lack of energy in the air, and, first and foremost, they did not come. . . . We did not hear anything about the liberation, well-, well-, we just stopped seeing the Japanese soldiers.”

“We were talking in whispers among ourselves when the Taiwanese people came to tell us that the Japanese had been defeated, that they had given up. But still, we stayed there for a couple more days.”

“I heard that the Japanese gave up because they took them down with an atomic bomb. That is how we knew and became free- on August fifteenth. After the Japanese soldiers stopped coming, our business came to a stop as well. At first, we were out of our minds with worry. What if we cannot get out and die here? That is the thought that went through our minds at that time. *Haegoo-*, if the Japanese had won, at least we would be able to go back home, we thought in our immature minds.”

“We stayed there almost a year longer after we were freed. We stayed there because we did not have a ship or money for the ship fare to return home.”

“So we sold things. . . . *Choba* brought some eggs to us and told us to go sell them.”

“Could we do anything else? There was nothing to eat and no money to live off of. . . . They said, ‘Sell this and sell that.’ So, we would sell what little we could and brought back the money. Then we would take that money, bought a little bit of rice and sweet potatoes, which we put on top of the rice, and make sweet potato rice. So, I helped to do that.”

“I could not sell anything. Because I could not sell, I got beaten up.”

“We girls at *Kagetsu* stayed all together as a family, then we took a ship. They put us on a ship, and because they put us on a ship, we were able to get out. They just put all- of us on a ship . . . and that is how we made it out to Busan.”

“There were so many people getting out of [Taiwan] at the time that everything was in chaos. If we could not obtain any of those pieces of paper at the Busan harbor, we would have no money for traveling and could not go home. We had to stand in a line all proper-like before we could receive any.”

“They gave us one piece of paper money, just like that. Paper money.”

“I heard, ‘Young Adult Group!⁹ Young Adult Group!’ That is where they gave us the money.”

“I was so happy to set foot in Busan. *Haegoo*. So excited now that I was still living and I could go see my mom, and I could go see my younger siblings.”

“Day and night, I held onto my mom, and we cried and cried and made a big scene after I came home, not even aware of the other people around us. *Haegu*.”

⁹ Kim Hwa-ja remembers that the young adult group were those people who distributed paper money for the bus fare when she arrived at the Busan port.

Destiny

It seemed like it was my destiny to suffer; suffering awaits me everywhere I go

“I was staying at home, and when it got to be about one or two years later, I met a married man.”

“I met him in Angang.”

“I was in my twenties, under thirty.”

“At the time, there were only married men around. Everyone went to war and died. So, who would be around?”

“I do not exactly remember how we met. . . . I think someone introduced us to each other.”

“His last name was Hwang. They lived well, all- the Hwangs. The Hwang family were *yangban* (of the noble class).”

“We just lived together: he had a legal wife, you see. What could we do?”

“He was ten years older than I since he was a married man. So, we met, started selling silk, and lived together for about twenty years, but it was hard going. . . . I cannot even begin to tell you how hard it was.”

“These days, everyone lives like a king.¹⁰ Do not even talk to me about it. What effort I put into feeding just one mouth.”

“I went through a lot of suffering. Do not even talk to me about it. *Haeegoo*, it seemed like it was my destiny to suffer; suffering awaits me everywhere I go.”

“And then this married man went and bore a son and returned to me with a baby not even a year old. The one that he brought back, he was going to give him to somebody, so I said, ‘*Uh-ee-goo*, I will raise him,’ and told him not to give the baby away.”

“I could not register him on the family books. . . . So, even though I raised that child, he was not listed under my name but under the name of his legal wife.”

“Did he bring the baby when I was thirty-five? Was the child four? Yes, . . . I raised him with all the attachment of a mother since he was a babe. And since I could not have babies of my own, it was as though I gave birth to him. . . . I never think about the fact that I did not.”

“He thinks I gave birth to him. He does not know--. [My adopted son] bore a daughter and a son. So, he has a boy and a girl.”

¹⁰ Kim Hwa-ja seems to think that things are much more luxurious now compared to back then.

“After Mr. Hwang passed away . . . I worked a lot as a housekeeper. I lived and worked at restaurants for several years as well. . . . It was hard. Do you know how tiring it is to work at a restaurant? I had to wash all the dishes. Having to wash dish after dish in the cold water with that poisonously strong dishwashing detergent was enough to give me Housewives’ Eczema. I cannot tell you how I hard I had it. And again, I went to Gampo¹¹ and stayed at someone else’s restaurant and after that went to work as a housekeeper in a residential household. That was the worst.”

“I had to wash even their underwear. And I cleaned up all the rooms, using a broom and a rag. At a restaurant, it is tiring work, but when you are done doing the job that you are assigned to, it is all finished. But as a housekeeper, it is another story. The family just goes to work in the morning . . . and until they came back late at night, I could not go to sleep but had to wait and open the door for them.”

“I- worked as a housekeeper for about three years. And after I turned fifty years old, I worked here and there. What else could I do?”

“I worked at a restaurant for about seven or eight years and moved to another restaurant for about one or two years. Then again I went to another restaurant and stayed there.”

“*Haeegoo*, I quit working after I moved to [Daegu]. I worked most of my life. Hasn’t it only been three years since I have been [living] here?”

“I will live like this until I die, then it will be the end. That is all there is. I have no room in my heart to think about anything else. It takes a person living a life of ease to think of all those things. If you have to work day after day, when you come home, you are so tired all you can do is sleep. There is no room for thinking. . . . There is an old saying that you think about your husband near your bedding, but you do not think about your husband near the baby (blanket). . . . Without my realizing, time has passed by, and without my realizing, days have passed by. (With a soft sigh) I only think about what to do with the money I get paid every month. That is all that I think about; there is nothing else.”

“While moving from here to there, I have gotten old.”

“I turned sixty, and then after a little bit, sixty-five, and then after a little bit of this and a little bit of that, seventy. Even if I get a proposal from a rich man who just lost his wife, I would not go. What would I do there?”

“I would not want to do it because of my son. Nothing would change even if I did. . . . I just eat and pay my dues and live my life. What else is there?”

11 Gyeongsangbuk-do Gyeongju-si Gampo-eup (Gampo Town, Gyeongju City, North Gyeongsang Province).

An Assumed Name

What need is there for even just one more person to know?

“If I were to tell you why I could not report at first . . . it was that I was living as a housekeeper. My sister-in-law told me that I should report it. But, *haekoo*. What would be the purpose in rehashing it all over again? Down on my luck, I was going around living in other people’s houses. I might have done it for several tens of million won.¹² But for only several hundred thousand won¹³ or several million won,¹⁴ why would I do that? So I said to myself, ‘Don’t do it. Do not dredge it all up again.’ And I forgot about it. . . . But then there was this cousin of mine, right? She asked, ‘Older sister, have you reported about the time that you went across the river and back?’ ‘What would I be doing reporting a thing like that? I forgot all about it and did not do it.’ ‘*Aheego*, it is not too late to do it. So, do it now.’ So, I did it, I did.”

“I remembered every detail. I remembered the name of the ship, ‘Asama Maru’. . . . When I spoke in detail, it all came back to me. It is still fresh in my memory. I do not know how I still remembered. Unknown to me, the memories crept into my mind, and I did not forget.”

“Why would I talk about it? If I had told my mom, she would have been heartbroken. If they knew, then they knew. If they did not know, then they did not. They did not ask me anything and I did not tell them either.”

“Mr. Hwang (the married man) did not know. Would it have helped if I had told him? He did not know, I tell you. My relatives, all they acknowledged was that, well-, I went somewhere abroad, stayed for a while, and then came back.”

“One of my sisters-in-law and my two younger brothers, they all- know. (In a quiet voice) The wives of my nephews do not know. So, just in case I become known when this book is published, I do not want to reveal my real name. I do not want my nephews’ wives to be saying, ‘Ah-, our aunt was a *com-fort girl-woman*.”

“After I die, I do not care whether they know or not. . . . What need is there for even just one more person to know? The thought that comes to me is that I wish that it would just all blow over without people knowing about me. . . . It is better living out my life when they do not know. What good would it do me if they knew?”

¹² Ten million won in 2000 is approximately \$11,196.00 today.

¹³ One hundred thousand won in 2000 is approximately \$112.00 today.

¹⁴ One million won in 2000 is approximately \$1,120.00 today.

Deep Rooted Sickness

When I think about it, well, *hwabyung* (the repressed anger) bubbles to the surface, and my face becomes all red with that anger.

“When [*choba*] kicked me with his shoes on, [my knees] went out. When I did not put any ointment on it but left it like that, it was infected and pus came out. So, I had a hard time for a long while.”

“Look here.¹⁵ Those wounds were inflicted a long time ago, but the scars are still there. (Drawing a big circle with her finger) At first, it was this big. But it kept getting smaller and smaller. The way that they beat us typically was how they beat dogs, not human beings. . . . Just try not following their orders: they would say, ‘Put these bitches in the sea and kill them.’ So, I thought [in my heart] that it would be better to listen to what they say and save my life. But it did not occur to me that I would live to come back to Korea one day. The war was getting fierce and serious, and I worried, ‘What would happen if they took me from here to somewhere worse?’”

“Well-, when I think about it, *hwabyung* (the repressed anger) bubbles to the surface, and my face becomes all red and my anger erupts. These days, it has gotten so- much better. Look at the heart medicine I have bought there. I have to keep on taking it. Among the people who have been there, there are not many who have healthy hearts. If I do not take the medicine, my heart beats so fast that I cannot handle it. That is why I am so bad-tempered now, so sharp with my words. . . . My body keeps on deteriorating. My heart is no good. So, I take a lot of medicine.”

“[Because of a beating I was subject to from *choba*], my spine is a little crooked. It was okay when I was young, but now that I am old my back hurts a little. When I walk, it keeps bending. They say that a little bit of hurt that happens to you when you are young catches up with you when you get old.”

Compensation

I would like to receive a little bit of compensation so that we can live a little bit better before we die.

¹⁵ Kim Hwa-ja still has some wounds from getting beaten by the soldiers. They are on the knees and ankles, and they are mottled. The wound is about 2 cm and is between her knee and ankle.

“Well, is there anything else? . . . The best thing would be if I do not catch any bad diseases while I am still living, I can feed myself my own food, I can relieve nature by myself, I continue living a little while longer, and I die in my sleep. . . . Now, before we die, I would like to receive a little bit of compensation so that we can live a little bit better before we die. That is all. What else is there?”

“I do not want anything more than that. But, *haeegoo*-. If I were to secure a little compensation, I can watch my adopted son spend some of that money. Then would my heart not be more at peace? . . . I think that everybody thinks the same way. That is all I am saying.”

“After I started going to the Catholic church, I became much meeker and gentler. I have changed my heart.”

“These days when I pray, *ha-ee-go*-, ‘Let the Japanese look at South Korea and ask for forgiveness.’ That is how I prayed. When I pray alone, that is how I would do it. ‘Give the world peace.’ After I pray that three times, I also pray, ‘God, my father, no matter how you do it, please lead Japan’s Koizumi to look at us South Korea, yes? and ask for forgiveness.’ I- prayed like that. Ha, ha, ha-. I am funny.”

Interviewer's Commentary: Ariadne's Thread

Cha Hyeyoung

On a particularly hot summer's day in 2002, I set out for Kim Hwa-ja *halmoni*'s house in order to conduct the first interview. I was very familiar with visiting Kim *halmoni*'s house as a full-time employee of the Daegu Citizen's Forum for *Halmoni* that works with *comfort girls-women*. Because of my regular visits to her, I know a lot more about her than others do and, as a result, have built a good relationship with her. As I prepared for the first interview, I thought the interview would go well since she had already told me several times about things that she had not even been able to share easily with others. Also, despite the fact that Kim *halmoni*'s age is quite considerable, her mental faculties are relatively sharp. I anticipated that Kim *halmoni*'s ability to remember things in detail would help me easily close the interview because even the stories of the comfort station – which we briefly dug into as she spoke in everyday language, almost as if in passing – were very concrete.

Her story started from her relationship with her family during her early childhood, then continued to the circumstances of how she ended up in a comfort station, to her suffering until she returned home after the liberation, and to the incident in which she adopted her son after the marriage. The interview progressed in order at a good pace while her story continued up until after her return home to

Korea. As I expected, Kim *halmoni*'s story that she poured out unhesitatingly went swimmingly with every question as if a knotted skein was coming unraveled.

Her story showed a marked difference from that of the other *comfort girls-women*'s stories, which were detracted by their spotty memories. Despite the fact that a great number of years have passed, Kim *halmoni*'s memory was very accurate, to the extent that she could tell you the precise names of the comfort stations and her travel route, as well as the names of the women with whom she shared her life at the comfort station and even their hometowns. The name of the ship, the name and personal information of the owner of the comfort station, and everything else, she pulled out of her accurate memory. She said she especially memorized the name of the ship, the names of the other *comfort girls-women* she lived with, and the name of the comfort station intentionally because she did not want to forget where she was going.

I think the reason that she remembers every detail, even after more than sixty years, is because of her anxiety in having to go, at the time, to a place she did not know. Things like the travel route and the name of the ship were Kim *halmoni*'s only information, and her anxiety made her unable to ever forget this information. They were probably marks carved into Kim *halmoni*'s mind, like Ariadne's thread, that would keep her from forgetting the road home.

After I finished the smooth first interview, the additional second and third interviews took place. She never refused an interview and told me everything she knew each time. She looked tired from the repeated interviews, but her attitude remained very cooperative. Only her inner thoughts, which would show themselves once in a while, became a little bit of a burden to my heart. Kim *halmoni* believes that her testimony will help to obtain an apology and compensation out of the Japanese government in the near future, and she expects that the compensation, albeit in a small way, will prove to be a financial benefit to her. And with that expectation, she asked me gently, 'Is there any chance of things working out right and us obtaining some small compensation? What do you think?'

The reason why securing an apology and compensation from Japan before she dies has become her last wish is not because Kim *halmoni* is greedy. Of course, I am sure she does have the wish in her heart to recover her honor and to become a little more comfortable financially through an apology and compensation, but the bigger reason is that she wants to help her adopted son financially as his financial situation has become dire because of the IMF crisis in 1997. For the sake of her impoverished son, Kim *halmoni* is currently saving a little bit of her monthly income to send to him, and last year, in 2001, while living with her granddaughter who is preparing for her college entrance exams, she even paid for her studies. However, she feels sorry that it is not enough to be of any great help to her son and his situation.

Before it is too late, she wants her and her son to be able to live a little more comfortably with the compensation obtained from Japan. Her adopted son, who thinks that she is his real mother, is no different to a real son to Kim *halmoni* too. Indicating the black and white photo on the wall, she says, 'This one is my son,' and in her voice, there was a little bit of pride in there. The boast is testament to the comparison between herself, of whom her son would take care if she were to become too old to take care of herself, and other old ladies who live alone. Kim *halmoni* thinks that her adopted son is her last refuge.

Maybe it is because she wants to protect her adopted son and her other family members, but Kim *halmoni* always went to extremes to refuse to do interviews with broadcasting TV stations and other media because she does not want her face to be known. Regardless of any excuse, she has always refused all situations that might make her face and name known. Even when procuring her to promise to do this interview, I had to promise her that her name and face would not become public. Only when I made her this promise did Kim *halmoni* brighten up enough to make up her own false name right away and let us put it in the book instead of her real name. Ultimately her false name works as protection and accordingly she makes no bones about sharing her experiences at the comfort station and every emotion that she expresses about them.

Right before the end of the interviews, Kim *halmoni* asked me one last time to use her false name in the book. And despite the fact that I had promised her this many times, she was very anxious lest her past become known to her neighbors or her relatives. She told me strongly she would hate for her granddaughter, son, and all her other relatives who did not know that she had been a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman* to find out about her past and to make a lot of noise talking about her and staring at her. She would introduce me to her neighbors as a volunteer who helps senior citizens living alone. And every time she did so, I realized how hard and difficult it is for these victims to be open about their experiences as *comfort girls-women*. When I saw the pain of Kim *halmoni* who, during the course of the interviews, seemed as though she has overcome her past, but, at the same time, still showed her unhealed wounds, all I could do was tell her again that I would keep my promise.

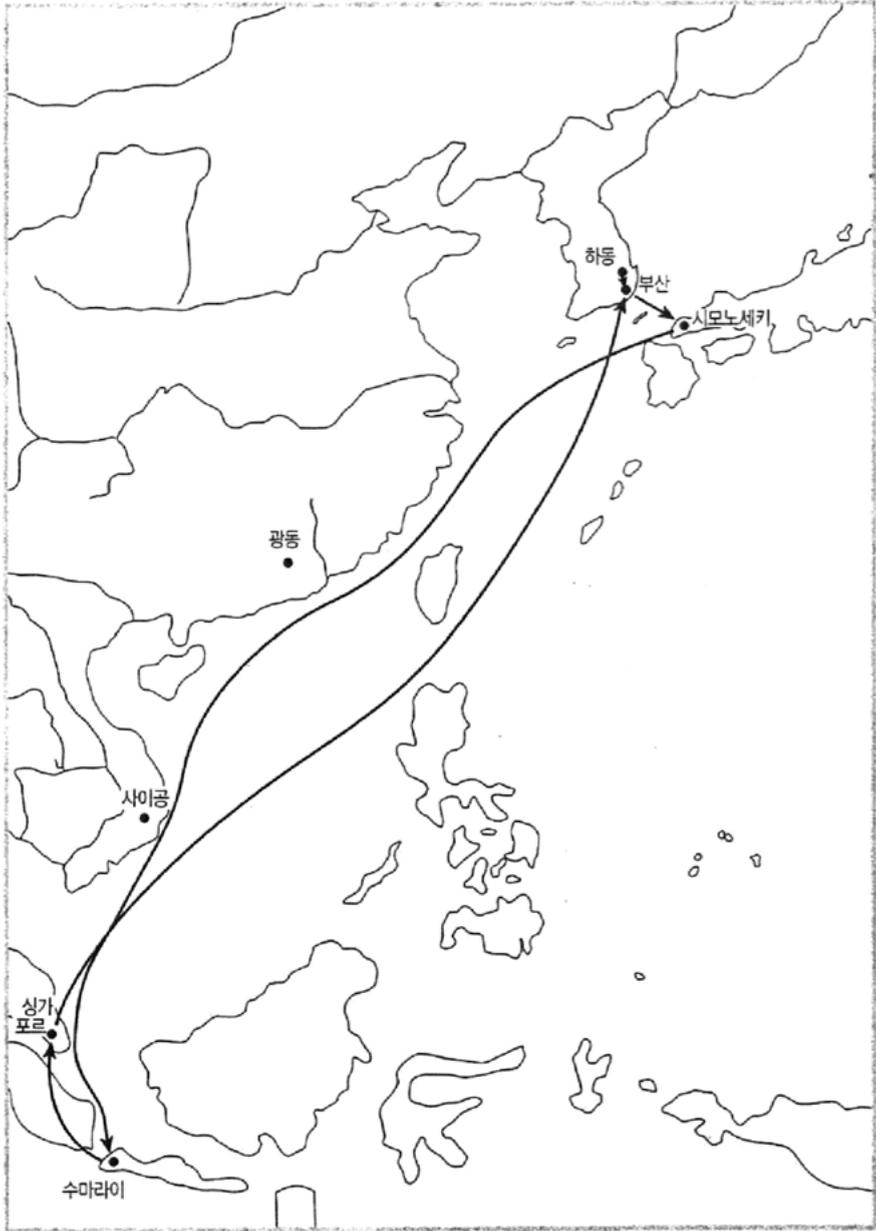
“It Is Like a Dream That I Survived. But an Utterly Terrifying Nightmare of a Dream”

Chung Seo-un



Chung Seo-un.

1924	Born in Gyeongsangnam-do Hadong
1941 (Age 18)	Taken from home by work scams Went to Busan – Shimonoseki – Taiwan – Guangdong, China – Singapore – Saigon – Indonesia
1942 (Age 19)	Lived as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> in Semarang, Indonesia
1945 (Age 22)	Lived at a refugee camp in Singapore after liberation
1946 (Age 23)	Returned to Busan
1947 (Age 24)	Married Jea
1971 (Age 48)	Death of husband
1975 (Age 52)	Cohabiting with Kim
1992 (Age 69)	Registered as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i>
February 2004 (Age 81)	Died of a chronic disease



Chung Seo-un's route: Hadong – Busan – Shimonoseki – Semarang – Singapore – Busan.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of. This is because I had to have done something shameful to be ashamed. The people in my hometown, they all know my situation: how I was dragged off. I have lived an honorable life. So, I would never hide and be ashamed of the fact that I had been a *comfort girl-woman*. No way! Those who were sold may be ashamed, I do not know, but in my case, there is nothing to be ashamed of. Even a daughter of the president could have been dragged off.”

“Even if it is just one person, we have to let people know more about this problem of ours, even if it is to reach just one more person. Even if it is just one more person, they have to know. I said this when I went to the witness stand: ‘We were born at the wrong time and were sacrificed, but something like this must never happen to our children who are growing up now.’ I was the one who asserted this, me. That is always been my mindset. *Ah-ee-goo*, when I think about those Japs, *uheegoo*. Really.”

Lie

‘If you go to the *senninbari*¹ factory . . . you will suffer some, but when you come back, everything will be alright.’

“I had good parents, so I did not know what suffering was [when I was little]. My parents gave out land to [tenant] farmers.”

“I was the only daughter.”

“I did not go to school either, because my father would not let me. ‘What could you possibly learn [from] the Japs?’ So, I studied Chinese characters from a teacher who taught it.”

“My father refused to change his name to a Japanese one. . . . So, that is one of the ways that he incurred the hatred of the Japs. And the straw that finally broke the camel’s back was like this. The Japs asked everyone to offer up their brass bowls. But my father just complained to the head of a village. ‘You took all the rent money and now you want the brass bowls that we eat from too? Even if I were to die, I would not give them to you.’ So, they came from the police station and asked why he would not offer up the brass bowls. ‘You bastards, you will have to kill me to take them. I will not give them to you. I do not

¹ A red sash belt worn around waist to protect Japanese soldiers from being shot by bullets during war and to bring good luck and confer courage. It has 1,000 stitches often with “Long live the Japanese military” written on it.

know about necessities, but why do we have to supply you with materials for bullets and war tools?’ So, my father took everyone who worked for us, went to the rice paddies, and buried all the brass bowls. At night, he dug up rows and rows in the rice paddies and buried them there. Someone informed the Japs about the burial. And that is how my father was taken into custody. How much my father was tortured, I cannot even tell you. I followed the head of the village to visit my father, and he scolded me something awful. ‘You don’t belong here, so never come back! If you come again, I will not see you. So never come back, you hear me?’”

“I saw that [my father’s] hands were all bandaged up. Those bastards tortured him something awful. A few days later (takes a pause from speaking), the village foreman came to me and said, ‘Young girl, if you go to the *seminbari* factory in Japan and spend about a year, no, two or two and a half years, at most, you will suffer some, but when you come back, everything will be alright.’ Yes, if I go, the day that I go, my father will be released. That was the story.”

“I believed that. (Speaking with a deep sigh) *Aheego*, so I went on my own volition. If I go to the factory and suffer some hardship for two or two and a half years, when I come back, my family can be back together again and live happily ever after. That is what they said. So, how could I not.”

“I was taken away at the age of fourteen in December.”²

Collecting Cheonyeos

We waited for ships, and they gathered people. That is how we were gathered, I guess.

“On the day I was leaving [Busan] I took the ship right away, the ship that went back and forth between Japan and Busan. . . . They gave me a ride on their ship, so I got on. So, now that the ship had arrived, I saw the bastards (the Japanese soldiers) out there. When we arrived in Shimonoseki, there was a place, like a big factory, and I mean, big. When I was in the factory, I noticed later that there were other girls too, girls who came in the same ship with me.”

² Chung Seo-un said that she was taken at the age of eighteen during the interview in 1995. Since Japan occupied Indonesia in December 1941, her statements during the interview in 1995 were assessed to be true. Thus, eighteen years old (1941) is used as the time of her being taken away from her home in the chronological table.

“We waited for ships, and they gathered people. That is how we were gathered, I guess. I turned fifteen years old in Shimonoseki.”

“*Aheegoo*-, *aheegoo*. *Gimbap*³ rice ball, they called it. I got rice balls three times a day. . . . I was so dumbfounded I did not eat my rice balls. For three days, I did not eat. Even now, I do not eat *gimbap*. We do not even have seaweed in the house. Even to this day, I do not eat seaweed. But then when the fourth day came around, I was starving, and I could not stand it anymore. So, I ate.”

“When a good number of people gathered around . . . [until] then I thought I was going to a factory. One day, they said that we were all to come out; [again] everyone had to get on the ship, they said. Being of tender age, I did not know how many people there were: hundreds of people, maybe thousands of people. They were nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, and sixteen years old, *cheonyeo*.”

A Faraway Country

That is when I found out that this was a faraway country, not Japanese land at all.

“[And again] we got on the ship (in an angry voice) and the first place we went to was Taiwan.”

“They let us off the ship by the tens. . . . I thought to myself, ‘*Aheegoo*, my world, this here Japan must be a big country.’”

“Someone said that here the Chinese were carrying around bananas, wearing baggy hats. That was strange. I guessed there was something like that in Japan, too. [That is what I thought.]”

“I was on the ship. The soldiers got off, but we did not.”

“Then, after two or three more days, where did we go but a place called Guangdong. But, to this day, what remains in my memory is the Aikon Hotel.”

“It was a sixteen-story building; the hotel was so big that we saw it from the ship. It was so big that I asked them about it, and they told me the rest. After a few days [on the ship] . . . we left for Singapore again and then went to Saigon.”

“Indonesia. That is where we all got off. Everyone got off and everyone was sent to various places. I got off in Jakarta, and was stationed in a place called Semarang.⁴ There, at Semarang, thirteen people got off. I went there. That is when I found out that this was a faraway country, not Japanese land at all.”

³ A Korean dish made of steamed white rice and other ingredients rolled in sheets of dried laver seaweed and served in bite-sized slices.

⁴ Semarang is a city on Jawa Island located in the center of the islands of Indonesia.

“After we got off at Jakarta, they took us to a hospital. There, they did something to our wombs. They made it so I could not have children. At first, it hurt to walk. What happened? (Pointing to her stomach) It felt like my stomach was going to rip in two down to my lower abdomen. Then, the soldiers came in a truck and loaded us up in it.”

Semarang

Funeral? What funeral? They treated us worse than dogs.

“I belonged to Jakarta. There was a very small [town] called Semarang. From the evening I arrived, I resisted but was stabbed with a knife and left a big scar (pointing to the scar on her neck and jaw).”

“On the first night, they let in an officer. He was drunk. So, I was trembling like a leaf. I was the youngest amongst all the girls there. Everyone was eighteen, seventeen, and nineteen. Then he raped me. When I tell the story, my whole body . . . *aheegoo*, I cannot even speak. When I think about it, I still dream about it at night. I have wounds all over my body because those bastards hit me. That is why I am so sick now. I did not have a scratch on my face before, but this mark I got when he hit me with a knife, *aheegoo*, the blood that spilled, I cannot even speak. Just think, to leave a scar like that, how much I must have bled.”

“There was no escape from there. That is because, first of all, when you leave there, you would have to board a ship. But where are you gonna go? [You cannot even think of] running away from there. People are trapped in there like rats. Even if you run away, you would just come right back into the unit. [The unit] was wide, and it was so big, they put the unit right in the mountains, that is, the house, the unit, was big.”

“The bastards were all very secretive then. It was a top secret. People did not even know what kind of unit it was. And they did not want to find out more either.”

“We were fourteen in all. Korean girls. At Sumaree,⁵ there were only fourteen of us. [Among us] two were beaten to death. *Aheegoo*, if a dog died, they would at least bury it. Funeral? What funeral? They treated us worse than dogs.”

“The comfort stations had been built one next to the other, side by side. A shack was like a house, with small rooms all lined up next to each other. That is how they built them. . . . [The room] was small, so there was a bed and

⁵ Chung Seo-un used Semarang and Sumaree interchangeably as the location of the comfort station she stayed at in Indonesia.

nothing else. They gave us clothes, anything that would fit us: they gave us pants, and they gave us skirts. I was Gook Ja, Kikuko in Japanese. That is what they called me. When the bell rang, all we could eat was soybean paste soup and Indica rice at the cafeteria. But, it still tasted like honey to me. Because I was hungry. When the soldiers came, they brought a bag of hardtacks (a type of cracker). I ate a lot of them. Even though the climate was very hot, every day at one o'clock, it would rain for an hour. [Then] we would close the door and go to sleep until two. It was cool then. It is a very strange country. It would be very hot, but then it would rain, and it would not be so hot anymore. [Around the comfort stations,] there were thick trees that they could easily hang us all on in a line, and monkeys lived in those trees. One monkey gave birth to a baby, and with her breast hanging down to her feet, carried the baby on its belly and walked up and down from tree to tree.”

Ruthless Bastards

It is so scary; just the thought of it makes me nauseous.

“There was no [thought of my hometown] or anything like that; when the bastards came, I forgot everything. I could not afford to think about that. *Ah-hew*, it is so scary; just the thought of it makes me nauseous. I get goosebumps. But, where we were was where the most ruthless ones were. The place where we were was at the front lines. That was where I was.”

“It was a big regiment. Made up of battalions and platoons. First company. Second company. There were many companies. The troops from that unit were all coming to us. *Aheegoo*, where could I go to say all those things like that? It is a miracle I came back alive. I reckon I have had a very long life.”

“From 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., the privates came. The privates went back to their unit at around 8 p.m. When it became nine or ten in the evening, then the officers would come. *Aheegoo*, do not even talk to me about it.”

“That is, they were evil bastards. They treated us like dogs, not human beings. It was unspeakable. The officers came in drunk, dragging their long swords. Then, if I did not do what they wanted, then all hell would break loose. They would say things like I will cut off your head. Those bastards. *Ahhew, ahheh--*, where would I go to say all those things? *Ah-hew*, they would stand all in a line, side by side. Then they did not even take off their clothes. They would just pull out their penises. With their shoes on. On Saturdays and Sundays, they would come early, those bastards. Even during the day. *Hew--*, scary

people. They hit me because I did not do what they wanted. *Aheegoo*, he would pull out his sword and threaten me with it.”

“Among the soldiers, there were some Korean soldiers. They would give us things to eat, things like hardtacks. Even when they came to the comfort station, the Korean soldiers did not try to have sex with us. They would only spend some time with us and then leave.”

“Once a week we went to get examined. The hospital we went to was a field hospital. They looked at our lower parts. That is, they looked at us to see if we had caught a disease. I have never had anything like an STD before. Because they all use condoms. The Japs take real good care of their bodies, that I will say for them.”

Addiction

The Japs, just to gratify their *thing*, they stabbed me with a needle and put opium into my body.

“Not long after we arrived there, I started to put up a fight because I did not want to deal with men anymore.”

“[But then I had no choice,] and I had to receive men. And I started to bleed, and the blood flowed out of me like a river so that I could not even bathe. When I begged them to save me, they said they would save me, and from then on, they would give me opium. It was opium. After a shot of opium, I could not feel any pain, even while receiving men. So, on Sundays and Saturdays, I would receive five shots of opium.”

“I did not know if it felt good or not; I just knew I did not feel pain anymore. At first, it was just one shot a day, but then later, one was not enough, so I got two shots. And on Sundays and Saturdays, I got five shots.”

“They gave me shots every day. It was the owner who did it.”

“I did not know that it was opium. It was only after I was addicted that I found out. What was just one shot a day became a shot in the morning and a shot in the evening. And when I did not get a shot, *aheego* how I thought I really wanted one. That was the beginning of the addiction.”

“They were never out of opium, because of the patients. When they were injured, and the pain was too much, they gave them a shot. So, they could not have their supply run out, could they? They never ran out of opium injections.”

“I left [my hometown] at age fourteen, and time passed on the ship, so I was fifteen when I started receiving soldiers. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. When I was twenty-two years old, my country was liberated. Oh my God. And all the while, I was hooked on opium.”

“(While letting out a deep sigh) *Aheegoo*, I cannot even speak. I cannot. The Japs, just to gratify their *thing*, they stabbed me with a needle and put opium into my body.”⁶

Quinine

I thought, ‘I should die.’

“I had a near-death experience.”

“Quinine . . . the thing that you take when you contract malaria. I saved forty capsules and took them all at once so that I could die. But you know, you cannot just die whenever you want to.”

“There was a Korean person, an army doctor. I asked him for a favor. I acquired three capsules here and four capsules there. Until I had saved forty capsules. Then, I took them all at once. I did not want to live like that. I only found out later. They say that blood burst forth from my lower regions, my nose, and my mouth, just everywhere. I woke up after two days and I heard a voice. People cried out of pity for me, and the guards walked back and forth. They cried, saying, ‘*Aheegoo*, you are alive.’ That is how I knew I was alive. I woke up in two days. *Aheegoo*, they washed me down with a hose. But even though they washed me, because it was such strong medicine, I could not move my arms and legs, I could not wake up, and it was hard for me to keep my head clear. Although I tried to die, I could not do it. That is how I lived. Even now my stomach is not so good, and it is because of that.”

“Later, after a long while, I told myself, let’s at least save my life. With that thought, no matter what, I was going to live, and that was the only way I could continue living. Even though you took my body, you cannot take my heart and soul. I sure made up my mind. No matter what, I had to live. I had to live and go back home. And so it was with that thought that I survived.”

Concentration Camp

There was no ship, so I could not leave and stayed at the camp for almost a year.

⁶ Chung Seo-un has traces of opium shots in her upper right arm, which is swollen and has hardened bloody lumps like stones.

“I could not run away, I had no place to run away to. I had to know where I was before I could run away. So, if we had never been liberated, we would still be living there now. I could not even send a letter to anyone. The Great East Asian War happened. Even if the Great East Asian War had not happened, we could not send or receive letters to and from home. It was the same as if we were in jail.”

“[At the comfort station,] they always said that when we went home, they would give us military payment certificates. But when the Japs suddenly lost the war, they ran away.”

“We did not even know that the Japs had lost the war. The soldiers just did not come around anymore. Then later when I got to thinking, I knew that they had surrendered.”

“Thirteen of us went there and three died. The remaining ten people could not all climb into the dugout. They took a few people to the dugout. Later on, we found out that they tried to bury us all there. If they had let us go, they would have been in trouble later, so they said to kill us all. The Japs. Evil bastards. Among those condemned to die, I survived.”

“A Korean soldier who came [to the comfort station] sent a letter to the Allied forces after the liberation. There was a man who came to pick up the officers’ laundry, an Indonesian. The Korean soldier wrote the letter to him and told him to give it to the Allied forces asap. [So,] we got in touch with the Allied forces. And the Allied forces came quickly. Even if they were to have been just a little bit late, we would have all been dead. At the dugout.”

“The Allied forces put us in two lines as if we were entering a theater, made us come out, and wrote down everything. They categorized Japanese soldiers, Korean soldiers and *comfort girls-women*. The Koreans go there. If you were sent over there, you were going to be taken prisoner by the Allied forces. So, that is how we all came out alive. Of course, some people died.”

“So, I said, ‘I am saved.’ *Aheego*, at first, when the British people came, I was so scared. I was scared and could not understand what they were saying. The Korean soldiers told us that we had to hurry and follow them. They kept insisting that we had to go.”

“I was in a concentration camp for almost a year after the liberation. There was no ship going from the Singapore camp, so I could not leave and stayed at the camp for almost a year.”

“[One day,] they broadcasted the news. Anyone who might have the potential to be a nurse was told to come forward. So, I came forward. I and several others came forward actually. I learned how to put a bandage on, and I learned how to give out shots. Even now, I am very good at tying bandages.”

“The army doctor knew [that I was addicted to opium]. Because I told him. So, he continued to give me shots of opium.”

“That is how I obtained opium, but soon the U.N. military sent word that I should take a ship. The ship was leaving in a few days, they said. Then the army doctor gave [me] opium. 600 grams of it.”

“There was a stage [in the camp]. Someone had made the stage and played music. He was a man from Jecheon. His name was Song Nakcheon and he sang ‘The Sound of the Water Makes Me Sad.’ He was the man who sang that song. He was dragged into the army. But he performed on the stage, and anyone who wanted to sing could sing on the stage. . . . He liked me very much. He asked me to marry him after we left the camp to go back to Korea, but I said no. *Ahhew*, what would I do with stage people?”

Alcohol Smell

I clenched my teeth to bear the pain. I would hold on to the pillar until I thought I would pass out.

“I boarded a big ship and left. I arrived in Busan, but for another month (raising her voice) we were on the ship. We could not disembark. There was an outbreak of malaria in Korea. So, I stayed on the ship for a month.”

“When we left the ship, they gave me something like a ticket. It would take me all the way home.”

“When I arrived home, my mother had died and my father had died, and the house, it had been turned into a haunted house. And all the servants were scattered.”

“Maybe it was like this after I came back home. The land rights had all gone to the peasants, the people who used to work the rice paddies for us. That is what they did, the Japs. Only the house was left.”

“[Even] our home was occupied by the Japs who made it into an office and used it as a villa. And according to the stories, they sent all our antiques to Japan before they surrendered.”

“My father had been buried alive and died at the police substation.”

“Because my father had passed away like that, and I was so troubled by it, whenever I came back from visiting his grave, I would become sick for several days and could not go out. It brings back painful memories.”

“It is because I have had a hard time in the past. I always feel sorry in my heart towards my father. And so, I try to live my life as diligently as I can, but when I visit my father’s grave, my heart aches, and I suffer so much. And a sickness comes over my broken heart.”

“It is not that my father was more loving than my mother. It is just that when he died, he died such a horrible death. That is why I think of my father more.”

“When I came home, I thought about it. ‘I came all the way back to my hometown. Now, how can I still be putting [opium] into my body?’ So, I came to a decision. I broke all the syringes I had brought from the camp and threw them away, and I decided to quit opium cold turkey. *Aheego*, when it was time for the injections, my whole body would become spasmodic, and I would itch and shake all over.”

“I clenched my teeth to bear the pain. I would hold on to the pillar until I thought I would pass out. *Aheegoo*. I cannot even begin to tell you.”

“I will never forget that. Not even if I die. It took about four months to quit. I did it by myself. That alcohol smell.⁷ [How] I suffered because of that opium. I am disgusted just thinking about it. I do not even want to pass by a hospital door.”

“The head of the village told everything. How I had been taken, and how I came back. Everyone in my hometown knew. So, there is no one there who would look down on me.”

“The situation is different. Because I was not just dragged away. I went only for my father. Because I wanted to be filial to my father. People in my neighborhood knew how I felt when I went to Japan.”

“The folks in my hometown knew me well. They knew my family well because we were well known in our town. And they knew how I had gone and came back. That is why I was better regarded than your average *comfort girl-woman*.”

An Arranged Marriage

He was already married, but it turned out he could not forget me either.

“Once I came back to Korea, I only had thoughts of that man on my mind, a married man.”

“This is how we met: now, his father and my father were friends. His father said, ‘Your daughter should be my daughter-in-law.’ And my father said to the man, ‘Why, I would like to take your son as my son-in-law.’ So, there was such a promise.”

⁷ Chung Seo-un described the smell of hospital disinfectant as the smell of alcohol.

“When I came back, for about a year I was living alone at my family house in order to kick my opium habit. I lived in a place called Agyang,⁸ and he lived in Hadong-eup. He came every day on his motorcycle. And when it became evening, he would go back. He had a wife. I was twenty-four or twenty-five years old at the time. . . . [He was already married,] but it turned out he could not forget me either. So, when I came back, and he saw that I was free, he divorced the person he was married to.”

“No matter how opposed to the divorce I was, he remained stubborn, and later even his mother came to see me. She said to me, ‘Be my daughter-in-law. If I am gonna be fooled, I would rather be fooled by someone I know.’ So, that is how the marriage took place. Because I did not want to hear any criticisms that I had been in one of those places (the comfort stations), if I was put in charge of the ironing, I would iron until two or three o’clock in the morning. As a homemaker, I lived a life full of energy. Even so, it seemed like something was a little strange, like people around me were looking at me. People who knew knew the truth, but people who did not know were saying that I had been sold. People did not say that to my face. But, I lived with this kind of humiliation.”

Two Sons

‘Why did you hit me? If you were my real mother, would you have hit me?’

“The first son was eight years old, and the second son was eleven months.⁹ I took inchoate babes and raised them. I raised them. And when I raised them, I raised them well. I told them, ‘Never forget to say hello when you see a person. And always help those who are weaker than you.’ That is the kind of education I gave them.”

“The old man (my husband) suffered a stroke, and we were not in any kind of circumstance to send our kids to college. So, [I] took the older one and went up to Seoul. The older one was admitted into Seoul National University, but we did not have the money to pay for the tuition. The old man’s friend gave us money for the school uniforms. And the Hadong congressman paid for the tuition. *Ahhew*, so I put that boy into school, and I rented a small store in Seodaemun in Youngcheon with

⁸ Gyeongsangnam-do Hadong-gun Agyang-myeon (Agyang Town, Hadong County, South Gyeongsang Province).

⁹ When Chung Seo-un married her husband, he already had two children from his previous marriage.

the money I received for the school uniforms. And from his Freshman year to his Junior year, I put the older one through school by selling Korean bread.”

“I was so angry I could not contain myself. . . . Our son and the niece of the boardinghouse owner, the two of them had a thing. He did not go to school. When I gave him the carfare to go to school, he took the girl out on a date. He was girl-crazy. One day, he was writing her a note about what time to meet. Oh my God, here I am busting my butt to put him through school, and what is he doing? . . . ‘Son, what the hell do you think you are doing?’ I slapped him across the face. Then, he said to me, ‘Why did you hit me? If you were my real mother, would you have hit me?’”

“*Aheego*, what good is living when your kids act like that? So, I went straight to a pharmacy and bought a lot of quinine. I came home with it, and I said. ‘You go to school on your own, boy. I am not going to live in this world anymore. I do not want to live.’ ‘Do what you want,’ he said. So, I swallowed all the medicine. Then, I went to the hospital and tried to flush it all out. But even though it was flushed out of me, I had [already] done damage to my stomach. I had damaged my stomach once before, but now I had done it again, so what are you gonna do? This time, from the ears, the nose, the lips, and my lower parts, it gushed out. The blood. Only then did this one cry, ‘*Aheego*, mother! Mom, mom!’ But it was too late then. So, we came down to Hadong. The oldest one, he could not go to school; for a year, he could not go.”

“My body healed, and I had money left over from selling Korean bread. So, I started smuggling. At first, I did a little bit at a time, then I went big.”

“At that time, there were many kinds of Japanese contraband coming in: clothes, cosmetics, and all sorts of things. I laid it all out at the wholesale market in Jinju. I was smart when I was young. I asked the stationmaster for a favor and got off the train with a whole box full of stuff. It was all mine for the taking. There was a price I had to pay for the box. But if I was lucky, after I had given the stationmaster a few things, there would be much expensive merchandise left in the box. Things like deer antlers.”

“I made money and sent our oldest son back up to Seoul. At that time, I put him in a boardinghouse, and he finished his studies. But, that one did not turn out right. He was a genius. But he became an alcoholic. A real serious drinker, he became. He really liked drinking. It has been almost twenty years since I lost touch with him.”

“[The second one] did not want to study, so he only graduated from high school. But still, he does very well for himself now.”

“Although I have lived, I have not lived eating food that came to me easily; I have lived in suffering. Because I did not want to hear that I had come from one of those places, I made a lot of effort to live happily with my family.”

“I did not smoke there; I did not smoke when I came back to Korea either.”

“When I think about everything that I suffered there, repressed anger surges up in me. The old man had a stroke and could neither speak nor move, so what peace could I have in my heart? [Then] the old man died. After that, peace was even harder to find inside of me. It was at that moment that I started smoking.”

Old Man

The one dying just dies not knowing, but the one left behind is so pitiful, how can I leave him and die?

“I did not want to remarry, but after [the children] got married, things changed. In Hadong, the rumors were flying high. How could there be such a good relationship between a mother and son in this world? How can I express in words what it took to raise someone else’s child? But, after he got married, all that changed. So, I thought, ‘Ah, that is how it is with children born from another woman’s belly.’ *Aheegoo*, even children born of your own body pretend not to know you, so how much more with children born of someone else’s body? So, I try to understand them and their situation.”

“So, I just made up my mind. Everyone told me to remarry. What good would it do to put your faith in those good-for-nothing children? When they told me to remarry, I did not listen. But when I saw my children act the way that they did, it made my heart turn cold.”

“When I was going to [church] in Hadong, the pastor arranged the marriage between that old man and me. I was lonely and the old man was lonely. It has been almost three decades since I met him. So, that old man and I, we became destined to be together.”

“That old man is also a victim. He grew up in Japan. He was born in Korea but went to Japan. He went to middle school, high school, and college in Japan. Then, as soon as he graduated, he was drafted into the military by force during the Japanese occupation.”

“[He] had no children, but he was married.”

“Since I met that old man, I have really been putting him through the wringer.”

“I have done nothing [for the old man]. He is a very good breadwinner. When he was young, he worked as a doctor at the Busan hospital. But still, he says the past is to be buried. There is no need for the past.”

“He is very good to me. The old man cares a lot about his wife and does not drink and does not smoke. It is me that does the smoking. Since neither of us

has children, we were lonely. So, it is just the two of us. There is no one else for me except the old man. Even in the middle of the night, if I say, ‘*Ah-ee-ya,*’ he gets right up, that old man. So, when I become sick, I think, ‘*Ahhew,* How can I leave him behind and die first?’ And I shed tears at the thought of it.”

“I do not know how to pray. [But,] every day, I pray that God calls us two at the same time and that God heals my body since it is the way it is. We feel sorry for each other. The one dying just dies not knowing, but the one left behind is so pitiful, how can I leave him and die? The old man feels like that, and I feel like that.”

Woolhwabyung

So, if I die, I cannot die with my eyes closed.

“I went to Beijing¹⁰ and fought with the Japs’ Minister of Foreign Affairs. I said, ‘let me meet that bastard,’ so we were supposed to meet at eight o’clock at night at the hotel where he was staying. So, I went. I went together with Pastor Kwon.¹¹ I could not believe that my speech flowed smoothly. On that evening, my words all just spat out at him, but after I had said all that I had to say, I felt much better. I only told him exactly what I wanted to say. Whenever it opens its mouth, why does your government only tell lies, only lies? Here, just now, you would say, ‘Yes, I will do so.’ Then you turn around and say something else.”

“The Japanese government is not the only bad thing. Our government needs to exert some effort and quickly tackle this problem actively, but our Korean bastards are too busy fighting over positions to even glance at our problem. This is what is making me so angry. Just because Japan gave us thirty million won,¹² they think it is all settled. They should all die, you sons of bitches! You are not worth the price of a cigarette, the lot of you. . . . *Ahhew,* I want this problem to be resolved before I die. Then, I can close my eyes and die. Before I die, you, come and apologize to us, and even if it is just one won,¹³ make reparations to us. That is all I want. If I die, I go back to dust. So, if I die, I cannot die with my eyes closed.”

10 Chung Seo-un represented the Korean survivors of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

11 Reverend Kwon Hee-soon was the chair of the International Cooperation Committee of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

12 Thirty million won in 1992 is worth approximately \$44,062.00 today.

13 One won in 1992 is worth approximately one cent today.

"I have *woolhwabyung*.¹⁴ Even the night before last, I had to run to the hospital in the middle of the night. When the anger comes up all of a sudden like it does, I feel like my house is falling down, and I cannot live. I am anxious. My heart races. That is what I have."

"Because I suffered so much during the years I have been alive, my body is in pain. And now I am suffering because of that. *Aheego*."

"I do not have just one illness. My heart is not good, I have diabetes, and I have osteoporosis so my whole body aches. After having seen pictures that were taken, my bones have many cracks."

"I received an IV [last year], and I think that they did it wrong at the hospital. Either the nurses stuck me the wrong way or gave me a bad shot because blood poured out of my nose and mouth. At the time, I had no idea what was going on. I forgot everything. The doctor said that it was not going to work, that I should prepare myself for death."

"[The old man] took me to the emergency room of a big hospital. . . . And there they even reserved the mortuary. But, I woke up. The old man saved me, I tell you. But sometimes, when I am sick, I think that it would have been better if I had died then so that I would not be suffering like this now."

"I do not want to be born [again]. Living in this world was as vain and hard as walking on thorny paths. What would I possibly do if later I were to be born [again]? Looking back on it, the fact that I am alive now is like a dream. Because even for a dream, it was an utterly terrifying nightmare."

Interviewer's Commentary: Nightmare

Kim Dong-hee

While I was collecting data for the Korean Council, I happened to see a collection of materials relating to Chung Seo-un, including a newspaper clipping, a photo of a demonstration, and a video, among other things, that Chung Seo-un herself had collected. Because, of all the *comfort girls-women* for the Japanese military, she was the first I had seen who had organized the evidence of her activities in such a systematic manner, and I was very curious to know what kind of person she was. Also, through others who came to know her, I was able to learn the story of how, before her health suddenly deteriorated in August 2001, she had participated actively in the campaign for resolving the issue of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, which included sharing her

¹⁴ A mental or emotional disorder as a result of repressed anger or stress.

testimony at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and at colleges in the Gyeongnam region and in Japan. After hearing this, I wanted to meet Chung Seo-un even more, and when I joined the research team, I chose Chung Seo-un without hesitation.

Chung Seo-un lived with her second husband for thirty years in a rental apartment on the outskirts of Jinhae. Her husband was indeed a victim of forced conscription during his youth while studying abroad in Japan, and he is still involved in a group movement against such victimization. The old couple lived while embracing each other's past pain. When I went to conduct the first interview, there was a moment of joy in being able to meet the person that I had wanted to meet, but at the sight of her tight lips and expressionless face that was unlike what I had seen in her photo, I shrank back a little. To me, who was at a loss as to how to begin because of the awkwardness of first meetings and her expression, she began telling her story in a natural manner: "You came to listen to my story, so I should tell it." Starting with "I was taken away at the age of fourteen in December," she recounted her memories, focused around the time she was dragged off. For an hour and a half, in what seemed like a single breath, she unraveled her story: the time of her arrest, her life at the concentration camp around the time of her return home, and her current life of hardship. She was very proud throughout the interview. To the point of erasing from my thoughts the notion that it must be so painful to wrest from her mind the memories that she would rather forget, Chung Seo-un made it clear that it was not by her own wrongdoing or fate that she had been sentenced to suffering.

However, after the first interview, something changed in Chung Seo-un. When I said that I was coming down to Jinhae for a second interview, she told me that, after my visit, she had not been able to sleep well and has been having nightmares in which the ceiling is collapsing, and she said in an extremely irritated voice, "Why do you need to come here?" and she yelled at me not to come. When I went down to Jinhae for the second time, she was lying in bed, and it was hard to imagine the Chung Seo-un with the tidy house and the neat clothes of the first visit. Even given my lack of culinary expertise, I tried to make the *cheonggukjang* that she likes; I even massaged her for over two hours; in addition, I prayed that her health would recover quickly and that the interview would go well. However, Chung Seo-un's story did not develop that much from the first time she told it, and when I tried to ask her for a little bit more detail, all she said was this: "I have already told you everything. Why are you asking me again? I cannot be bothered!"



Chung Seo-un.

Her answer to my question in the second interview was that it is always burdensome even just to pay for all the medication for the old couple on a small government grant, and this would segue to the fact that there is no part of her body that does not hurt. I could understand her complaints and grumbling, but there was a limit to what I could deal with. If the distance between us was short, it would have been possible to recover the relationship even if I had to visit her more often and listen to all of her complaints; however, due to the distance and time constraints, the second and third interviews did not go smoothly and remained superficial.

Before I went for the fourth interview, I carefully broached the subject with Chung Seo-un that if the oral contents were insufficient, her story could be removed from the book. Was her subsequent change in attitude because I said that her story could be removed from the book? She welcomed me, who had taken seven hours to arrive from Seoul because of the heavy traffic on the highway on my way to the fourth interview, asking why I had come so late and saying that she was worried. After we ate the lunch/dinner that her husband had made, her attitude different from the second and third interviews, she began her story actively. For five hours, with the help of cigarettes, she told the stories of her married life, after the liberation, with a man who was already married to another, of her struggles to raise another's children from suckling babe to

college student, and of being abandoned by these children. If I asked her about specific situations, she would say, “I cannot remember. Why do you need to know something like that?” So, we did skip over some things, but it was a great achievement for her to have given me different content than what was in her past testimonies. Only when it was past eleven o’clock at night, with a cigarette in her mouth, did Chung Seo-un end her story, saying, “This is the real end. I have nothing more to tell you.”

She arranged my bed in an empty room, saying that it would be difficult for me to go back to Seoul because it was so late at night. Unable to sleep and joyous that she was able to actively start her story unlike in her two previous interviews, I was preparing the questions for the next interview, when suddenly I heard a loud scream. In the room of Chung Seo-un that I peered into out of astonishment and fright, there she was, screaming painfully in the dark, and there also was her husband, who was continuously massaging her, saying, “It’s okay, it’s okay.” That night I was haunted by an unrecognizable scream, which I could not tell was real or a dream. The next morning, she pushed me out in a hurry. Thinking that more interviews would be too much, I set out from the house, leaving her with only a wish for her good health and a promise to call her when I went back to Seoul.

I could find in Chung Seo-un’s story a weariness toward a past about which she hated the slightest reminder; however, I could not find any self-blame or shame for her past life as a *comfort girl-woman*. She asserted that the shame belongs not to herself but to the Japanese military and the Japanese government that made and used the comfort stations and the Korean government that has yet to solve this problem and is only watching for the reactions of the Japanese government like nervous sycophants. After the first meeting, I thought that Chung Seo-un would be able to overcome the hurt of her past life to some extent, more so than the other *comfort girls-women*. But as my meetings with her went on, I realized that the fear and pain hidden by the façade of strength are repeatedly manifested in her body.

I was not able to have any more interviews with Chung Seo-un. If I had not heard her scream that night, I would have gone to Jinhae in an attempt to listen to her story at least one more time. After I realized that her past scars were not all on her body and that she was living with bigger scars in her heart, I did not have the courage to ask her anything more of her. All I could ask was how she was by phone.

Although she seemed independent and courageous, ultimately, she was not able to untie and open up what she kept bound inside, and she has been living with pain in her heart. Under the circumstances that she had been given, she diligently made a life for herself. She was deceived by the words of the

village foreman – who said that her father, who was imprisoned for protesting against Japan, would be released – and was dragged off to become a *comfort girl-woman*. She became addicted to opium while living the life of a *comfort girl-woman*, but she clenched her teeth and kicked her opium habit after going back to Korea. Fearing that people would point fingers at her for having been a *comfort girl-woman*, she lived harder than others did and sacrificed herself to become the perfect housewife and mother. Taking the place of her sick husband, she became a smuggler, Korean bread seller, and deer antler business-woman just so that she could send her husband's son to college. Moreover, after she registered herself as a *comfort girl-woman*, she was at the vanguard of the campaign to resolve the problem of Japanese military *comfort girls-women*.

However, even though she also suffered greatly after the Japanese colonial rule and liberation of Korea, in her life story, there was only room for one story: the story of a character named Chung Seo-un, a former Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*. Her life outside of that story was regarded as unnecessary, incidental chaff. She has proudly revealed her life as a *comfort girl-woman*, and the rest of her life, only as it relates to that story, as if she had already prepared the scenario. I think that after registering as a *comfort girl-woman*, through the many testimonies that she shared and the interviews with the press and broadcasting stations that she did over the years, she got the idea that the public wanted to listen to her only as a *comfort girl-woman*. Often, she would stop in the middle of saying something and sigh and say, “How can I say all those things like that?” I think that I now know a little bit better what she meant. She has memories beyond what she can tell anyone. More dominant than and beyond the part of the healed life of a *comfort girl-woman* is the part of her life that could not be healed, a part of her life that comes to her as nightmares. When she will be able to become free of those nightmares is something I do not think I can pinpoint. All I can do is wish that she does not have nightmares anymore.

In October 2003, Chung Seo-un was hospitalized after a fall. Even while looking at her in a full-body cast, I firmly believed that her life would not end so easily and that she would get up again. But after she was hospitalized, the more time passed, the weaker she became. I could not admit it, but I had to prepare her for the end. When asked if there was anything she wanted to say, Chung Seo-un said, “Please obtain a clear and certain judgment for our problem. Get a decisive apology from the Japs. It is so unfair that I might die without seeing this problem resolved . . . ” That was her last testament. In February 2004, when the entire country was in shock over this issue of *comfort girls-women*, Chung Seo-un's life ended. Now, she does not have to have nightmares anymore.

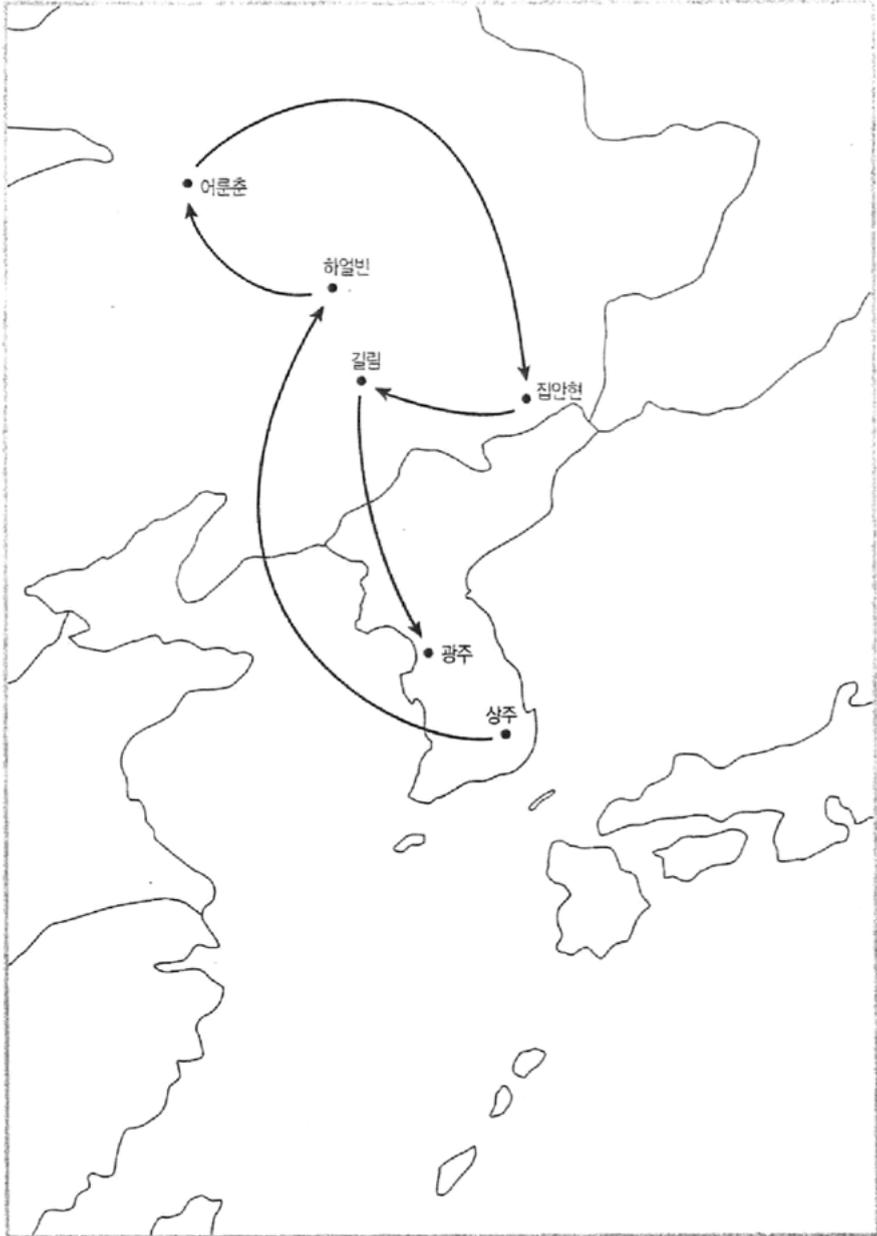
“When I Try to Speak of What Is Buried in My Heart, It Feels Like My Heart Is Bursting”

Kang Il-chul



Kang Il-chul.

- 1928 Born in Gyeongsangbuk-do Sangju
- 1943 (Age 16) Taken from her home and conscripted as a *comfort girl-woman*
Went to Mudanjiang comfort station via Andong, Sinuiju, and Changchun
- 1945 (Age 18) Rescued by Koreans in early summer
Took refuge in Elunchun
After the liberation, got married in Ji'an near Jilin City (first marriage)
- 1946 (Age 19) Gave birth to a daughter who died shortly after
- 1949 (Age 22) Worked as a nurse at a private hospital in Ji'an
- 1951 (Age 24) Worked as a nurse at the second hospital in Jilin City
- 1955 (Age 28) Got married (second marriage)
Gave birth to two sons and one daughter
- 1988 (Age 61) Visited Korea with the help of the Red Cross
- 1998 (Age 71) Attempted to restore her nationality after visiting Korea
- 2000 (Age 73) Permanent return to Korea
Recovered her citizenship
- 2004 (Age 77) Living at the House of Sharing in Gyeonggi-do Gwangju



Kang Il-chul's route: Gyeongbuk Sangju – Elunchun – Ji'an – Jilin City – Gyeonggi-do Gwangju.

“I am a member of a Full Gospel Church.”

“I am not in China, but [God] is looking after all my grandchildren’s education, so I can rest my mind a little easier.”

“It is also because I am a widow: you know that God always pays a lot of attention to widows’ children. Widows are not at all comfortable with receiving sympathy from others. Even though the wealthy bring a lot of money [to the church], widows do not get as much attention.”

“I have gotten a lot of answers to my prayers.”

“Even now, when I pray, I sometimes ask God for my parents to go to heaven as I would.”

The Youngest Daughter

‘*Aheego*- but you are a big baby. At your age, you are still piggyback riding on your sister.’

“My mother told me that I was the youngest out of twelve children.”

“Even though I was the youngest out of twelve children, [my mother] said that she had a lot of affection for me, for me.”

“My dad’s beard is (making a shape of a beard with her hands) this long. While I was playing with my mom and dad, my mom would say to me, ‘See how long a beard your dad has? Now you go and pull it.’ Then, I would grab his beard and stretch it out.”

“Then my dad would say that it hurt and fiercely chase me around. But he did not hit me. I have never been beaten by my mom or dad.”

“When my older brothers came home after being out, my parents might not have brought anything back for their sons, but they surely would have brought back something for me.”

“The school we went to was located across the mountains. There was a lot of snow at that time. At that time, it was not as hot as it is now, and snow came down like crazy, so I would grab the trees as I went up, and naturally, I would just slip and slide. So, my older sisters gave me a piggyback ride to school.”

“When [my fellow primary school classmate] first saw me, he said, ‘*Aheego*- but you are a big baby. At your age, you are still piggyback riding on your sister. You are such a big baby.’”

“I learned Korean until the second grade, but after that, I was not allowed to speak Korean. I could not speak Korean. If I spoke in Korean, [the Japanese teacher] would slap me on my ear.”

“I did not graduate.”

“At grade four, I left without having graduated.”

A Policeman with a Sword

I was so frightened that I was shaking like a scared dog, and I did not know what was going on.

“The head of a village had already spread the rumor.”

“They did not say *comfort girls-women*, they called it public conscription. The public conscription of *cheonyeo*.”

“At first, I went to another place and hid. I was at my mom’s friend’s house for a little while.”

“Because I was the youngest, everyday, I was in the habit of sleeping next to my mother, in her embrace, touching her breast. So, I thought I could not stay in that house.”

“When I was at their house, I thought of my mom and cried a lot, so they sent word to my mom. And so what could she say but tell me to come back. So, I came back.”

“I came back to my home, but I could not even see my mom.”

“The adults were not at home. Our house was situated a little away from the other houses.”

“One Japanese man came, and one Korean man came.”

“So, one with a sword (a policeman) came, and a man in yellow clothes (a soldier) came.”

“I was scared. *Aheego-*, whenever I saw a man with a sword, I would become so afraid that I would tremble like a leaf, and so I frantically hid at that time. I was so scared of policemen.”

“They threw a piece of paper into the house before they left.¹ When my nephew tried to stop them, they grabbed him hard and pushed him so that he fell backward. . . . Even when there were no adults in the house.”

“So, it happened on the day I came home.”

“My mom drove out one of my brothers. My [big] brother was not in the army, but there was another place to be conscripted into. She tried to send him there. My younger of the two older brothers was told to go to the army, but he

¹ When the policeman and soldier took her, they threw a piece of paper with the name of Kang Il-chul written on it into the room.

ran away to Japan, so he was okay. So, the two males had to go. Then, next, it was my turn to go.”²

“At first, they did not tell me where we were going; it was the town’s leader who said that we would go to a place where we would weave, a place where we would weave cloth. . . . We had no idea what they did there. Because we were too young then, very young in years.”

“I was sixteen. I left when I was sixteen years old.”

“I had to get a ride in Sangju. Even then, it was Sangju City.”

“They loaded us up on the car where you would normally put your baggage and such.”

“Some of the girls were sick or something, so they just lay down. They may have been ill or frightened; I did not know.”

“And then we went to Gimcheon and got on the train.”

“We were loaded into a place without seats where they loaded up the luggage. We were taken back only after we had run away. After we had hidden somewhere. So-, we were treated badly. Even when I tried to see the outside, they made it difficult for me to do that.”

“I was given some things like rice balls and Japanese radish. Those were all I got, and they did not go down easy.”

“I was so frightened that I was shaking like a scared dog, and I did not know what was going on. We did not even know that we were hungry, and all we did was look at each other and cry. Wondering where we were headed.”

“To North Korea to Sinuiju to Andong, yes. We did not know where we had gone to. I do not know how or why, but with my mind frantic, I looked out for a little bit, and I saw a lot of Chinese people, not our Korean people, and they were all speaking Chinese.”

Changchun

I did not do much except, what was it, I did the laundry for them.

“At first, we were traveling, then we stopped at Changchun and stayed there for a little while. We were there for more than twenty days.”

“At the time, including me, there were six people.”

“Inside, the armies stood like this. They were standing on both sides of me. So, how could one as small as me who could not even speak the language get

² Kang Il-chul thinks that she was taken away because her brothers were not at home.

out? If only I knew the language, maybe. Or if I had been there for a long time, I would have done something to be able to leave.³ We were scared to death, and just looking at them in the face was enough to make me faint. So, I had no choice but to live like that.”

“For our meals, what was it, they gave us corn cake. That is what they gave us. It was our first time eating it and we did not like it much. With white rice, with rice, if you make rice cake, it sure tastes good. So, it did not feel as though we ate anything. They would only give us soup without much in it and tasteless corn cake. Otherwise, they made rice with sorghum. Sorghum is not sticky, especially Chinese sorghum. It is the kind that is not sticky and you cannot make rice cakes out of it.”

“What did I [do] there? I did the laundry for them. For the soldiers. I did laundry with the people who remained.”

“Things like military uniforms and socks, things like that. I only hung out the laundry. [Doing laundry] is work for middle-aged women. There were about ten [middle-aged women].”

The Life of a *Comfort Girl-Woman*

I was all torn and hurt. I guess it was because it was torn that I hurt.

“After the twenty days, next we went to Harbin and then to Mudanjiang (Mudan River).”

“When we arrived there, it was August; in September, well, it snowed there.”

“At that time, I was not very tall, since I went there when I was a student. I looked after three of them, you know, those people who cannot see.⁴ I took care of three people, but then another person came. So, that made it four. It was very difficult to look after them all. By myself. So, they sent another woman. And the two of us were looking after them, but one [blind man] left a little earlier than the rest. . . . So, since there were now three again, they made me take care of them by myself.”

³ She stayed with the army in Changchun for about ten to twenty days, and the women who had been doing the laundry for a long time were able to go in and out of the building within the comfort station.

⁴ Kang Il-chul arrived at the Mudanjiang comfort station and nursed Japanese soldiers who had lost their sight before she lived as a *comfort girl-woman*.

“So I had to do everything: I had to prepare the meals and take them to the bathroom, everything. That is, I had to put their clothes on too, and I also had to feed meals to those who were really having a hard time eating by themselves.”

“After sending [blind patients] to Japan, I was assigned to work as a *comfort girl-woman*.”

“It was after the liberation that I got my period. So I did not know about it [before that] because I did not have it. I was just like a man. I was clueless. At that time, I was young, and not so bright.”

“Then I became an adult. I was not even an adult yet, so what did I know? I knew nothing. So, that is why I feel the injustice of it more.”

“Since the [penis] did not go in and something wrong happened down there, it hurt so.”

“I was all torn and hurt. I guess it was because it was torn that I hurt.”

“So, I was given a shot because they were afraid that I would contract an [STD]. . . . It was shot #606.”

“And they also gave you something to wash with beforehand. If you did not clean yourself with the medical solution, it would be infected and rot, which would be hard to cure.”

“The color [of the medicine] was purplish – a reddish-purple color.”

“I was young and the soldiers would leave almost immediately, so people of higher rank came to me.”

“They do not go to a woman who has been around a while for fear of contracting a disease, that is, the high-ranking officers. . . . If you contract an illness like that, it is very hard to fix.”

“The women who had been around a long time, the head honchos did not go to them. It is like how all men want to marry a virgin; they do not want to marry women who had been married before. They say that marrying a virgin is better, even if it is for the second or the third time, right? For people with money, this one thing is easy to get. If you are of a high rank, you can do whatever you want.”

“Even with your own man whom you live with, sometimes you do not feel like having sex. That is the hardest, the hardest.”

“I was hit here (on the top of the head), and for a very long time, I had no hair here. I still have nosebleeds. So . . . I thought I was just going to die. My face would go as white as a sheet.”

“The room was this small. And they pushed me down in that small place.”

“What reason did they have? If you did not do what they told you to do, they hit you like that.”

“Uh-, I was bleeding from here, and it became all swollen. My face was all swollen too.”

“If I tried to go to the hospital for treatment, that man [the high-ranking officer] would come down. Because he was a minister. (Pointing to the shoulder) It was a man who had stars here. He was a man who had three stars. Since I was hit by him, the man would fall in rank.”

“So, they did not take me to a big hospital and made a nurse and a doctor come instead.”

“The soldiers also had to bring tickets to be entertained. If they did not bring tickets, they were not received. That is how it was. Only if they had bought tickets there could they come in. They sold them at the place where the army was. Even a person who stood in line could not enter the rooms without a ticket.”

“They did not come that much. The most that came was . . . about eight old people a day.”

“As for money, it was the ethnic Koreans living in China who would give you a little. . . . Out of the Japanese people, the one who hit me gave me some money.”

“There were ten-won⁵ coins. . . . And there were five-jeon⁶ coins, coins with a hole (simulating the shape of a coin by hand) like this.”

“At that time, ten won was big money.”

“And sometimes they would bring me some tasty things to eat.”

“No one could spend [the money]. We could not go anywhere.”

“Barbed wire was set out all around. And since I was young and had not been there for very long, they never let me out. The old women went out with the Japanese people including the generals, but we could not even think about going out.”

Mr. Kim

Maybe I will meet him again someday. I think in my gut that I will meet him again.

“And I had typhoid fever.”

“Because I was sick from the illness, and because my head was hurt, I had a lot of fever. And since I was running a very high fever, I kept wanting to drink water. . . . I closed my eyes but could not clear my head. I was so out of it, and

⁵ Ten won in 1943–1945 is worth approximately \$61.00 today.

⁶ Five jeon in 1943–1945 is worth approximately \$0.30 today. One won is 100 jeon.

when I could focus my mind a little bit, I felt like I would die of thirst. As soon as I drank some water, I felt a lot better.”

“Because it was typhoid fever, the fever was rising. It was an epidemic. In the olden times in Korea, if the disease passed through, everyone in the neighborhood would die. They would all die. That was the kind of sickness it was.”

“I had a high fever. So, people called it a head-aching disease. There were several people, maybe about eight people, some lying down in the car, some sitting down. They were taken to be burned.”

“To burn them. To burn them in a fire.”

“So, they dug a hole, put the firewood in it, and doused it with gasoline; then, it just burned. They just threw people in there. . . . They threw me in there, but I was thrown in there last, so I was on top.”⁷

“Four people went [to burn the sick people]: one Korean man and [three Japanese people].”

“Only the two people on top survived.”

“There was a Korean man among the soldiers.”⁸

“The man in the comfort station was Mr. Kim. He was the person who was contacting the Korean Independence Army.”

“He said to me that we will be liberated soon, no matter what these bastards (the Japanese soldiers) are doing now.”

“And then, Mr. Kim beat up and killed two Japanese people. Beat up and killed them, he did, but I do not know whether one of them lived or died. . . . He kicked him hard, but I do not know if he was dead or alive. Who cares. I saw him fall. He was shooting off a gun. But we do not know, because we were in pain all over and had a fever of forty degrees.”

“So, Mr. Kim contacted [the other soldiers of the Korean Independence Army]. [The Korean soldiers that were contacted] carried us on their backs and put us in a cave in the mountains. They said blood squirted out of my head like a bullet might be fired from a gun.”

“When I asked after I was better, what was it that they said? They said that [Mr. Kim] went to Baekdu Mountain. Baekdu Mountain is [known as] Changbai Mountain in Chinese.”

7 At the time in 1945, typhoid fever broke out in the Mudanjiang comfort station, and the Japanese transported infected people to the mountains on trucks to burn them. Kang Il-chul said she was able to survive because she was the last one to be thrown onto the firewood.

8 Kang Il-chul remembers that there was a Korean, Kim, in the comfort station, who was a soldier of the Korean Independence Army, disguised as an officer of the comfort station, and who hid the fact that he was a soldier of the Korean Independence Army.

“[The soldiers of the Korean Independence Army who took care of me] said to me that he went to Changbai Mountain and would come back in a few days.”

“That man said that when we were liberated, he would come to our house, to Sangju where we lived, and live there too. The man thought a lot- about me.”

“[Mr. Kim] told me that he would seek retribution from these bastards someday. He said he would seek revenge, but I did not know [then] what kind of revenge he was talking about. I know now.”

“The man, he went to Changbai Mountain, and then I was not able to meet with him again. You never know. Maybe I will meet him again someday. I think in my gut that I will meet him again.”

“Those bastards (the Japanese soldiers) were something else. But [the Korean Independence Army] killed the Japs. So, we went to the border [to avoid the Japanese soldiers]. The place was called Elunchun.”⁹

“I was wandering around with no shoes on my feet. I peeled the bark off the trees and made clothes to wear. That is how I made most of the journey. There was a secluded place near the mountain where, when I looked around, there were fish jumping in and out of the water. So, the men (the soldiers of the Korean Independence Army) caught the fish and brought them back.”

“So, I became a little better, oh, what was that, and I transported some things a little bit.”

“I took a note with me, I did, [and] hid it. I brought it to a remote house where a father and a child lived, and when I brought it to the house, they would take it from there to another place. In this way, we used to send [messages] for three or four months.”

“Let me explain how we would do it: you know those burlap sacks. And in there would be a big hoe or a pickaxe. With a bent blade like this, like this. We would put it inside there.”

“When I went to that house, they would catch a chicken and we would eat it. We would put some roots used for medicine in the sack to make it look like a sack for medicinal roots.”

“I would wear a towel like this and go with a man as if we were gathering medicinal herbs, and we would come and go as we pleased.”

“After three months of that, the news came to us that we had been liberated. Then those (the Korean Independence Army) who were in northern region were searched out so that they could come back to Korea. I do not know if they found them or not. . . . There were a lot of Koreans when we came out to the Jilin. So, I stopped there for a little while, and then I went to Ji’an where, if I crossed the

⁹ Elunchun is located in the forest near northeastern Heilongjiang in northeastern China.

river, I would be in North Korea. . . . Even so, I could not live there for long, and I ended up going back to the Chilgu in Ji'an area. That is how it turned out."

First Husband

He said that when the roads opened up, he would go with me to my hometown and live with me there. He was very good at heart.

"At that time, there were no bags, no nothing. I packed up a few of these (pointing to clothes around the place) in a wrapping cloth and brought them with me, and I did not have [much] money either. Anyhow, there was no place to put the money. I was wearing a skirt, and so I took what little money I had. . . . I wrapped it in a piece of cloth . . . and used that like a pillow when I went to sleep. I do not know when they took it, but when I got up, everything I had wrapped up in my wrapping cloth – like my clothes and everything else – was gone. The money too, there was not a coin left. So, the man who came with me sold me again. Again."

"[I was sold] to someone from the Roh family. The grandma of the house was a North Korean woman. Even though they were North Koreans, in this family, everyone had gone to China since the time of their grandma, and either did not know any of their relatives at home or did not have any at all. Still, they were all North Koreans. The family bought me with money. . . . During the three years of farming I did for the family, I ate the food that they let me have."

"There was a son in the family. During the time of the Japanese occupation, he was a junior high school student. At a Japanese school."

"The man was tall and was very handsome. So, I had a soft spot in my heart for him, and he was a very good man. He said that when the roads opened up, he would go with me to my hometown and live with me there. He was very good at heart."

"I married into the family."¹⁰

"My husband treated me well. If [my mother-in-law] were mean to me, he would hate it, and there would be a fight between my mother-in-law and my husband. Yes, they sure did."

"I was cooking some rice, and the rice was boiling, and so I could not leave when I was called. While [my father-in-law] was drinking, he opened the door and said, 'Bring your *omani*.'¹¹ He called [my mother-in-law] *omani*. That man

¹⁰ Kang Il-chul did farm work at Roh's house and married Roh's eldest son.

¹¹ Mother or mother-in-law in the Pyeongan-do dialect.

of Pyeongan-do. He said, ‘Why aren’t you bringing your omani? Why aren’t you?’ What was it, he took the military boot of the Japanese army, raised it over me – me, who was only fanning the fire to cook the rice in the corner – and hit [me with the boot] for not going, at which time, this tooth broke off. So, my mouth (sticking her lips out) became like this. Then, my husband came. After returning home and seeing me, he asked, ‘Why is your tooth in that sorry state?’ So, I said it was because I did not go fast enough to fetch his mother when I was told to. The rice was boiling, and I had to do something to the fire before I left it or else how could I go? I told him that it was because I did not go and bring [his mother] that he did this. When I said this to him, [my husband] frantically said, ‘Hurry, go. Go to my eldest uncle’s house. Go to his house and stay there.’ His eldest uncle’s house was nearby. He told me to go. Because he kept telling me to go, I went, even before preparing the rice and setting the table. Then, his mom (my mother-in-law) came carrying one of her sons on her back (at that time she was in her thirties). When she came carrying her baby on her back, because she was still young, my husband said, ‘Look at that. Look at what he did to her with the boot. What are people in the neighborhood going to say? If you are going to be a parent, you have to be a good parent. She does not have even relatives or anything here.’ When he attacked his father by saying that this family would fare better if [his father] treated me better than his own children, and demanded to know why he had done this, his mother said, ‘Hey, you, son-of-a-bitch.’ In Pyeongan-do, they often use the term son-of-a-bitch. She said, ‘Hey, you, son-of-a-bitch. How can you say that to a drunken man? You are still wet behind the ears. You are too young to talk back to your father like that, even if it is to defend your wife.’”

“Even before fall came along, my husband went to the army in July. There was no choice; he had to go. It was because there was a big fight between the National Party and the Communists.”¹²

“After the liberation, there was a fight between the Communist Party in China and Taiwan. That is when he went out there and died.”

“At that time, my child (a child born to my first husband and me) was taken ill. She would not have died from pneumonia if she could have had just one or three to four injections. She had measles, which developed into pneumonia.”

“So, she died. Even though my baby was sick, they did not let me take her to the hospital, and they did not give me any money. So, my baby . . . even when she was about to die, I could not buy her a lousy scoop of ice cream because I had no money. I could not even tell whether my child- was dying or not

¹² The part of the Chinese Civil War that took place from 1946 to 1949.

because I myself was so young. [My mother-in-law's] parents lived in the same neighborhood, and she went to them and did not come back even when it became dark out. I did not make the rice. How could I? My child was sick.”

“She ground her teeth furiously. My child did. Then she slowly closed her eyes. After she was dead, I covered her with a quilt like this. The mother-in-law came in carrying her child on her back and asked me, ‘How is the child?’ I was still and did not say a word. The father-in-law also came in with her.”

A Nurse

I went to a big Chinese hospital and worked at a place where they treated people's eyes.

“The head of the village said to me, ‘If you stay in this household, it might just kill you. All you do is work, and in the summer, you walk around barefoot because you have no shoes.’ I suffered a lot living like this.”

“What can I say here. Uh- in a remote village . . . the village leader said, ‘I will introduce you to a place. It is a small hospital where my relative works in Jilin City.’”

“I went there and did my work. I did it. I gave shots too. It was my first time giving shots, but I had no problems. This was because I saw him (the doctor who treated the blind people at the Mudanjiang comfort station) doing it.”

“I was in a private hospital for a while, learning how to treat patients, and then I went to a big hospital because there were not enough people there.”

“I went to a big Chinese hospital and worked at a place where they treated people's eyes. I worked at the eye clinic and then went to the dental center. It was a big hospital, but it was a hospital that was established together with a dental center. Our hospital was the second-best hospital in Jilin City, China.”

“When the doctors did not come, I looked at the patients. There was one chief person in charge of the ophthalmology department, where they treat eyes, one chief in charge of the ear department and one chief in charge of dentistry; there was one person in charge of each department. The chief who had come to our dental department could not pull out teeth and could not administer treatments. But because I was a quick visual learner, I could do all the pulling and knew what medicines to apply where.”

“While people who had just graduated were working with me for a year, a person had to pull out a tooth, but instead of pulling out the tooth that was hurting, he pulled out one that was not hurting. But, the chief could not take care of this matter, so without him knowing, I took care of it.”

“I told the patient, ‘Please bear with me. This person is a young man and a person with a future. If you do a good turn, a good turn will come to your kids.’ So, he turned a blind eye but did not pay. I asked him to think of it as doing me a favor. He thought I was amazing, that doctor.”

“I was a head nurse, so I was higher up than regular nurses. In rank. There was a doctor of internal medicine and a departmental head, and I received more money than them, I did. It is a college student who becomes the head of the department of internal medicine. Above him, there were a director and a chief. And there were also head nurses in the hospital rooms. There was more than one head nurse. There were several.”

“If you were better at doing things, for example, giving these shots better than others, then you became a head nurse. There had to be a little bit of this ability. But, you have to be more than just good at your work. If you could not speak well or if you were a little awkward, you could not make it.”

“I went to work, carrying one baby on my back and holding the hands of the two kids,¹³ slipping on the sheets of ice and falling over. It was very far away. It was hard for three or four people to climb into the car (public transportation) together. The car was tiny. When the car came, some men just pushed up their heads to make an opening and went up.”

“So, I was more distressed than anyone else. I had to arrive at 5 o’clock in the morning when others could arrive there at 5:30 a.m.”

“If I went to the mountain to get medicinal herbs, I had a hard time since I had a son whom I had to feed regularly. Because I had to feed my baby, I brought the baby on my back. And when I brought my baby, they (the nurses who worked together with me) took care of the baby, and I looked for the medicinal herbs.”

“My daughter entered the hospital where I was working instead of me.”

“[My daughter] must have been about nineteen.”¹⁴

“Because the officers said that [children] could not replace their parents, I left the hospital saying I was seriously sick to help my daughter so that she could work in my position at the hospital. If not, I would have had to work three or four more years.”

“I had no choice but to leave my job for my child. If I did not, my daughter would not have had a job, and I did not want her to meet a bad person while working here and there. So, I gave up my position at work.”

¹³ Kang Il-chul remarried, while she was a nurse, and gave birth to one girl and two boys.

¹⁴ It is estimated that Kang Il-chul worked in the hospital from 1949 to 1980, when her daughter turned nineteen. She intentionally left work to let her daughter replace her in her position.

“If I had not done so, I would have made a lot of money because I had a long service record.”

Betrayal

I cannot forgive his betraying me like that.

“When I was at the hospital, what was it, the woman at the drugstore introduced me.”

“[My second husband was] a Korean man. He also grew up in someone else’s house because he had no mother and father.”

“My baby’s father was very- handsome. Haven’t you ever seen the face of Kim Il Sung? He had more teeth than Kim Il Sung, and when he smiled widely, everyone said he looked so cool. Everyone who saw him said he was handsome. Still, there was a price to pay for his looks.”

“A crazy bitch and a crazy bastard, that is what my second husband and the woman he had an affair with were like.”

“Even though he earned money, he did not bring it home to me; he and other women would spend it eating and carousing around together. I was very hurt by that.”

“All he wanted to do was drink, and the only people that he liked were his friends. Even if he were to leave me, I would rather that he met someone better than me. But she was short and had a dark complexion. That is the kind of woman he got to run around with.”

“I would be okay with you seeing another woman; it would be okay as long as you brought home the money. You can just go and live there. I have three children, and I have to see them through their studies. So, just go-.’ Even though I said this, he did not go, and he went there to sleep and came home only at around five or six in the morning.”

“Right after I had a wedding ceremony, I had a baby, and after a year and a half later I was pregnant again with the child’s younger sibling, a boy. And that woman’s [baby] was the same age as my second child. If I gave birth to my child in July, she gave birth in the 11th month of the lunar calendar. He saw the birth of two sons that year, that man did. So, just imagine how I must have felt.”

“Even so, I thought maybe he would mend his ways once he saw his son, but he did not mend his ways. So, at last, I got divorced. He asked for it, so I gave it to him.”

“I just do not want to see him, not even in a dream. I cannot forgive his betraying me like that.”

“I overcame what the man did to me. Also, at first, I overcame what my parents-in-law did and found a way to live. So, I think I felt the most comfortable when I was by myself.”

Return

I came here, and when I went back to China, I carried the soil with me. I would always travel carrying Korean soil with me. I did.

“During the holidays, especially during the Korean Thanksgiving season in August and on New Year’s Day of the lunar calendar, I shed many tears when my children are not looking. Well, I cannot very well shed my tears when my sons are looking, can I? But the tears certainly always come during the holidays. And since I was the youngest of twelve, they raised me soft and gentle like. At that time, silk merchants used to come. Then [my parents] bought me a traditional Korean yellow jacket with a bright red border and a new traditional Korean skirt, and they would buy me another set on New Year’s Day. And my mother would carry me on her back. I remembered it because I had become mature enough to. My older sisters and brothers all sewed in the bright moonlight. . . . When the moon is full, it is very round. Then when I thought about that, even when I was alone, I cried many tears.”

“In 1988, I came back once. At that time, I came by way of Hong Kong. I could not come [directly] here [to Korea]. I was asked to come by the Red Cross.¹⁵ I had my family register, you know.”

“Like the other separated families, I was motivated and able to come here due to the efforts of the Red Cross.”

“A place called Guangzhou in China and a place called Sunjun are the places where I come from.¹⁶ They are situated across from Hong Kong, right? I came back here in a roundabout way via Hong Kong then too. . . . My nephew lives in Seoul. My nephew came out to meet me.”

¹⁵ Prior to diplomatic relations being established with China in 1992, travel liberalization did not take place, and there were restrictions on visiting South Korea. Kang Il-chul visited South Korea in 1988, at the request of her nephews, as part of the Overseas Koreans’ Home Visit Project undertaken by the South Korean Red Cross.

¹⁶ Guangzhou and Shenzhen are located on the border of Hong Kong and belong to the administrative district of Guangdong Province.

“When I came then, since my brother was gone, and my parents had both passed away, I cried so much that people said that this was the first time they had seen anybody cry like that at the airport.”

“What more is there? I came back, but people told me to go to China because I was a Chinese person. . . . When I think about that, my heart aches so much.”¹⁷

“I came here, and when I went back to China, I carried the soil with me. I would always travel carrying Korean soil with me. I did.”

“In about the year 1998, I came and then I went back. I could make my living in China. And when I went back to China, I was in the newspapers.”

“I did not do it; it was a school friend of mine. My friend was in the same class as me.”¹⁸

“She said that it would be good to let people know since I had come such a long way and all. ‘Now that we are all old, it is okay to tell, and you will not end up getting married anymore,’ she said.”

“When I told the broadcasting station that I was taken as a *comfort girl-woman*, someone came from a newspaper. A person came out to see me, and then I was in the papers here.”

“I had to be able to guarantee thirty million won¹⁹ in land or money for me to get on the family register.”

“When I asked my nephew to do this for me, he found out that my younger brother’s family would do it for me, but the eldest brother’s family said no.”

“My nephew said, ‘Aunt, I will do this for you. Do not worry. Another nephew and I will take care of it together.’”

“My tears poured down like sheets of rain. This was because if my [big] brother had earned money himself and bought the land, I could not say a thing. I am not such a thick-skinned person as all that; it is just the circumstances I was in. Everything was paid for by my parents who earned their money by working until they sweated blood. When my mother came into the Kangs’ house, she did not even have a dish to call her own and had to eat her meals in a bowl made out of a gourd. So, when they acted like this, maybe it was because I thought of my mom, I cried, I cried like a baby.”

17 Kang Il-chul did not recover her nationality when she visited South Korea in 1988, so she only stayed in South Korea for three months, which is the legal limit for foreign visitors.

18 During Kang Il-chul’s visit to South Korea in 1998, she met an elementary school friend. Her friend informed the media about her, and her wish to recover her nationality was reported in the *Chosun Ilbo* (“Testimony of a resident of China, Kim Mal-sun *halmoni*’s past life as a *comfort girl-woman*,” *Chosun Ilbo*, April 9, 1990).

19 Thirty million won in 1998 is worth approximately \$41,291.00 today.

Resentment

But, I do not know why the Korean government is acting like this, like this, uh-

“You cannot attach the military prefix. If you say military *comfort girls-women*, that is wrong, that is. You have to say *comfort girls-women*. Military *comfort girls-women* volunteered to go on their own. These people went in to make money. We were forcibly dragged away, that was it. . . . The women who were dragged there by force, they are *comfort girls-women*. So, you cannot say like that.”²⁰

“If I die after having used all my power to correct this problem while we are all still alive, then I would die happy. . . . But I have to think about our country. We really suffered, and as one who almost fell into the fire pit but came back, I cannot ever let this happen to my descendants.”

“I do not know how to speak well, but I can say what I have [experienced] first-hand in one or two words. So, it is okay for me if I do not have my own house, but why would I again let some foreigners take away our country where our parents and ancestors are buried? In a word, that is why I am here. . . . No matter what I have to do, I will plant seeds with even one word of mine to stop the Japs and the foreign bastards from ever invading our country again. That is why I came back here from China. I mean, really.”

“It is our future generations that must forever guard the country of Korea. If just one word of mine can leave a lasting impression on just one person, I would really thank God for it. If there is just- one person who would protect our country, then it is better. I really want to see my children. When they call me on the phone, I become so- worried and anxious that I cannot go to sleep. But that is just my little household, and without a country, there is no me. If there is no country, what joy is there in being born into the world?”

“I am thinking of going to China next month.²¹ . . . Until now, for the first time. Now, for the first time, I am leaving.”

“I am not nervous. I am just going to my home, to my house. It is not my son’s house but my house.”

“I have earned a lot of brownie points. I worked for thirty-two years, you know. So, I was awarded a house, I was. . . . It is in a very good location in Jilin City. . . . The biggest road in Jilin City is in front of my house. . . . It is the Liberation Road.”

²⁰ Kang Il-chul seems to distinguish between girls who were forcibly taken like herself and others who voluntarily joined to earn money. She does this by adding the word ‘military’ to denote those who voluntarily signed up to go to comfort stations during the war.

²¹ Kang Il-chul went to China in December 2002 and stayed there for about two months.

“But, it would be nice if my son and daughter were to live near where I live.”

“If they could just be with me while I am still alive, I could close my eyes in peace when I die. . . . For me, the fact that, throughout my whole life, I could not live with my blood relatives before they died is one of my biggest sorrows. My daughter also has some money. And as for my eldest son, if I were to add a little bit more to what he can scrounge up for himself, he would not have to go to the government for welfare benefits.”

“I have left my sons and daughter, and I am here for this government. But, I do not know why the Korean government is acting like this, like this, uh-.”

“So, what should I do? What should I say to the National Assembly's Women's Department?”

Interviewer's Commentary: 'For the Country' of Kang Il-chul

Oh Yeonju

In June 2002, the first meeting with Kang Il-chul *halmoni* started with a pleasant picnic. The Anmyeondo Island excursion, which was provided by the Korean Council as a part of the welfare program for the victims, was a chatty and leisurely excursion, unlike the heavy feeling that the word ‘victim’ evokes. The *halmonis* poured out songs, jokes, and past experiences all at once, each in their own personal color. Without a moment's rest, Kang Il-chul *halmoni* too unknotted the yarn of her story: from her memories of her childhood to the sorrow of her return home to Korea, her current life at the House of Sharing, and even the experience of violence inside the comfort station. The two-day trip seemed to give more meaning to the *halmonis* than a mere picnic. Their lives were different, but the *halmonis* had the common experience of being a *comfort girl-woman* of the Japanese military. And the *halmonis'* picnic was a place where they could shed the careful routines that they had to hide from their children, relatives, and neighbors that they were *comfort girls-women* and relieve their anxiety, even if it was just for a short time. Thanks to this, the *halmonis* broached many stories without having to close doors or having to look around to see if anyone was there, and Kang Il-chul *halmoni* also unfolded her past experiences. This active attitude of Kang *halmoni* relieved me of my worries that she would not accept to do the interview, or that she might remain silent throughout many parts of it even if she were to agree to do it. It was quite a good experience to have a picnic with the *halmonis* in the process of getting to know each other before the interview.

After the picnic, I met Kang *halmoni* two or three times during the Wednesday rallies. In July of 2002, I sought out the House of Sharing in Gwangju, Gyeonggi-do

to request an official interview. The *halmoni*'s relatives live in her old hometown of Sangju, Gyeongbuk and in Seoul, but she has been living at the House of Sharing since she permanently returned to Korea from China in 2000. This is because she thinks it is unnecessary to obtain medical-related or financial help from her relatives yet. The House of Sharing was well-equipped so that it would not be inconvenient for the *halmonis* to live there, but she often complained. Her biggest complaint is about religion: this is because while she is a devout Christian, the House of Sharing is operated by Buddhists. Kang *halmoni* said, "I am fighting hard with myself [to keep my faith in God]," maintaining that "God sent me here to overcome this." And these words of hers were also expressed in small quarrels with the family members of the House of Sharing. Kang *halmoni* told me that she does not feel at ease because she has a different religion, but she goes to a church nearby every Sunday morning without fail.

Upon my request for an interview that I carefully broached after I had looked around the House of Sharing, Kang *halmoni* decisively refused. It was the moment when the trust in the friendship built on the encounters at the picnic and Wednesday demonstrations collapsed. Throughout the picnic, she had insisted on taking pictures with me, saying "I will introduce you to my



Kang Il-chul.

nephew's son in my hometown," and when I first visited the House of Sharing, she introduced me to others, saying "This child is a close friend of mine," but this friendship did not result in accepting the interview. Rather, the friendship that we had built before the interview became a stumbling block. The student, whom she was only thinking of as her nephew's potential daughter-in-law, was asking for an interview all of a sudden, and she might have felt embarrassed. But even after I was denied the interview, I kept asking for a month through phone calls and the encounters at the Wednesday rallies, and Kang *halmoni* finally revealed the 'history' she did not want to recount, saying, "So what are the stories do you want to hear from me?"

Kang *halmoni*'s story was relatively accurate in terms of space and time as if she were slowly reading down a list of well-organized notes. The contents of her testimony (edited) that connect her stories of her childhood, the circumstances of her being drafted as a *comfort girl-woman*, Changchun, Mudanjiang, Ji'an, her life as a nurse, and returning home to South Korea are in the same order as she said, and the range of that memory was also intact. In comparison to her 1998 interview with the Institute, which I read before I visited the *halmoni* during the interview preparation process, I found her story mostly consistent, and her memory relatively accurate, without a large part having been lost or a large part being added. She repeated a similar pattern during four interviews, so it was less burdensome for me to organize the tangled memories. However, on the other hand, I was concerned about how to be free from her formulaic memory and, more than that, about why her memory was cemented in that way.

The above-mentioned interview with the Institute was done before Kang *halmoni* returned home permanently. In other words, for a *halmoni* who had never revealed that she was a *comfort girl-woman* while she had been living in China, the above interview was done with little oral experience. Therefore, did Kang *halmoni* design the frame of her memory before the interview with me? During her four interviews, she told me that nobody knew how to recount 'history' as well as she. The 'history' that she was talking about was only the life of a *comfort girl-woman* that has come to take up more than half of her life, and she seemed to think that it was the only thing an interviewer wanted to hear. Therefore, has Kang *halmoni*'s memory perhaps been formalized through previous interview experiences? It was not whether she had summarized the important parts of her life herself, but rather whether it had been edited after several interviews. Her fixed frame of her memories was like a question that kept coming back at me: 'Is this not what you wanted to hear?'

Inevitably, I had to ask questions to break the flow of Kang *halmoni*'s formal interviews. I decided not to ask about factual experiences, but to ask about her overall thinking or her emotional state. For example, when asking about

her marital life, I did not ask about the details of when and how she met and married a certain person, but instead threw her a comprehensive question: “What do you think about your marriage?” Or, when asking about her nursing experience, I asked her questions about her feelings at that time, like “Have you ever felt proud as a nurse?” She brought up a story about her second husband’s extramarital affair, saying that we must marry, but we should avoid “a man with a good looking face.” When she talked about her nursing life, she said that she saved a lot of people, but that she also missed her first child whom she could not save. She declared, “My daughter died. I had no money. I had nothing. She died because she could not receive treatment.”

She filled up quite a lot of her interview time with complaints about her present life. These were her major complaints: the apology and compensation problems of the Japanese government show no sign of being resolved. Conflicts were arising from living with other *halmonis* in the House of Sharing. The National Assembly and the Ministry of Gender Equality seem to be indifferent to the welfare of the victimized *halmonis* and the resolution of the *comfort girls-women’s* problems. Kang *halmoni* had only one personal request: to be given a house where she could live with her son and daughter and their spouses living in China and her youngest son, who lives far away in South Korea. When the same complaints and demands were repeated in the *halmoni’s* stories, I would ask appropriate questions to change the subject. However, the *halmoni* continued to rant regardless of the question and endlessly poured out these requests and complaints into the dictaphone, as if she thought that, as well as me sitting right in front of her, someone from the Korean Council or the Ministry of Gender Equality would be listening.

Kang *halmoni’s* complaints and demands were not disparate. She wanted the government to show more interest so that she would be able to receive compensation more quickly, and for her, compensations means that she could prepare a house where she could live with her children. Exposing the conflicts that arise at the House of Sharing, she also told me that she would leave if she could only have a house to live in, but this house must be big enough for her to live with her children, not a place where she could live just by herself. In the summer of 2002, she found a rental apartment that was not cramped for one person to live in, but she did not sign the contract, saying that the house was not roomy enough. Her current discontent and troubles have become a kind of precondition for certain demands.

Throughout the interview, she often pulled out phrases like “for my country” and “for my posterity.” She thought that revealing that she was once a *comfort girl-woman* and talking about her experience were in the national interest. Accordingly, she called her story ‘history’ and stressed the value it had. And by telling that ‘history,’ she said that if the next generation correctly understand the facts about the past, no material reward is necessary. However,

when she complained about her inability to live with her children, she expressed her disappointment and asked why she had been given no material reward even though she had abandoned her comfortable life in China and chose South Korea. Kang *halmoni* wanted to be compensated for the happiness of her childhood that she had lost because of her motherland and for her social status in China, which she had lost once again by returning to her motherland.

“How Can I Avenge Myself?”

Seok Soon-hee (pseudonym), Ahn Jeom-soon (real name)

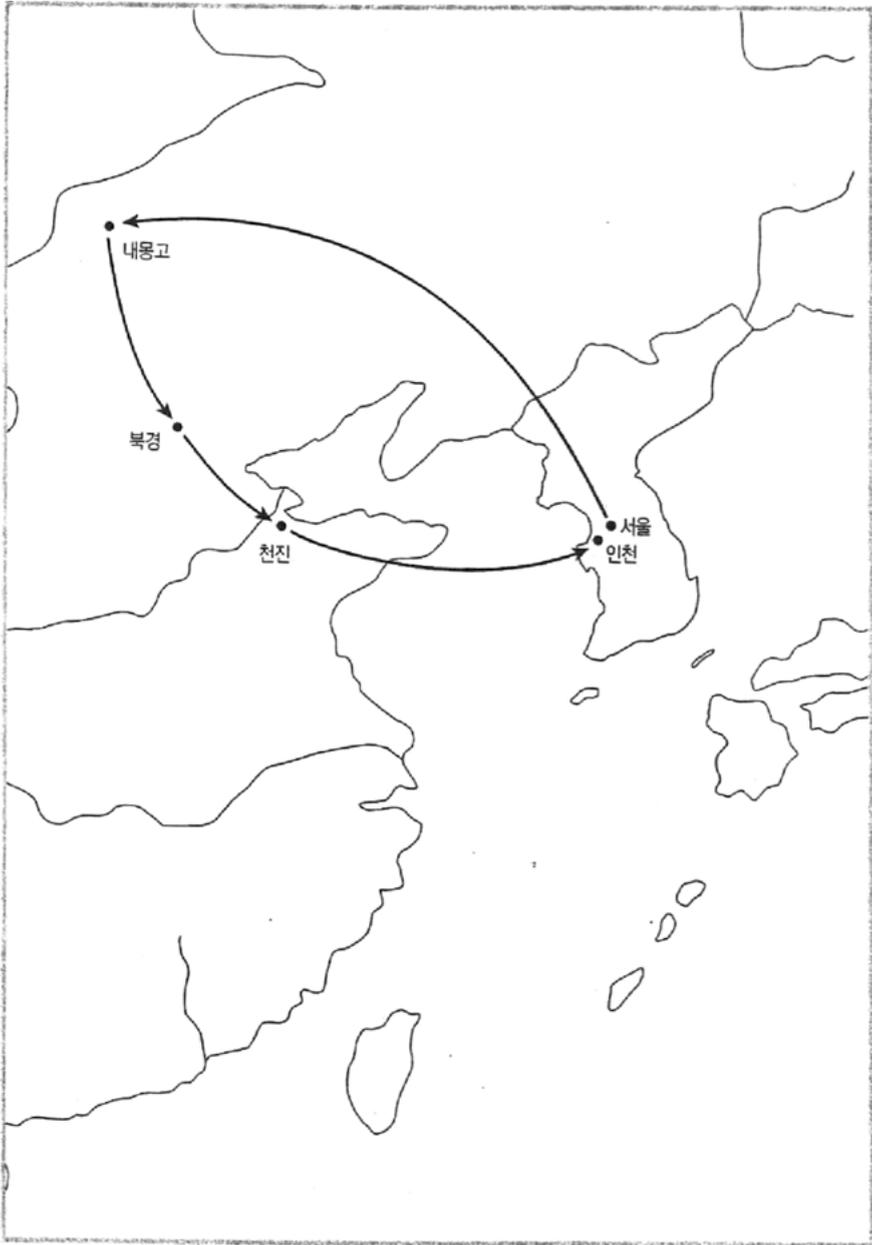


Seok Soon-hee.

1928	Born in Seoul Mapo
1941 (Age 14)	Abducted to China from Seoul Mapo-gu Boksagol Lived as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> , presumably in Inner Mongolia
1945 (Age 18)	Stayed in Beijing for eight months after Korean independence
1946 (Age 19)	Returned home via Incheon harbor
1950 (Age 23)	Fled to Daegu when the Korean War broke out
1956 (Age 29)	Served as a restaurant assistant for two years in a restaurant in Gangwon-do
1959 (Age 32)*	Ran her own restaurant business in Daegu Waegwan
1992 (Age 65)	Moved to Suwon
1993 (Age 66)	Registered as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i>
2004 (Age 77)	Lived in Gyeonggi-do Suwon with her nephew and his wife
2018 (Age 91)	Deceased

*Approximately

Note: Her real name is Ahn Jeom-soon, which she started using again after her social phobia was healed. Until then, she used her assumed name, Seok Soon-hee.



Seok Soon-hee's route: Seoul – Inner Mongolia – Beijing – Tianjin – Incheon.

“When I think about what those bastards did to me, how awful, my precious youth, because of those bastards, I have not been able to get married to this day.”

“Even when Korea was liberated, and I returned home, I was still just a kid. I did not even want to think about marriage or men. One time, through the introduction of a neighborhood woman, I was set up on a *seon* (blind date) with the intention of marriage to a tailor’s son. He must have liked me because every morning, he would wait for me in front of my house. I really, really hated seeing him there. I was disgusted by men. I hated all men for no reason. I found them gross. I did not even want to think about anything like marriage or men.”

“Already there has been so much wrongdoing, like this, heck, with all that has happened to me. Why do I need to get married and do more wrongs? I have suffered so much pain and had unspeakable things happen to me, so what movie life could I expect in a marriage?”

“But still, when I see other people living happily in marriage, I am pained inside. I have had such things happen to me, and my youth has passed away.”

Escape

Protecting my older brother from the draft and their daughters from sexual slavery camps.

“My father passed away early when I was little. My mother had a very hard life. She got married at twelve years of age, gave birth to my older brother when she was around seventeen, and became a widow at twenty-nine.”¹

“My mom ran a small store in Boksagol, Mapo-gu. It was more like a mom-and-pop store, actually. Even with that store, it was still very hard just to put food on the table, and we suffered a great deal in our struggles.”

“When I became eight years old and went to school, they said they could not admit me because I was too young. December 2nd (lunar calendar) was my birthday, and they wanted me to come back a year later. So, after I turned nine, I went back to school, and this time they said I was too old to enroll. What did I know at that time? I had no inclination to do things like studying anyway. I just went to other people’s houses to work and to watch over the babies a little bit.”

¹ Seok Soon-hee’s family included her father, mother, older brother (born in 1924), her younger sister (born in 1934), and herself. Her father passed away in 1936.

“During the Japanese colonization, my older brother almost got dragged off. But so that he would not be dragged off, my mother removed his identification from the family registry and made him independent.”

“After she did that, because she did not want to send him away, she hid him behind a pile of blankets and took away his urine and feces herself. Heck, I do not know if it was because my mother hid him behind the blankets or not, but my older brother did not go into military service.”

“And to save her daughters from what is called Chongsindae,² being recruited for the Japanese military and compromising their chastity, she put our names here and there until finally, she had no choice but to place them onto her mother’s family registry.”³

“I have a younger sister, and she and I are six years apart. So, she is now seventy. Our original last name is Seok, but her last name had been changed to Ahn. Her name takes after my mother’s maiden name, and my name is also recorded as Ahn Soon-hee in the family registry. But when I was doing my citizen registration in Daegu, I changed my name back to Seok Soon-hee. My sister’s last name is still Ahn.”

Weighing the Weight

They had the village girls line up in a single line and weighed them on a scale.

“At that time, I heard that the Greater East Asia War broke out. (Whispering) I was only fourteen. What did I know back then? I knew nothing.”

“If you go deep into the Boksagol, Gongdeok-dong, Mapo-gu, there is a large rice pounding mill.”

“I think that the season was fall. It was sometime around early fall. There was an announcement in the village, and it said to gather at the large Boksagol rice mill. Young girls up to a certain age were called to come to the mill. Because the announcement called for girls, the parents came out also, to figure out why.”

² Chongsindae was the Volunteer Labor Corps established by the Japanese government in 1944 to recruit unmarried girls to work in factories. The meaning of the word in its usage by Chosun people, however, was not limited to the corps but referred more to compromising their daughters’ chastity by being recruited to provide sex to the Japanese soldiers. The word ‘chongsindae’ was thus interchangeably used with the term *comfort girls-women* by Korean people.

³ The registry of Seok Soon-hee and her younger sister was transferred from her father’s family registry to that of her mother’s family.

“When we went there, they had the village girls line up in a single line and weighed them on a scale that they used for weighing straw bags of rice. If a girl weighed above a certain weight, they loaded her up immediately on a truck.”

“There were some soldiers carrying guns, as well as some Koreans too. Of course, there were several Japanese soldiers and civilians also. They told us all to get on the truck and dragged us up onto it.”

“As far as I remember, I weighed somewhere between fifty-five and sixty kilograms (120 to 135 pounds). Like today, I was a big girl. (Sigh) The bastards put us on the truck right away if we were a good weight. And I was one of those who were taken on the truck. Since they forcibly put us on the truck, my mother cried out, ‘Why are you taking my daughter?’ and violently held on to them, cried and yelled, and swore at them. But, would that have made any difference? Did the bastards listen? Most of the girls were grabbed, some at the same time; I think there were about ten who were dragged away from there.”

“[In the truck], if I remember correctly, I think there were one or two soldiers with guns, and, in the front seat, there was the driver, and then a soldier next to him.”

“We did not know where we were going because they had the tent flap drawn and it was dark inside.”

“*Aheego*, do not even mention it. My heart severely pounded, pounded. I did not know what to do; I had no idea what was going on.”

Earthen House

It was neither *tatami* nor *ondol*,⁴ but made of plain dirt; that is the kind of house it was.

“I had no idea [how far we went]. This was because as soon as we got on the truck, they put the tent flap down for the whole ride. Oh, but on our way, they stopped the truck somewhere to pick up several more girls, and then we would go again and stop again to pick up still more girls. But I did not know how far we traveled. A while later, they told us to step down from the truck to get on a train. It was a train station, and we crossed a long bridge like that over the Han River. Anyway, the bridge, the bridge for the train was super long.”

⁴ A traditional Korean underfloor heating system.

“I did not know whether that place was Korea or China, but it was said that where we arrived was Chinese land.”

“*Aheego*, do not even ask. There were no mountains, no trees, no water, and yellow sands covered the whole area, like in the desert. They led us to a big and empty house in the middle of the desert-like area. And it was said that the Chinese used to live in that house, but they were driven out. The floor of the rooms was neither *tatami* nor *ondol*, but made of plain dirt; that is the kind of house it was. And around the house that we were in, there were some houses here and there situated some distance away from one another.”

“We lived in tents and in dilapidated houses that we fixed up a little. In those places, that is what we did.”

“Everything looked like the desert, like an empty plain. It was like a Siberian field. Some places, in the mountains, just in the mountains, tents were set up. One place we went to was a *boukugou* (an air-raid shelter); they dug a hole, and we lived inside it.”

“So, because it was during a war, the soldiers would go where the fighting was, and we would have to follow them in the battle fields.”

“There were like ten of us. Later, more people came. There were originally five or six, but more came in later, and then there were a little over ten. About one or two more times, people came in.”

Soldiers

Those bastards treated us like animals. Not like human beings.

“As soon as we arrived, they went nuts. What, what. What on earth did I know?”

“In the afternoon, a lieutenant with symbols like two grains of rice entered. He peered at me and left; then, he came back again in the evening wearing a long sword. . . . He drew his sword and freaking threatened to kill me because he said that I did not do what he asked. *Aheego*-- I fled to here and there until I found a cave to hide in. Then, I was looking for whatever I could hide. There was a house, and this house did have a hypocaust, but no fireplace to kindle a fire. It had a hole just big enough to go in and out. I repeatedly hid in the little hole, and then, came out. *Ah-yoo* – these [bastards].”

“I was trying to withhold myself from them, trying not to be taken. . . . If I had been caught by that lieutenant that night, I would have been killed.”

“An older girl who had gone there earlier than I had said that I needed to do what they said. Only then could I live. I ran away and rebelled many times because I really hated giving myself to them.”

“They used to call [me] Yashida-san, Yashida-san.”

“The soldiers were not always with us; they would go to battle, and then occasionally come to see us.”

“The generals would often spend the night.”

“The mornings were a bit freer, but the rest of the time was crazy and there was no afternoon or night. As soon as breakfast was over, they would rush in. Those sons-of-bitches, I wonder how they will be punished for all their sins. Those bastards are probably dead by now.”

“Saturdays and Sundays were the worst. Yes, these days were rest days. . . . [During the weekdays], there were about ten soldiers, give or take a few.”

“I would never even see any [*sakku*] (condoms). And who had time to use them anyway?”

“Because their time was strictly set, they were busy too. Given that you had a certain amount of time for a certain number of people, everybody was in a hurry. There was not even time to take off our clothes. They pulled out their dicks, did their business, and then left the room because the bastards were busy too. On one side, you could hear the sounds of gun shots, cannons, and planes; we were in the middle of a war, for heaven’s sakes. Who had time to dilly-dally?”

“Some Japanese soldiers were good, although I have forgotten their names now. There was one Japanese soldier who came in that grabbed my hand and patted my back, saying ‘*Kawaisou* (pity on you).’ He then left the room. He never even slept with me but just left the room.”

“I began [my menstruation] there. I think I was around sixteen years old. But they still came. Were those sons-of-bitches even aware that I was having my period? They were just insane and went nuts.”

“They punched the girls with their fists, but there was not much noise of protest. Girls were dead if they resisted against the violence. What could be done with the generals watching us from outside the camp. It was always crowded with soldiers. They went berserk, saying we were not listening to them, and we were not doing what they wanted us to do.”

“I think I saw about two pregnant girls. But I never heard of or saw them giving birth. I think maybe they said they had something done at the hospital.”

“[When the soldiers did not come], we would just lay on our stomachs or sit, passing the time in tears. What else? Because it was excruciating and exhausting. So, even now, tears stream down like this because the tears have not yet dried up.”

Opium

And because of that girl, I ended up taking opium too.

“Wash my face? There was no washing my face. I washed my face once in a few or several days. So, you can just imagine what [bathing] must have been like. Once in a while, those bastards would bring tap water in a tank-like container. And we had no bowls or anything, so we would just put the water into a wash bowl and wash ourselves.”

“Panties? There were no panties. All we had were something like pants, short pants that we would wear. We did somehow wear clothes though. That is, we would wear something like a *kimono* and a one-piece dress that was open at the front. They gave us those.”

“They gave us rice balls for our meals. There were no side dishes. If they gave you rice balls, you ate rice balls, although they did not taste like anything.”

“There were no civilians at all. No Koreans at all.”

“[Money? There was] none-. What money?”

“Among us, there were no titles we could call each other. If we were about the same age, we would call each other *chinguya* (dear friend), and if you were a little bit older, we would call you *unni* (older sister). That’s all.”

“[One older sister] was about five years older than I. Her accent sounded like she was from the Chungcheong-do area, and I can clearly visualize her face even now. She is probably dead by now. She took a lot of opium, so she was a mess. And because of that girl, I ended up taking opium too.”

“The way she acted, it seemed like she had come earlier than us. And when the Japs, the privates I mean, cursed at her, she would just curse right back at them.”

“I was crying all the time, so she said to try smoking [opium]. She said it would make my worries go away. So I smoked some opium. I put it into the cigarettes and smoked it. That is why I cannot quit smoking. When I tapped the cigarette like this, the tobacco went in a little, and the paper went out a little. Then she would put some white powder into the end of the cigarette. So, I smoked that.”

“When I smoked opium, I had no feeling. Your body becomes overly relaxed, you lose interest in everything, and you do not think. You are just numb like you are half an idiot. It was very strange. Maybe it was because I was drunk on the opium. So, she taught me that I should suck on the cigarette, but I should not blow the smoke out of my nose or mouth. I should inhale it, the smoke that is. But, *aheegoo*, when I swallowed it in, I became nauseous, and my body became limp, and I collapsed. I tell you, I almost died. That was in the

beginning. *Aheegoo*, it was scary. So, I tried it a few more times, but, *aheegoo*, I thought this would not do and quit.”

Syphilis

The lower part flipped over, opened into a wound, and started to bleed. Just thinking about it, *uheegoo*-.

“*Ahhew*-, the lower part flipped over, opened into a wound, and started to bleed. I could hardly walk, so they took me to the hospital. Whether you are treated or not, there was not much of a difference. What medicine was there at that time? All they could do is rub a little Merbromin on you, and the dye from it would seep through to the outside of your skirt, making it all red. (Sighing) This is why I do not want to date anybody. I do not want to think about things like that anymore. It is not like it was a condition that I should be happy about.”

“The year after I went, I was about fifteen years old. And half a year after that, I contracted a venereal disease, so I was shot with #606 a lot. They said it was *baidoku* (syphilis). *Aheegoo*-. Sesame-like warts grew underneath. A lot of them. (Pointing to her genitals) A countless number of warts grew around this part. After coming back from the hospital, it hurt, so I touched it, and there seemed to be threadlike things that were knotted there. Something like threads. And they would just fall off by themselves.”

“Here- (showing her shins), here, and here.⁵ I suffered a lot because of the disease I contracted from there. Because of this. It became so- rotten. Look how it goes in like that. They said that even my bones decayed. I almost died.”

“[In the hospital] there were only one or two female nurses, and the rest were all men. And the hospital was a tent-like structure.”

“They applied some Merbromin and sprinkled yellow powder on me. I wonder why a tumor grew there.”⁶

“*Uheegoo*-, even after Korean independence and I lived in Daegu, it was still awful. The underneath part. It kept feeling itchy and even when I used salt water, it did not help. So, I went to the hospital, and they said I had to receive shots of #606 again. Since the hospital said to get the shots, I did.”

⁵ At the time of the interview, Seok Soon-hee showed me three caved wounds on her shins.

⁶ You can get a tumor on your legs if you contract syphilis.

Liberation

Without someone interpreting that we were Koreans, we would have been killed.

“Even though we were liberated from there, I did not know whether we were liberated. We were in an open field in the valley, not even aware that we were liberated. Aside from the Japs, that is, aside from the soldiers, I could not see anyone.”

“Those bastards were totally panicked, with their swords in their hands and their eyes red. They kind of lost it.”

“A little later, some foreigners arrived. The Chinese came, and then some Yankee people came, I think. *Ah-goo*, gross. Just thinking about it makes me get goosebumps and shudder. I saw many Japanese soldiers being beaten to death by the Chinese also.”

“We were almost killed too. They came at us with clubs, like they were demonstrating or something. They chased us and [surrounded] us, *aheegoo*-. [But] someone interpreted that we girls were not Japanese but Korean, so we avoided being beaten to death by the Chinese people. At first, I thought we were going to die. But then the Chinese people helped us and hid us.”

“With that girl that I called older sister and a few other people, I ran away from place to place. But did we have a car or anything? All night long, we would come out from hiding and just follow the Chinese. . . . When we were moving from one place to another, we would collapse anywhere and sleep. Then, we would walk without stopping, day and night. . . . And if there were Chinese houses, we would go in and get food to eat. In this way, we came all the way out to Beijing.”

“Because we walked day and night, our feet were all swollen, so we could not even wear shoes. We walked barefoot, and it was excruciating. I think we walked for over a week.”

“*Ah-go*-, if I thought about all that I suffered, those sons-of-bitches-. I need to get my revenge. But how do I avenge myself?”

“[With the girls], we walked together for half of the journey, but I do not know what happened next. We were all scattered. As for me, by chance, I met the Korean Liberation Army right away. While we were staying at a Chinese house, the couple asked me where I was from and treated us well. They embraced me and wept. They said that as long as I was in Beijing, I should not go anywhere else but live with them.”

“The house was a Chinese house, and the Chinese owners lived there. Oh, the son of the Chinese owners kept begging me to marry him. And one of the Korean Liberation soldiers said I could not marry him; I had to leave there

soon. If I think about that, *ah-go*, if I had married that Chinese, I would not have made it out and would still be in China to this day. That is what I think.”

“There were noticeably many of the Korean Liberation Army people around. They were coming and going a lot, in their uniforms. And the hats they wore were hats that generals wear. They would come and go wearing those hats. Whatever they were doing, they looked like soldiers to me. And I do not know why, maybe they did not want to spread the word around, but when they talked, they would just talk among themselves secretly.”

“As for me, [I] just cleaned the house for them and cooked the rice. The wife of a soldier took pity on me and treated me well.”

The Return Home

My mom was on her way home after having prayed for my safe return.

“Korea became independent in the month of August. After Korea became independent in August, we spent one New Year’s Day in Beijing and returned home the next year in April. We had to go to Tianjin and board a ship. In Tianjin, people boarded the ships in order like the first and the second ship. And I got on the third ship. It was super big. The ship was. So, what I overheard in passing was that three thousand passengers were on the ship.”

“We had to wait on the ship for a week after the ship anchored at the Incheon harbor. After one week, they said for us all to get off. Then, American soldiers brought this big machine and sprayed *DDT* on us; they even sprayed it inside of our clothes.”

“I think there were some contagious diseases in Korea during that time. So, when we were sprayed and got off, a Korean spoke in Korean, through a mike, said we should just stand there and not go anywhere. I think they gave out five hundred won⁷ to the children, and one thousand won⁸ to the adults. I think I received eight hundred won,⁹ or seven hundred won.¹⁰ A Korean handed them out. And I separated from the Korean liberation soldier.”

“And I went to Mapo, Seoul. I had no idea how to go to Mapo. So, I kept asking people for directions and walked, but they had electric trains then. I got on the train and got off at the last destination stop in Mapo and came all the

⁷ Five hundred won in 1946 is worth approximately \$3,027.00 today.

⁸ One thousand won in 1946 is worth approximately \$6,054.00 today.

⁹ Eight hundred won in 1946 is worth approximately \$4,843.00 today.

¹⁰ Seven hundred won in 1946 is worth approximately \$4,238.00 today.

way to Boksagol. When I entered Boksagol, my mom was on her way home, carrying steamed rice cakes on her head, after having prayed for my safe return.”

“I vomited a lot on the ship. So, I was sick there, and when I came home, maybe because I was so relieved, but I was sick for three months. It was something like malaria. You know the disease where you are sick one day, and then the next day you are not. *Aheego-*, I said I would die then.”

“The first month was like that, and in the second month, I shook continuously. At the time, there were no medicines or anything. The only medicine I took was herbal treatments, which my mom acquired for me. My mom really worked hard to make me well.”

“My mother stopped selling [at the store] and peddled on the street with her son. I somehow recovered from the disease with my mother’s help, and so I had to make money. . . . My older brother too was ailing from beriberi at the time, and that made his body swell like a balloon. . . . So, I lived in other people’s houses and babysat the kids who lived there. I also served as a housemaid for wealthy families. There is not anything I did not do.”

American Army Unit

My mom and I did the laundry for the American soldiers at the American army unit.

“Then, a war broke out. And people took refuge from the turbulence at Waegwan, Daegu. . . . After a little while, American army units came into Korea when the war was at its full force at the Nakdong River. . . . All of the river water turned red with blood as the North Korean soldiers died and the South Korean soldiers died, and the bloody water was something else at Nakdong River. We cannot even describe it.”

“In the meantime, my mom and I did the laundry for the American soldiers at the American army unit, and, *aht-tta-*, but they gave us all sorts of things.”

“At the time, there was an abundance of food at the American army unit. They had chocolates. Boxes and boxes of all the goodies were there. When we opened the boxes, we found all sorts of things; there were bread, gums, and candies of every kind. So, we were able to eat all those things that they gave me.”

“Later I found out that that place was a supply warehouse, a supply storage unit. They brought rice there for storage. They brought blankets. And they sent food to all the battlefields.”

“Thanks to the soldiers, we ate very well and lived very well there. Occasionally, they provided us with dishes. Did we have any dishes at home? they would ask. Now that I think about it, their dishes were good, steel dishes. Those are the kinds of things that they used to give us. Sometimes, they also gave us pistols as well and told us to sell them at the market. But we gave the guns to the cops. What were we supposed to do with them? *Aheegoo-*.”

“But I was very dense. I should have sold the guns at the market and made money. I did not know. When someone asked for the guns, I would give the guns to them and only ate whatever the soldiers gave us.”

“When the war at Nakdong River was coming to a close, the soldiers left. I made some money by selling some items at home and started a small store. It was a hole-in-the-wall kind of store, selling all sorts of things.”

Making a Living

We ground two bags of beans, white beans, every day.

“I did not even see my mother pass away. My mother passed away in Daegu, and I was living in Gangwon-do at the time. I was twenty-nine years old, I think, when she passed away.”

“I had a friend in Gangwon-do; she told me to come there, so I went when I was twenty-nine. It was not long after I had arrived there that she passed away. My friend ran something like a restaurant, so when I arrived there, I worked at the restaurant. I helped her with her work. We sold food and drinks; it was a kind of bar. I stayed there for about two years.”

“There was an American army base in Waegwan. At that time, my older brother knew people, had friends at a restaurant for the Eighth United States Army. And the people who used to work at the Eighth but then came out to Waegwan had sympathy for us and helped us open a restaurant.”

“We had a millstone at home this big. (Pointing at the rooftop) There, we ground two bags of beans, white beans, every day. That is why my arms ache. We ground the beans and made pureed soybean soup. . . . And when it became quitting time, around 4:30 or 5:30 in the afternoon, twenty to thirty bicycles were waiting outside of the restaurant. . . . They came to eat the pureed soybean soup and also out of sympathy for us. I made some money from the restaurant business which was running well because of sympathetic support from the American soldiers.”

“*Aheego-*, I do not think I was destined to keep the money though. I went to make a contract to buy a house, but the owners had gone out to the field and

were not home. So, I came all the way back home. [But] I bumped into a gambler. He was a butcher.”

“I often went to his butcher shop to buy some pork backbones for the pureed soybean soup, and while doing that, we *tokui* (befriended) each other. Although we became close while selling and buying food, I never knew that he was such a serious gambler. He asked me to lend him some money. I had seven hundred thousand won¹¹ in my hand to buy a house with; at the time, for seven hundred thousand won, you could buy a really nice house. I gave all the money to him. I must have been around thirty. No, I think I was thirty-two. I came here to Waegwan at the age of thirty-two. He wanted me to lend him some money so that he could buy some cows and materials. If you bought a cow with two hundred thousand won,¹² you could acquire a large-sized cow. He was not just a gambler but a serious one, that one. I was cheated. I was not paid back, and he made off with the money.”

“I ran the pub business for about ten years. And after ten years, I became old, and my body condition was worse, so I would carry on the business, then stop, then resume, and then stop again. When I did that, the business did not do too well.”

“The child’s (oldest nephew’s) younger brother asked me to live together with his family and not live alone, so I moved to [Suwon].¹³ I went to Suwon and lived in one house for three years with my oldest nephew’s younger brother. There were two rooms, they had two kids, and then there were the husband and wife. I slept in the living room with my two granddaughters, and the grandson was using the other room for his studies. The grandson was either a junior or a senior in high school. They kept telling me to come into the large room. So, I thought that I could not live with them any longer, so I rented a room for ten million won¹⁴ and came out of there.”

“When I first went to [Suwon], I worked on a government-sponsored project job. They paid me fifteen thousand won¹⁵ [per day]. I visited the borough office and said to them I needed some help finding a job to live on my own. Then they said they understood, offered me a government-sponsored project job, and told me to take it. My legs ached then; so, dragging my legs and using a cane while going from place to place, I did my work.”

¹¹ Seven hundred thousand won in 1959 is worth approximately \$11,854.00 today.

¹² Two hundred thousand won in 1959 is worth approximately \$3,387.00 today.

¹³ Seok Soon-hee currently lives with her oldest nephew and his wife, but she lived with his younger brother’s family when she first went to Suwon.

¹⁴ Ten million won in 1992 is worth approximately \$14,687.00 today.

¹⁵ Fifteen thousand won in 1992 is worth approximately \$22.00 today.

My Family Members

I must have been born to serve others a lot.

“When it was first broadcast on TV, it was my youngest niece who heard it.¹⁶ I was sitting down somewhere in Waegwan, so I did not know what was going on. My youngest niece, she knew then, so she asked her father, my older brother, about it. And that child made a report to the broadcasting team.”

“It seems I can never cut off my relationship with my family.”

“[My brother] does not work. He does not do anything. He just plays. Even to this day. *Aheegoo*-. Hew-.”

“In the past, I used to live [in Daegu with my brother’s family] for a long time. And I also lived apart from them, on my own, working for my own business and living apart from them. Then, I went back to living with them again. But [even when I came out of his house], he still looked for me, my older brother. He wrote letters to me, telling me to send him money and get him a room to live in. That is what he did. *Aheego*-.”

“As for [my nephews’ and nieces’] schooling, it is the same as if I taught them. He is a person who does not know what work is. He is seventy-nine years old now, but he has no savings that he earned when he was young, so that is why in his old age he is still going through hard times. So, that is why my younger sister disappeared and is hiding somewhere.¹⁷ Because our older brother drank and lived his life like that. Now, he does not live with his children; it is just him and his wife, the two of them.”

“Not like me who worked so much, *aheegoo*-. I do not know how I was born like that. I must have been born to serve others a lot. My family. My five siblings. Even when I am going somewhere and I hear a baby crying, *ae-go*-, it is like one of them is crying, and I become concerned. It is strange.”

“*Aheegoo*-, it is because I did all those things for them that they are near me and are good to me. When I was young, I did whatever it took to earn whatever was needed to feed them and educate them. If I did not do that, they

¹⁶ The South Korean government set up a special task force team led by a director of the Asian Affairs Bureau under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that aimed to respond to the issues of *comfort girls-women* in January 1992. The special task force team was made up of government officers from seventeen ministries. From February 25 to June 25, 1992, Japanese military *comfort girls-women* reported their victimhood through each borough office and township office. The collected information was reported through various media channels, and the youngest niece of Ahn Jeom-soon (Seok Soon-hee was using her real name then) happened to watch it.

¹⁷ Seok Soon-hee’s younger sister went missing in Daegu during the Korean War.

would not like me so now. I mean, we live in a world now where children do not even look twice at their own parents.”

“So, my oldest nephew used to say, ever since he was little, ‘When I grow up, I am going to live with my aunt. I will take care of my aunt.’ That is what he said. That is how it goes, I guess, since that is how it turned out. He said that ever since he was a little tyke.”

“Now, I live here with my oldest nephew. A few years ago, I almost died from diabetes. So, they realized that this would not do, and now we live together.”

“[My nephew] started a business, but during that IMF crisis in the late 1990s, he went bankrupt. And ever since 1998, he has not had a real job to speak of. His wife goes to a restaurant to work. I would be less concerned about him if only he did not have any debts. Would it not be great if he could just be hired by some company?”

Hope

If you want to take history and make it into a book, there is no end to it. It is easy to say, but hard to do.

“Now, cigarettes are like a husband and children to me. It has always been like that. Without cigarettes, I find no pleasure. Ever since I was sixteen, when I first learned to smoke from that older sister, I have not been able to quit smoking.”

“I have wept much, and I have experienced sorrow; it seems like I have spent most of my time in tears. But I thought to myself, ‘Is my life hard? Everybody’s life is hard. It is all the same,’ and swallowed everything.”

“When I hear a Buddhist prayer in the morning, my mind becomes relaxed. I am a fake believer. I go to a [Buddhist temple] about once a month below Paldal Mountain in Nammun, a mountain located in the center of Suwon-si.”

“[Nowadays], I watch some TV shows in the morning and go to the Senior Center in the afternoon and play some Korean card games. Sometimes, I go to the hospital, and, sometimes, I go to the landlord’s house and play Korean card games with her, too.”

“Whatever they say, it is when you are sick that you feel the most disheartened. I cannot live without my pills. And I eat less than the kids do, maybe just one spoonful. Even with that, I do not digest well, so I have to take digestive medicine every day, and only then does the food go down. Once in a while, I drink soda to help with the digestion. The kids do not like it, but if I drink soda, I can burp, and I can digest my food, so that is why I take it.”

"I have diabetes, so I must take medication. Now I have complications that make my legs go numb. (She pinches her own foot) Even if I pinch my foot like this, it does not feel like my own foot because there is no strength in it. Every part of my arms and legs hurts, and my back hurts. Several years ago, I had major surgery done. This was a colorectal surgery; they said that there was a tumor in my colon. So, I got the surgery done at a university hospital."

"[My only wish] is to stay healthy, that is it, and not to trouble others until the day I die. I cannot become a burden to the kids. I want to stay healthy and to die peacefully. It sure is."

"Well, the world has become a better place to live now. I did not know that such a good time as this would come. Thank you so much for your hard work. In those days, no one stood up and raised their voice for us. We were born during miserable times, where we experienced wars and suffered a lot. We did. Really."

"*Uh-hew*, those bastards must repent of their own volition, but all they do is protest. . . . How can I avenge myself on those bastards? We have to come up with a good resolution quickly."

Interviewer's Commentary: Dry Cough

Yoon Meehyang

In May 2002, as the staff workers of the Korean Council started to work on the oral testimonies of the *comfort girls-women* for the first time, we wrote up the basic content about the *halmonis* in the office. It was at that time that I first found out that Seok Soon-hee *halmoni* was living in the same district of Suwon as I. Feeling pleased about this discovery and having asked myself in self-reflection why I did not know it sooner, I started to investigate basic information about Seok *halmoni's* life. But the only things I was able to find out about her was that her address was in Suwon and that because she had a social phobia, she did not wish to meet with anyone.

The material concerning Seok Soon-hee *halmoni* was just one piece of paper, her registration for the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, that was submitted to the Korean government. But, on that one page, the essential data, such as the draft date and location, her experiences at the comfort facilities, and the circumstance of her returning to Korea, which were recorded in the cases of the other *halmonis*, were all left blank. There was no home phone number or exact address which I could use to contact her. The telephone number of the government officer in charge at the city hall of Seoul was the only means of

contact at my disposal. Moreover, although I asked for an interview with her through the government officer, I was told that, aside from that government officer, she would not meet with anyone. The government officer let me know that my situation was an impossible one and did not even give me her contact information. For this reason, Seok Soon-hee *halmoni* was not included in the first list of interviewees that the Korean Council drew up. However, I could not easily shake off my lingering attachment for Seok Soon-hee *halmoni*. More than anything else, it was the term ‘social phobia’ that pulled me in. Because she was a *comfort girl-woman*, even half a century after Korean independence had been obtained, she still could not meet and be at ease with people and probably has been living her life bearing the burden of her private pain. When I thought about that, my heart ached. Even if I were not able to put her life story in the book, I was still desperate to at least meet her as soon as possible. In truth, I felt a greater responsibility as the director of the Korean Council than as an interviewer.

I sent an official letter to the city hall of Suwon, requesting their cooperation in setting up a meeting with Seok *halmoni*, and after several telephone conversations with the officer in charge, I finally managed to obtain her home phone number. However, even after I had obtained her number, I spent almost a week hesitating to call her. This was because I had a fear of what I would do if Seok *halmoni* refused me on my first call to her. On the day I finally talked to her on the phone, she greeted me in such a warm voice that my previous concerns and hesitation were rendered futile, and instead, thanking me for my interest, she answered that I could come to see her any time. This was really an unexpected response since I was sure that she would refuse a meeting with me and I had worried a great deal as to how I would try to persuade her otherwise.

I promised to visit her house for the first time two weeks after that day on the Sunday afternoon of July 7, 2002, and prepared what I thought was necessary for the visit. I had decided that the purpose of my first visit would be to introduce myself to Seok *halmoni*, explain our work of imparting the *halmonis*’ stories as part of our history to future generations, and obtain her approval for the work.

I went through a narrow alleyway to reach her place, which was the semi-basement of a multiplex housing unit situated in between the Suwon Air Force airfield and an adjacent railway line. She leased a two-room place and was living with her nephew (her older brother’s son) and his wife. In her room, there were household goods like a TV, cabinet, refrigerator and other things arranged around the room against the walls. At the entrance, there was a dining table on which were prayer beads, a paper-bundle of medicine, a few cosmetics, and a bunch of cigarette lighters that she collected from restaurants. By the glass

window, the bottles of liquor that she made herself were on display. Just by looking at the inside of her room and getting a sense of its atmosphere, you could tell that she did not go out much and that everything she needed was taken care of within the confines of the room.

Seok Soon-hee *halmoni* opened the door to our conversation by telling me that the government officer had telephoned and told her to help me as best she could. Only then did I come to know why she, who had a social phobia, had allowed a stranger to visit, especially one who was trying to investigate something. Outside of her family, the city hall officer was the person whom she trusted the most, and because that officer asked her to meet me to help, she allowed my visit. This was a fact that I only found out later, but aside from her monthly pilgrimage to the Buddhist temple to pray, her hospital visits, and her trips to the pharmacy, she stayed mostly alone at home. The city hall officer's calls and visits were pretty much all the contact she had with outsiders.

When I introduced myself, Seok *halmoni* told me that I had a difficult job; she said that she saw other *halmonis* demonstrating on TV, and she even asked whether they were *halmonis* who had been 'there' and had come back. Although she avoided meeting people because she had been a *comfort girl-woman*, she seemed to have continued to be quite interested in the Korean *comfort girls-women* issue. She already knew that the House of Sharing was managed by Buddhists. The story about the House of Sharing naturally led us to her testimony: "I have also been to China . . ." The *halmoni's* story that continued even without preceding questions came to a stop as soon as her nephew, who had been out, returned. It seemed she was not able to tell her history even to her nephew. I had no choice but to promise that I would come back to see her at a time when her nephew and his wife would be out working; thus, I ended my first visit. Since I had only planned to do my best to explain the purpose of the interview and to receive her approval on my first visit, I thought my goal had been sufficiently achieved. I received her approval for the interview, of course, and I also completed my basic investigation about her life: how she was taken and where she went.

However, from the time of the second interview, when she was supposed to begin in earnest to talk about her life as a *comfort girl-woman*, she became very stinging with her words. While talking about her life in the past, she did not use unnecessary words if she could help it, and she almost never stuttered or repeated what she said. She did not speak at length and avoided talking about the painful or tough experiences in her life.

Despite the fact that she gave me permission to carry out the interviews in our first meeting and also approved of publishing her story, she did not want to talk about the situation at the comfort station and tried to speak of it as little as

possible. Especially when she was talking about the hard parts of her story, for instance, the first day she was raped at the comfort station or her relationships with the Japanese soldiers and so on, she would often give a few little dry coughs and stopped talking during the story. She did not want to go deeper into the story, and thus avoided doing so as much as was possible. Although she talked by herself from beginning to end about her life after the emancipation and her current day-to-day life without my having to interject any questions in the middle of her story, whenever we went back to the past and entered into questions about specific situations at the comfort station, she would answer with a sigh or end the dialogue with a short reply, saying “Why do I have to talk about these unmentionable things again? It causes me shame just to have the words in my mouth.” As such, I assume her experiences as a *comfort girl-woman* were painful, and she did not want to bring them up again.

My worry was about how I would make Seok *halmoni* feel comfortable when telling me about her past and her present life. Remembering her groaning about the rise in the price of her medicine, I prepared some pocket money in advance and gave it to her to help her pay for it. I also steamed some sweet potatoes and brought them to her, and as we ate them together, I was able to conjure up some nostalgia for her. And when she told me that she used an umbrella as a walking stick to go to and from the hospital because she had no stick, I even searched all over for medical supplies stores near big hospitals in Suwon to buy her one. When I saw how happy she was, taking a turn around the room with the walking stick I had given her as a present, saying “Even a child born to me would not do something like this for me,” I was ashamed of the motive hidden behind the present.

Maybe it was the result of my efforts to open her closed mind. Maybe she began to trust me as the number of times we met increased. Or maybe she became comfortable with me because she had unleashed the emotional baggage from her heart that had been so difficult for her to dislodge. As we jumped over the hurdle of the half-way point of our interviews, her facial expression became much brighter than when we first met and her look toward me became more tender than before. The frequency of the little dry coughs that she would often spit out when she spoke about her past life decreased, and she started to show interest in the other *comfort girls-women* who had shared her experience. Toward the time that the interviews came to an end, she attended the human rights camp for the *halmonis* that the Korean Council hosted and met other *comfort girls-women* who had suffered the same pain that she did. Through such a process, she was able to feel that the *comfort girls-women* experience that she had buried deep in her heart was not one that belonged to her alone. And

through her encounters and conversations with the other *comfort girls-women*, she seemed to be slowly opening the heart that was shut to the outside world.

Seok Soon-hee *halmoni* now feels comfortable even farting with sound effects in front of me. She talks about her resentment towards her family. And her social phobia seems to be gradually dissipating. However, she still tries not to talk about the deeper story of the comfort station. And, aside from me, she does not allow people to visit her house and, aside from other *comfort girls-women*, she still avoids meeting people.

Even while I am at the point of writing this commentary, I do not feel completely satisfied because I know that she has many more stories to tell about some of the specific parts of her comfort station experience and about her life after the emancipation. Will she ever be able to comfortably pour out the still unspoken stories of her past life, like unraveling tangled threads? This is a task that is left for me to do. It seems that I still have the work of opening her heart and mind so that she will be able to continue her unfinished story.

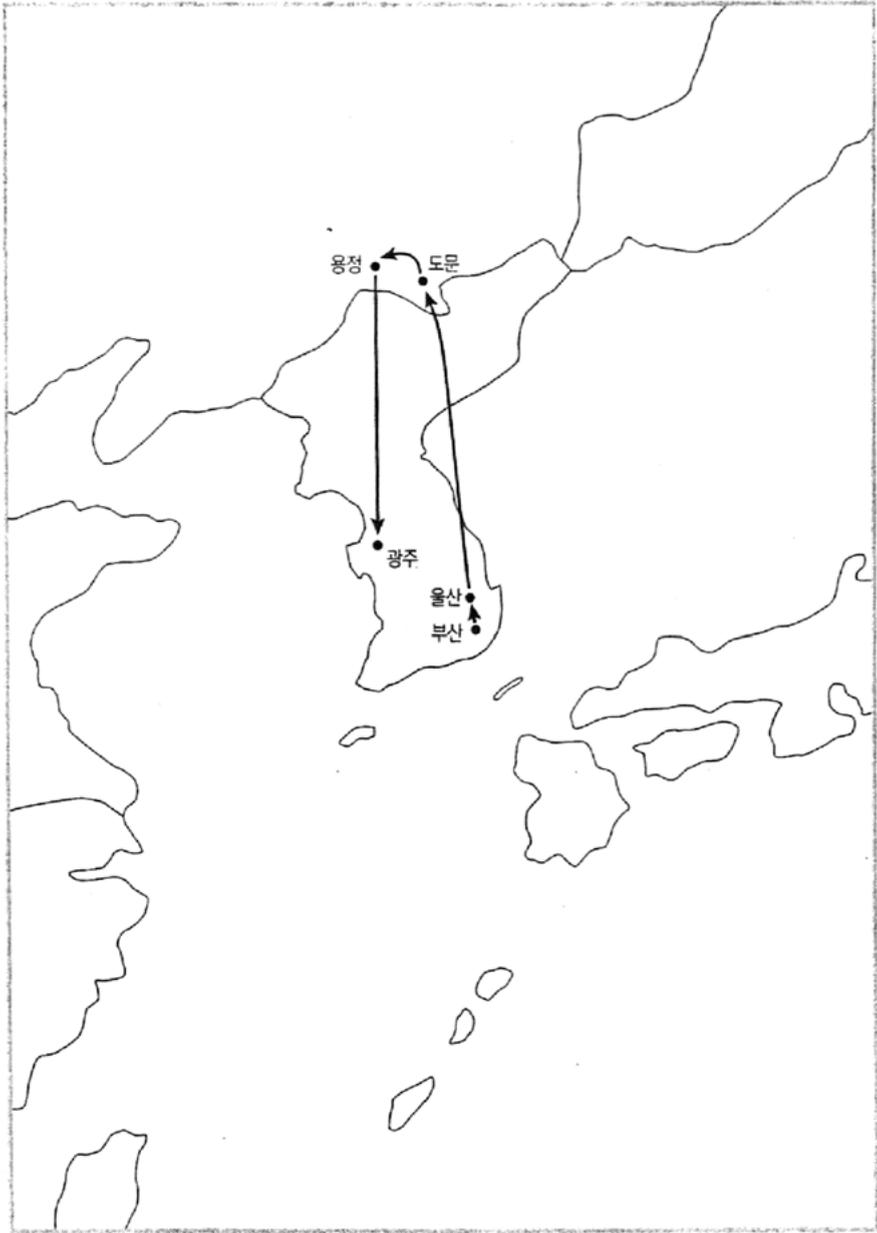
“That History, At First, I Was Ashamed About It, So I Was Not Able to Talk Very Clearly”

Lee Ok-seon



Lee Ok-seon.

1927	Born in Busan
1941 (Age 15)	Sold to a <i>udon</i> shop called Busanjin
	Sold to Ulsan
1942 (Age 16)	Taken as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> in Ulsan Airport in Tumen, China – Transported to the nearby comfort station at west market
1945 (Age 19)	Married Shim
1955 (Age 29)	Married Kim
2000 (Age 74)	Returned to South Korea
2001 (Age 75)	Recovered South Korean citizenship
2004 (Age 78)	Lives at the House of Sharing in Gyeonggi-do Gwangju



Lee Ok-seon's route: Busan – Ulsan – Tumen – Longjing – Gyeonggi-do Gwangju.

“Last time I went to [China], [my neighbors] said, ‘Grandmother, we told you not to go to [Korea], but you kept at it, and on TV, we saw you doing this, this (imitating a fist pumping in the air and yelling out slogans); is that why you went there?’”

“When I came here (South Korea), and they all came to ask me about the *comfort girls-women* problem, at first, I could not even speak or hold my face up high because I was ashamed. But, now that I have come out here and protested as an activist, I can do whatever I want. So, no matter who asks me, I can say, ‘Yes-, that is how it was.’ Even when students come and ask me, they do come to ask about the grandmother’s history. How I have slept with the soldiers. *Eh-goo*, because they have hounded me so much, now I feel no shame.”

“Students come every day [to the House of Sharing], and they spread the name Lee Ok-seon here, there, and everywhere. . . . For that, everything is great. When I go outside, they acknowledge me there; when I come into [the House of Sharing], they acknowledge me here so that I do not even need to speak. My mind is at peace. I have suffered fifty-eight years in China, and when I think of the hard times there, this is real happiness, to me.”

Her Passion for Learning

So, how happy was I? I jumped for joy. Since they said they would send me to school, I said I would go.

“I was born in Busan, but [my parents] were originally from Hwanghae-do (North Korea). I was born on October 10th, 1927 according to the lunar calendar. . . . I was born and raised in Busan until the age of fifteen.”

“When I repeatedly asked my mom to send me to the school, she said ‘You cannot go to school. We have no money. If you go to school, who will pay for your tuition? . . . If you do not look after the babies (younger siblings), I cannot go out and earn money, and we cannot eat. You have to take care of the babies so that I can earn money.’ That is how it was. And because they did not send me to school, I cried until I was fifteen. That is, every year, once a year, I cried on the day that school opened.”

“One day, [my mom said] ‘You are always crying because you cannot go to school. Well, there is a family who has no children, and they want to take you in as an adopted daughter and send you to school so that you can study.’ . . . So, how happy was I? I jumped for joy. Since they said they would send me to school, I said I would go.”

“But it was not at all what they said it would be. Since I kept begging [to be sent to school], my mom felt sorry for me, she could not take care of me as I wanted, and we were so poor she sent me to a stranger’s home. But when I arrived there, I found that it was a small *udon* shop . . . called Busanjin.”

“I grew my hair down to here (lowering her hand to her waist). Because my hair was so long, I could not braid [it] by myself, so if my mom did not brush it out and braid it, it was my dad who did it for me. But, that hair, when I went to the new place, they cut it off. So I cried because I was sorry about losing it. But I thought they would send me to school now. However, they only used me as a housemaid.”

“And the owners had other things in store for me. . . . One day, they set up a table with alcohol on it in the back room, then they put me in there. . . . When I went in, a man was sitting there in the room. . . . It would be like going to a place like the karaoke bar [these days] where men who had had too much to drink would try to put their hands on a woman and play with her. I started screaming and tried to shake his hands off. The guest yelled, and the owner came in. When he came in, the man yelled at him and scolded the owner, saying ‘where did you get such a girl?’ So the owner dragged me outside like this (imitating being dragged by the hair). The owner repeatedly poked me with an awl. (Indicating her shoulder) Here is where he poked me; there are still scars. And then, he beat me up.”

“Because I did not want to receive the guest, because I acted the way I did with the guest, he cursed me and dragged me onto the street, and he hit me and repeatedly poked my shoulders with an awl.”

“Because I did not listen to what they said, they sold me to Ulsan.”

“When I arrived in Ulsan, I found that it was also a bar. It was a second story house, and I went there to work as a housemaid. I had to work until 1 a.m. When the guests came at night, I would bring them water, and if they asked for some tea, I would serve that. I went back and forth doing errands until I turned sixteen.”

“But I did not stay for more than a few months at that house.”

On That Day

Coming back from an errand, I was dragged off. I do not even know by whom.

“As he was dragging me off, I resisted and kicked and squirmed, but after a little while, I saw a truck there. He put me on the truck. We were all small so how could we overcome the strength of the men? When he lifted me up onto the truck, it drove off. So, I screamed and yelled for them to get me off, and they covered my mouth. And since they covered my mouth, I could not talk or

make any noise. When I was put onto [the truck], I saw that there were other girls like me there, but I did not know how many. There were definitely girls there, maybe five or six. And we did not know where we were going. We were taken in the truck, and we went to a train station. We took a train from the station, but we did not know where we were going.”

“We did not know whether we were going to Japan or China; nobody knew. Even when we crossed to Tumen,¹ China, we did not know that it was China. We went to Tumen and what was there? A prison. When we were young, we did not know what a prison or a concentration camp was. But when I saw it for myself . . . the windows were barred by iron lattices about this wide (widening her hands about a shoulder-width apart). And the floor was made of concrete. They shoved us into the cold place. How many people were there? I think about six. They put all the other people into one room, but I slept in a single. Try as I might, I cannot think of what happened there then.”

“They told us to spend just one night in there and then come out, so I came out. Uh-, all the others had been separated and divided. Those friends, people who were dragged off together, all the others were separated and sent to different places, but I do not know where they were sent to.”

Airport

I cleaned the airfield, that big yard.

“So, where did I go from there? I went to an airport.² . . . It was an airport that the Japanese invaded and occupied; since it was a small airport, they were extending it to make it bigger. I cleaned the airfield, that big yard.”

“If you went where the Japanese soldiers were, there was barbed wire. They put up wire netting. And then they put electricity into the netting. Why did they put electricity into the netting? Because we would try to escape. They put the electricity in there so that if we tried to escape, we would be stuck to the netting and die.”

“We went there from here in July, and when we arrived there, the light and gentle breezes made the days cool. They put us to work, but we did not start

¹ A city of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in the eastern region of Jilin Province, China.

² The place Lee Ok-seon went to by train from Tumen was a soil-lined barracks of a Japanese army unit at the eastern airport of Yanji. The place today is in front of the Yanji Social Psychiatric Hospital. (Source: testimonial materials from the website of the Gyeongnam People’s Association for *Halmoni*.)

work right away. We kept cursing and screaming to be sent back home, so they beat us. Again and again. Some girls were scared of the beatings, so even though they were trembling, they pretended to work. Me, I had an unyielding spirit and a bad temper. And I was not afraid to be beaten. Even with a bloody nose, I still rebelled. ‘Why are you treating us like this? And why don’t you send us back home?’”

“Then, they gave us a big house inside the army unit. They gave it to us. When you see things like that, you realize how dirty and petty the Japanese people are. If there were ten girls, then ten, if there were twenty girls, then [twenty]. They raped them all they wanted. They did not even care how many people were around them.”

A Tin-Roofed House

We went not knowing what a comfort facility was. But when we arrived there, we found out what kind of a house it was.

“So, the Japs said, ‘Let’s go.’ Since we gave them so much trouble, they said, ‘Let’s go.’ Since these people said, ‘Let’s go,’ we thought they were sending us back home, so we were all happy and came out to go. They said because it is in the west, it is called west market. When we arrived there, there was a big house, a comfort facility; it was a tin-roofed house, and it had a sign. They took us to a comfort station. And we were too glad to follow them there because we thought we were going home.”

“We did not know at the time. Although we were raped at the army base, when they said let’s go, we went. We went not knowing what *comfort girls-women* were or what a comfort facility was. But when we arrived there, we found out what kind of a house it was. When we got to that house, it was just all Japanese people. They gave us cooked rice, but it was rice with millets. They gave us millet rice, and for side dishes, they gave us *kimchi* – which was more like dried radish greens – that tasted awful. And when I took a spoonful of the rice, *aheegoo*--. You know when you go to the beach to sunbathe, and there is a lot of sand there? Well, it was like I had eaten a spoonful of sand. Ah-, I cannot tell you how awful it actually was. But since we were all starving, it tasted good to us. Even the dried radish greens tasted good. That is what we ate to stay alive.”

“They told us to receive customers. And if we did not receive a lot of them, well--. Weekdays were okay, but Sundays were busy. On Sundays, the Japanese soldiers lined up like this (indicating a long line), in two lines. In two lines they would stand, with the lines going as far back as way over there. And we had to

receive them all. . . . They expected us to receive thirty or forty soldiers a day. How could we do that? Can hardly even eat. So, the soldiers dragged us off, but since we were so small, how could we do it? When a girl could not do what they wanted, they would say that she was not mature and for that, they would cut the girl with a knife, cut, stab, and kill her even.”

“The soldiers were not so bad compared to the ministers. Physical contraceptives were used – at least, we were supposed to – but they did not [use them,] really. So, we would insist on using them; we would tell them that they have to use them so that they do not get sick and I do not get sick.”

“At that time, we wrote down our names. We wrote our names on small pieces of wood – the names of all the girls and young women. We did not use our Korean names; our names were all changed to Japanese ones. At the time, I was using the name Domiko. They would plant the wooden sticks. If you caught a disease, and you could not receive soldiers, then that stick would be turned around like this (motioning how the stick would be turned around). This was to signify that this person cannot receive clients. But unless you were really sick, they did not let you do this. They still wanted you to receive soldiers. Of course, the hospital could not know about it. The army could not know about it. Even when we got our periods, once a month, we still had to receive soldiers. . . . When you have your period, there is a thing that you can use that can stem the bleeding. A tool.”

“(Indicating her vagina) There is something that they cut out so that it can go in there. When they give it to you, you use it to block the hole inside, so that the blood does not come out. But how would it not come out? In any case, even when we had our periods, we could not rest, we girls. So, there are many who cannot have children – girls who have been to places like that. I myself caught a disease. I had syphilis. Can you guess how much I suffered?”

“It was Salvarsan #606. I had a scar then. Now that I have become old, and it is been a few decades, I still have a little something here.”

“So when they give you the shot, look here. On my arm, the scar is this big.”

“I received many shots. But the disease still did not leave me, so I used mercury.”

“And because I used mercury, I cannot have any babies. . . . I was exposed to [gasified mercury]. The lower part, down there, was exposed to the steam. They wrapped my body inside a blanket, with just my head sticking out.”

Bruise

If they took that belt and hit you with it, your whole body would go black and blue.

“I kept trying to run away, but I was not able to run away; I tried to take drugs so that I could die, but I was not able to take drugs to die. Did I have money so that I could buy drugs? No, I did not. So, I could not. And I could not hang myself to die since there was no tree outside the door on which I could hang myself. Here, in Korea, there are so many trees by each house, but near the houses in China where people live, there are no trees. . . . They are only in the mountains. Even if you live right below the mountains, there are no trees in front of your house. So, I could not even die. And try as I may, I could not run away either.”

“Once, I did think about how I could escape. So, on Sundays, the front gate was always open. As there were a lot of soldiers coming in, I could escape then. I was seventeen years old. Being one year older and that much more mature, I fled. So, I did escape from the camp, but I did not know the roads to know where I was going. I did not know the roads! Those Chinese roads!”

“I did not have any money; I did not have anything. . . . And although I did escape out of there, I had no sense of direction. So, for a little while, I was in the mountains, but during that little while, I was caught and brought back. They caught me, dragged me off, and brought me back there.”

“As soon as I ran away, I was caught and brought back. I was dragged back and beaten. The fact that I did not die then but lived really meant that someone in heaven helped me. . . . When I think about how much I was beaten, I think I should have died on the spot, but I did not. Because they beat me so much, I was covered in blood. The soldiers kicked me with their boots on, and then the police would take their turn beating me, but when they could not make me surrender completely, they would make the soldiers beat me again. The soldiers would beat me, but I would not surrender. They asked if I would try to escape again, but I never said that I would not. I would talk back. I would say if you send me home, I would never run away again. I would ask, why have you separated us from our mothers and fathers and brought us to this God-forsaken place? Why have you brought us here and treated us like this? I would protest and not say a word about not running away again. They kept beating me. They kept beating me and beating me until they could not beat me anymore. Then they called in the military police.”

“They called in the military police, and their boots were very thick boots – soldiers’ boots. They kicked me with their boots until my body was just one big bruise. And next, they would take off the belt made from cowhide, which was this thick. It was a belt that they put on up there pretty high, on which they would attach a sword and a gun, so it had to be pretty solid. If they took that belt and hit you with it, (indicating her entire body) your whole body would go black and blue with bruises. When the next day came, I had to receive soldiers

again. When they took off my shirt, they were shocked at what they saw and ran away. Thinking, what in the world?”

Comrade Shim

He came, and I met him on the road. And he said, ‘Let’s go.’ How glad was I to see him?

“When [the Japanese soldiers] said that we should evacuate, we thought we were really going to evacuate. They said evacuation, but we did not know. We were just scared when we saw the planes attacking severely-, severely. They said let’s evacuate, so we went. We went, and now that I think about it, we went to the mountains.”

“The Japs just abandoned us in the mountains. So, we wandered around and around. . . . They left us in the mountains, with the sun going down. We said, ‘Let’s go. We cannot stay here in the mountains. Let’s go.’ So, like dogs, we crawled backward down the mountain. Because there were no paths. When we came down from the mountain, there was a path that people walked on. We were on that path for a long while. But finally, we came out at Yanji City.”³

“So, we came into the city, but everyone from the city was taking refuge elsewhere during the day. Everyone was taking refuge in the mountains; then at night, they would come back down and make food to eat, then at dawn, they would take refuge in the mountains again. The reason why they did this was that a lot of strangers were coming into the city and killed a lot of people. The women were raped and killed. So, the women could not walk around outside during the day. So when we came into the city, how could we get food to eat? There were so many people⁴ that we could not all go to one house to beg for food. Hey, at this rate, we were all just going to starve to death, we said. We could not go to anyone’s house. We did not know the way. We did not have any money, none of us. . . . We were all just going to die this way. So, we split up, the *comfort girls-women*. After we went our separate ways, I wandered around for a long while, lost.”

“While I was wandering, that man (Shim, her first husband) came in a truck full of soldiers. He came, and I met him on the road. And he said, ‘Let’s go.’ How glad was I to see him?”

³ A city of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, China.

⁴ There were about ten girls and young women who were from the comfort station.

“It was in the city no less. That is how we met, and he said, ‘Let’s go. Let’s go to my house.’ How glad was I to see him? Really. I was starving and just wandering around crying. He told me to get in the truck, so I got in the truck. *Aheegoo*, [but] the soldiers were all laughing. Then, someone said, ‘Comrade Shim,’ there they all call each other comrade, the soldiers did, ‘you seem to have found yourself a girlfriend.’”

“I was nineteen when we were liberated. I was liberated and having a hard time in Yanji when he took me home.”

First Marriage

[My husband] threatened to kill himself with a knife in front of his father. So, how could they let me go? They did not.

“When we got married, when we first met, [my husband] took me to his house without his parents’ permission. When they saw whom he had brought home, such a woman as I was, what could my father-in-law and my mother-in-law say? I had nowhere to go. But, no. How can you, a bachelor, take a woman like that as your wife? [My mother-in-law said], ‘No, you cannot.’ [My husband] and I were three years apart. I was nineteen and he was twenty-two, so she said no. She kept telling him to let [me] go.”

“I had three aunts-in-law, and the second aunt’s husband was from South Korea. Do you know what he said? ‘Hey, you cannot live with this woman. Why not? Even after you have lived together for a while, she cannot give you children. . . . So, if it is going to be like that, it would be better if you just sent her back home.’ He was saying to send me back home and to take another woman. [My husband] said that would never happen. When my father-in-law [who was sitting next to him] still said no, [my husband] threatened that if he were not allowed to live with me, he would kill himself with a knife in front of his father. So, how could they let me go? They did not.”

“He had taken me home while he was still in the army. After he took me to his house, he went back to [the army base]. He came back a few days before the wedding day. To get married. . . . But his family was in financial straits too. So, what we had, you could not call it a real wedding.”

“Since he stayed for four days, that means, from our wedding day, a whole bunch of soldiers from the base came and celebrated for two nights. That is two nights.”

“My mother-in-law was forty-one years old, right, no, she was forty-two years old. She wore traditional red Korean pants and jacket and would sit by a

spruce tree, smoking a cigarette. Even though the family was struggling financially, there was a grandfather, a grandmother, a mother, a father, and even three younger brothers. I entered such a family, and that made nine of us. But mostly, there were a lot of men, and the only women were me, my mother-in-law and the grandmother. Other than us three women, they were all men. Everyone was working but we were so poor that we might as well have been all jobless.⁵ Because there were six men and we were so poor, I could not eat much. We could not afford to eat anything with fat on it, either. So, all I could eat was burnt rice. Burnt rice was all I could eat because there were so many family members.”

“[My husband] was at the warfront when he got hurt, so he came home and stayed a few months. . . . We stayed together for a few months, then separated again. Why did we separate? [My husband] was at a Japanese army base where he commanded some men who were a little afraid of him. Because he was the leader. When those below him did not listen to what he said, he would beat them and cursed them. Yes, so, there were victims of his brutality.”

“After the liberation, saying that they wanted to remove all [vestiges of Japanese imperialism], they came to our home and attached tags on everything. Here too, when you are in debt, they stick pieces of paper on everything. That is what they do. So, we were not allowed to touch anything. They took it all. It was a new life in nakedness. We had nothing . Nothing at all.”

Forlorn Parting

He did not even send me a one-page letter, not even a postcard. And I waited for him for ten years.

“He told the whole neighborhood that if anybody mistreated me, they would get hurt. But for all that, after he left, he did not even send me a one-page letter, not even a postcard. And I waited for him for ten years. For his part, my husband got married, had kids, and set up house alright. Until I heard that news, I had been waiting for [my husband].”

“One of my uncles-in-law went to [downtown Yanji], and at a movie theater, ran into [my husband]. Old people do not change their appearance that much as they grow older, but young people change a lot when they get older,

⁵ This means that they would have had no financial means even if all nine people, including Lee Ok-seon, had been doing things to earn money.

don't they? So, the uncle did not recognize him, even though they were uncle and nephew. But my husband saw him first. When [my husband] asked, 'Are you from China?' [The uncle] said, 'Yes. Who are you?' 'You do not recognize me? Aren't you so and so's uncle?' [The uncle] said, 'That's right,' and [the uncle] kept asking my husband who he was. 'I am from China too. Don't you know me?' Then [the uncle] said, 'I don't remember you.' Then [my husband] said that he was my father-in-law's, his father's son. 'Oh,' (clapping his hands), 'how is it that you are here? I heard you went to the Soviet Union.' [My husband] said that he was living here now."

"After the movie, [my husband] invited the uncle to his house. And when the uncle followed him there, the uncle saw that he had three girls. (Almost falling down laughing) And there was another one in the belly [of his new wife]. The uncle was received with great hospitality. Then, the uncle said, 'What are you doing?' [My husband] replied, 'Uncle, ten years is a long time to be living alone, as a man. I naturally started thinking that I cannot live alone like this, so I started living a family life. When the uncle said, 'You are doing wrong. Go back to your home and see. . . . You have a wife already. Do you know how she is taking care of your grandmother?' [My husband] slapped his knee and said, 'I did wrong. I did not even think that she would still be there.'"

"[Without having any idea what was going on] for three years, I had been at the rubber factory where they make shoes to earn money to feed [my husband's] family. Because they were so poor and had a hard life, I did this. I fed them and clothed them. I went to that house, and until the grandfather passed away and the grandmother passed away, I took care of them with my own hands."

Second Husband

It seemed like I did all my suffering here at this house. I considered hanging myself, so you can see how hard it must have been.

"My aunt-in-law used to live deep in the mountains.⁶ One day, she took me [to her house], and when I arrived there, she asked me to trim the napa cabbages. When I trimmed them, she asked me to wash them; then she asked me to marinate them in salt. So, what was the reason for this? She wanted to marry me off again, and men came to see me. That is, they came by to check me out . . .

⁶ Lee Ok-seon lived here – in the same region of her first husband's home in Badao Zhen, Longjing City, Jilin Province – until she permanently returned to South Korea.

because I was working outside at the front door, you see. My second husband was a Chinese Communist Party member. He was a leader of society and a cultivator who managed the law in the countryside.”

“She hid my shoes and refused to give them to me, my aunt did. She said, ‘My nephew is not coming back. It has been ten years now, what makes you think he will come back? He is dead.’ Saying that he was not coming back, she urged me to [marry another man]. She said that there was no need to suffer so much earning for my in-laws and trying to take care of a family who were poor. No matter how much you try to care for them, there will not be any fruit for your labor, so go. She kept me there for several days without letting me go. So, finally, I said . . . ‘Ok, aunt, if you really feel sorry for me because I am suffering so much, let me see this guy. What kind of a person is he?’ So, she called him, and when he came, I saw that he was not bad-looking and had a good physique, and when you talked to him, you could tell that he was smart. So, I put all my cards on the table and told him about my flaws, but [after hearing it] he did not care about them. ‘At our house, there are two children without a mother. If you would just take good care of these children, I would marry you.’ That is what the man said. The girl was nine years old, and the boy was four. And the man seemed alright to me, so I gave my permission and got married.”

“But my husband turned out to be the bane of my existence. He drank heavily. *Ah-oo*, how is it that I ended up with a man just like my father? He gambled. He drank. *Ahhew-*. He gambled away our house, and he gambled away our cow. I was left speechless. He even gave away our rice to pay off his debts. And that too, he did without our knowledge; we only found out after the fact. After they found out, my son and daughter-in-law worked until they sweated blood to pay off their father’s debts. Now, we had no house and no cow; there was nothing for the children to inherit from their father.”

“*Aheegoo*, do not even talk about it. Everything had to be liquidated,⁷ so we nearly lost the shirts off our backs. Because of my husband, we had to liquidate everything, and afterward, nothing was left.”

“It seemed like I did all my suffering here at this house. I considered hanging myself, so you can see how hard it must have been. I suffered more here than at my first husband’s house. I suffered from more hunger and a lack of clothing, and that is how I lived for fifty years with that old man, paying off all his debt. But after [my husband] died, the men [in the neighborhood] came

⁷ Lee Ok-seon’s second husband, Kim, was a local councilor from the Chinese Communist Party. They had to sell all their property due to Kim’s punishment because of a verbal mistake he made while drunk that became known to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

around asking, ‘Could you give us your husband’s shirts? The ones you are throwing away.’ So, I gave away what I could give away, then I looked and found that there was another bag full of his clothes. *Aheegoo-*, there was a time when we only had one pair of pants to share between us, and now that there are so many shirts here, now we have enough to eat, and now life has become livable, you had to go and die. That is what I said.”

My Poor Son

I came when he was four years old and stayed with him until he turned fifty-one, so he has deeper feelings for me.

“I suffered so much after going into that house; the wife that died left such a heavy debt when she died. . . . The son was only four years old. Within three days, he attached himself to me, started calling me mom, and never left my side. So, I raised him, and I promised myself that when my adopted son grew up, I would tell him that I was not his birth mother. . . . Raising my son was okay, but because of my daughter, I experienced a bit of heartache. You know, girls are a little different. The little one called me mom, but the older one was nine, so she knew. She was with me for ten years, and then she went to North Korea.⁸ The time might have been 1964 or maybe 1963? It was around that time.”

“So, after I let my daughter go, I lived with my one son for a while until just before he turned twenty. I told him ‘I am not your birth mother; your birth mother died, and she is buried over there. So, now you should go to the mountain where your [birth] mother is buried and cut the grass and stuff. . . . Go to your mother’s family. Your uncle is waiting for you to see if you want to go to the mountain. I will buy and [bring] you some alcohol, so you take it and go.’ So, that is how I told him when he was twenty plus years old, and that is when he went to his [birth] mother’s [grave]. That is how it started, and now he goes to her grave regularly. He knows that [I] am not his birth mother, but the time that he spent with her was short, and the time that he spent with me was long. So, he does not have much feeling for his birth mother. I came when he was four years old and stayed with him until he turned fifty-one, so he has deeper feelings for me. That is why he says there is no one but you, mom. I love my son and my daughter-in-law.”

⁸ According to Lee Ok-seon’s testimony, her nineteen-year-old daughter permanently went to North Korea, attracted by the Migration Incentive Policy of North Korea, in around 1963 or 1964.

“I pity my son. Because he is different from the others. . . . His ear was infected, and he had to have surgery on it. And since they took out one eardrum, he cannot hear well. The other eardrum also was affected by a disease⁹ and does not function well. You have to yell really loudly for him to hear a little. That is why I pity my son.”

“I thought about divorce; I would sit my son down and think about it. I would look at him and think: I did not even give birth to him, so what does it matter? If I leave him here, some woman will come and take care of him. But then, (about to cry) tears would come pouring down, and I could not stand it anymore. So, I could not leave. I could not divorce him, the old man.”

“And there was this one time, I went to the mountain with some cowhide and a long wooden stick to hang myself and die. When I climbed up high for quite a bit, I found these beautiful trees, and among them there was one very tall one. So, I thought I could die hanging on that tree. I sat at the foot of that tree and suddenly felt no strength in me, and with my legs stretched out, scratching the ground with the stick, I cried and contemplated [whether] I should live or die. I was sitting like that when I heard noises coming from below the mountain, people’s voices. My son, daughter-in-law, grandson, and husband were all looking around for me. My son was saying, ‘Mom is not here. Mom is not here’ in a panic. ‘Ah, you are looking for me.’ And I cried and cried, just sitting there. Then I thought I could not die. My son was looking for me like that. Then, I wiped my tears, stuck the stick in my pocket, and came down [from the mountain]. Avoiding the family, I went a roundabout way and arrived home, crying, I took the stick out of my pocket, threw it on the ground, and threw myself on the ground and started weeping. Then, my son ran into the house, saying, ‘Father, mom has come home.’ He came in, asked what was wrong, and put away the stick. When he asked what was wrong and told me, ‘Mom, don’t be like this,’ this made me cry all the more.”

Midwife

Even now, if there is anyone who cannot have children, just call me.

“I [married] my second husband in 1955, and I started working as a midwife in the winter of that year.”

“There was no one to be a midwife there. The chief of the big hospital asked, why isn’t there anyone we can send there? Let leader Kim’s wife do it.

⁹ It is presumed that this was an ear infection leading to hearing loss.

So, I received a call from the hospital and learned the skills and did it. I worked there for fifteen years.”

“Being a midwife, I can do it with my eyes closed. Even now, if there is anyone who cannot have children, just call me. During my fifteen years, I have neither made any mistakes nor failed anyone.”

“After I was married for the second time, I took on a sanitation business. As a sanitary worker, I took over that business, and then I worked as a midwife, and then I worked with the welfare office, and then I became a representative of production workers. I had four jobs. Many people in China had several jobs in those days. Then, after the liberation . . . I was first appointed as the head of the women’s party where I took responsibility and worked. Then, I became the leader of a group of the party and took responsibility for that department. And then I became chief of the women’s committee.”

Attempt to Return

I was searching for twenty years, to find [my family].

“Because I cannot write, it was very difficult. But, I wrote a letter to KBS broadcasting station,¹⁰ I did. . . . But, there has not been any news.”

“[Since I first sent a letter to Korea until now], it has not been twenty years. No, it has not been twenty years. It is a little over ten years. Yes, it is over ten years.”

“Even after I sent the letter, I waited a long time. A few years I waited. Then, the news came [from Korea that they had found my family].”

“It is a complicated story. I know a person who has a niece, a Korean person. [I] have been going to their house. That niece has a cousin. [The cousin] said, *Unni*, I feel very sorry for so-and-so’s mom. She came to that house and found a son who was not that bright, but she did not reject him, rather she took pity on him and took care of him. She came to that poor family and suffered a lot. Please help her. . . . He was from Seoul. His last name was Park.¹¹ And since he was boarding [in that house], he knew my history.”

¹⁰ Lee Ok-seon thinks that KBS assisted with her homecoming, but it was the SBS program “Issues and People,” which offers investigative reports on social topics, that made her homecoming possible. The episode was about the “Search for hometowns of Japanese military *comfort girl-woman halmonis* remaining in China” and aired on January 4, 1997.

¹¹ Park Sang Jae of Yanbian University of Science and Technology assisted with Lee Ok-seon’s return home to South Korea.

“Because Park was boarding at the house of the family who knew me, he talked to them and came to see me.”

“[Director Park asked me,] ‘They say that you were at a comfort facility. Is that true?’ So, I said ‘Yes, that is right.’ At first, I was so ashamed about my history that I was not able to talk very clearly. I only told him the fact that I had been in such a place. So, [Director Park] said to the middle-aged woman at his boarding house that if the old lady speaks like that, even in [Korea], they will not take her testimony that she had been a *comfort girl-woman*. Because I was ashamed then, I did not say anything else. I only testified to the fact that I had been at a comfort facility.”

“When he came to [Korea], at first, he could not find my house.”

“I told him just to take me to Busan train station, then I could find my house with my eyes closed. At the time, I had been [living in China] for fifty-five years. [Director Park] asked, ‘Grandmother, really? Really? Do you really think you can find your house?’ I told him, ‘Yes, really.’ He asked again if I could really find the place. [So, I said,] really, just take me to the station and I can find it with my eyes closed.”

“So, I drew illustrated maps of my house and the neighborhood it was in. I drew them for him, and I said, here (making out like she was pinpointing her house on a map) is my house, and behind it, there is a big river where you can wash laundry and across it was a bridge. And if you crossed that bridge, there is a school. Well, I thought there was a river there, but [I later found out] that it had since disappeared. And our house in my time was called Bosoo-jung, but now it is called Bosoo-dong. Jung has changed to dong. (Smiling pleasantly) So, that was wrong too. I let him know that you have to get off at the train station and then take a bus to get to my house. . . . So, finally, he found my nephew that way in Busan, and I found out that all my siblings were there. My oldest nephew did all the paperwork to invite me to Korea.”

“I arrived in Busan. I went with my second younger sister and she said, ‘*Unni*, you said you could find it with your eyes closed. We are almost here.’ ‘Ok. Then, take me there.’ So, she took me to the front door of the house from the car. . . . Did I say I could find it with my eyes closed? I could not find it with my eyes wide open. Needless to say, I could not find it with my eyes closed.”

“On June 1st, 2000, I arrived here in South Korea. . . . For a year and a half, I stayed quietly in this room half dead and half alive [at the House of Sharing]. . . . Because I did not have citizenship. . . . My family reported me dead. They played with the law, but how was a dead person going to come alive?”

“My nephew said that because there was no news of me for so long that uh--, they reported me dead. He had no idea where I was. . . . Nobody knew. So, how could he find me? That is why he reported me dead. When I came back, my neighborhood told me all. My mom would fill a bowl with a cold drink on top of a crock

and prayed every day. ‘God, if my Ok-seon is not dead somewhere but alive, then let her live a healthy life.’ That is what she prayed until she breathed her last breath. When I came back to [Korea], my younger sister’s friends from the neighborhood said, ‘Thanks to all of your mom’s prayers, your older sister has come back alive.’”

“In the end, I came back to [Korea] to find my siblings, so even if I only live for just one more day, it is okay because I am happy.”

Interviewer’s Commentary: Lee Ok-seon’s Homecoming

Oh Jiyeon

With her extremely white hair, Lee Ok-seon *halmoni* would stand out anywhere. At the Wednesday rally that I attended for the first time since I started working in 2001 as a member of staff at the Korean Council, my first impression of Lee *halmoni* was an image of a woman who maintained a sense of calm with a modestly lowered head and white hair and tidy clothes. Before the Wednesday rally began, the other assistant administrator introduced me to about ten *halmonis* who would participate in the rally that day. They said that among them, Lee Ok-seon *halmoni*, who had come back home from China not too long ago, was someone who did not like being in anyone’s debt, and who was quiet but always had a sense of assertiveness and confidence about her. As if to prove what they said, she boldly declared that we must get an apology and compensation from the Japanese government in an interview with a newspaper reporter who attended the rally. Hers was a wholly different and unfamiliar image from that of the usual image of a *comfort girl-woman* – an object of sympathy.

My close personal relationship with Lee Ok-seon *halmoni* began when I traveled with her as a guardian to attend the assembly for the testimonies of *comfort girls-women* that took place in Tampa, Florida in May of 2002. Despite nearly twenty hours of flight time, she did not once complain that she was either sick or tired. When I, who was so much younger than her, was struggling with sitting on the plane for so long, all she said was, “my legs are a little stiff.” I think that she was worried that if she felt uncomfortable or tired, it would be a great burden on me who was traveling with her. The character of Lee *halmoni*, who did not want to become a burden to others, became more salient the more I met with her, to the point that whenever she asked me for something, or when she was receiving my help, she would always say, “Ms. Oh, write it all down in your bankbook.” Even as a joke, she made sure that she expressed the fact that she would pay back what she owed.

Lee Ok-seon *halmoni* also never forgot to say, “Because I am a fool, I do not know anything,” whenever she explained anything about herself. I just thought

that she was using that expression because she had just come back from China and everything was strange and difficult for her. However, listening to her testimony in the United States, I realized that calling herself a “fool” was a very double-sided expression of herself. Her story that began with her describing herself as a “fool” was immaculately organized, and she remembered her experience as a *comfort girl-woman* in detail with relative accuracy. Is calling herself a “fool” maybe a way to prepare herself for possible mistakes she might make in the future?

August 23, 2002 was the first day I visited Lee *halmoni* to interview her, and it was a sweltering day. I entered the room of the grandmother, who had just returned from having been out, and gave her an explanation of the oral work, and then asked her for permission to publish the book. She agreed very happily and told the story, albeit very briefly, of how she lived in China after the liberation.

Lee Ok-seon *halmoni's* room was neatly arranged with a bed, appliances, and a clean wardrobe, and on the other side, a statue of St. Mary, the Bible, and a rosary were placed. Right next to the door was a mirror, and on the front of the mirror was attached a prayer, with the title ‘Daily Prayer,’ written by her in poor handwriting. She said that whenever she went out, she would stand in front of the mirror and memorize the prayer, and when she went to the United States with me, she woke up alone at dawn and memorized it. A devout Catholic since her days in China, the grandmother has lived a zealous religious life, appreciating her freedom to be able to pray and go to church that she had in Korea.



Lee Ok-seon.

To have a more effective meeting, I looked through her testimony that was posted on the website of the Gyeongnam People's Association for *Halmoni* and watched the program "Issues and People" that was broadcast on SBS in 1997. From these two sources of data, I found out that she had returned home to find her remaining family in South Korea, and that she had been ashamed of her history as a *comfort girl-woman*.

I could not imagine that Lee *halmoni* was ashamed of the fact that she was a *comfort girl-woman*. This was because what I had seen so far about her had been confidently shedding light on the fact that having been a *comfort girl-woman* was not a shameful thing and the fact that the responsibility lies with the Japanese government. Furthermore, although she first tried to come back to Korea for the personal reason of finding her family, over time, that reason shifted to 'This problem must be resolved while I am still living.'

Also, Lee Ok-seon *halmoni*, who was always praying and thinking about the family members she left behind in China, would boast and share her worries about her family whenever she had the chance. She recollected her memories of her son who cannot hear well because of the ear surgery he had when he was little, her very obedient daughter-in-law, and her two smart grandchildren as though they were rewards for her hard life in China. She told me the story of how she tried to kill herself because her life was just too hard, but that she has lived until now because of her son.

My second meeting with Lee *halmoni* took place at the Korean Council office in early September 2002 after the Wednesday rally. She took her seat and slowly told me the stories of her life, one by one, in order. However, as the story moved on to the times after the liberation, her voice began to tremble a little bit, and the changes in her emotions became varied as well. When she started the story about when she met her first love after the liberation, I could even feel her light excitement. When the story reached her second marriage after she parted from her first love, she gave a speech about how hard her marriage had been, and saying "Life has become a lot easier for married people these days" to me who was married, she emphasized her difficult life and even let out a light sigh.

As the interview continued, Lee Ok-seon *halmoni* talked about her second husband's son and daughter. While telling me their stories and going into great details, from her impressions of her children and their characters to even their medical histories, she who seemed so strong, ultimately, broke down in tears. She again began reminiscing when she was telling the story of how she raised her son until the day that she left China and how much that son regarded her with love, saying, "There is a deeper love in raising a child than just having given birth to him." And she also talked about how much time and effort she spent getting back to Korea, how many people helped her, and why she wanted to come to Korea so much. Of course,

these facts are hidden behind the confidence that she showed, but they might also be the driving force behind her that has made her so strong to this day.

In the spring of 2003, the Korean Women's Association of Oriental Medicine examined the health of *halmoni* at the House of Sharing for free and made oriental medicine for them. The doctor who examined Lee *halmoni* diagnosed her with slight signs of strokes and depression. I was wondering whether this was not a little too much for her, who outwardly seemed to have no health problems. The nurse who was checking her health at the House of Sharing related to me that it seemed to Lee *halmoni* that her family in Korea seemed to be avoiding her for some reason. Also, the nurse shared that she seemed to want to invite her grandchildren, whom she had left behind in China, to Korea.

Lee Ok-seon, a girl who cried for several years with the desire to study, after decades, has now come into the present. After a long and rough history, she seems to be worrying, stuck between an estrangement from her family in Korea whom she wanted to see so badly and the wishes of her family in China who want to see her so much.

Currently, Lee Ok-seon *halmoni* is passionate about studying, as if she is trying to make up for not having been able to study during her childhood. She is studying Japanese to give her testimony to the Japanese government and people from her own lips about her victimization as a *comfort girl-woman* through which she had to experience the wounds of her body and heart. She is also eager to study Korean, which she cannot read or write. Her positive attitude would have eventually made her what she is in the present. And it would have given her the strength to live in the present.

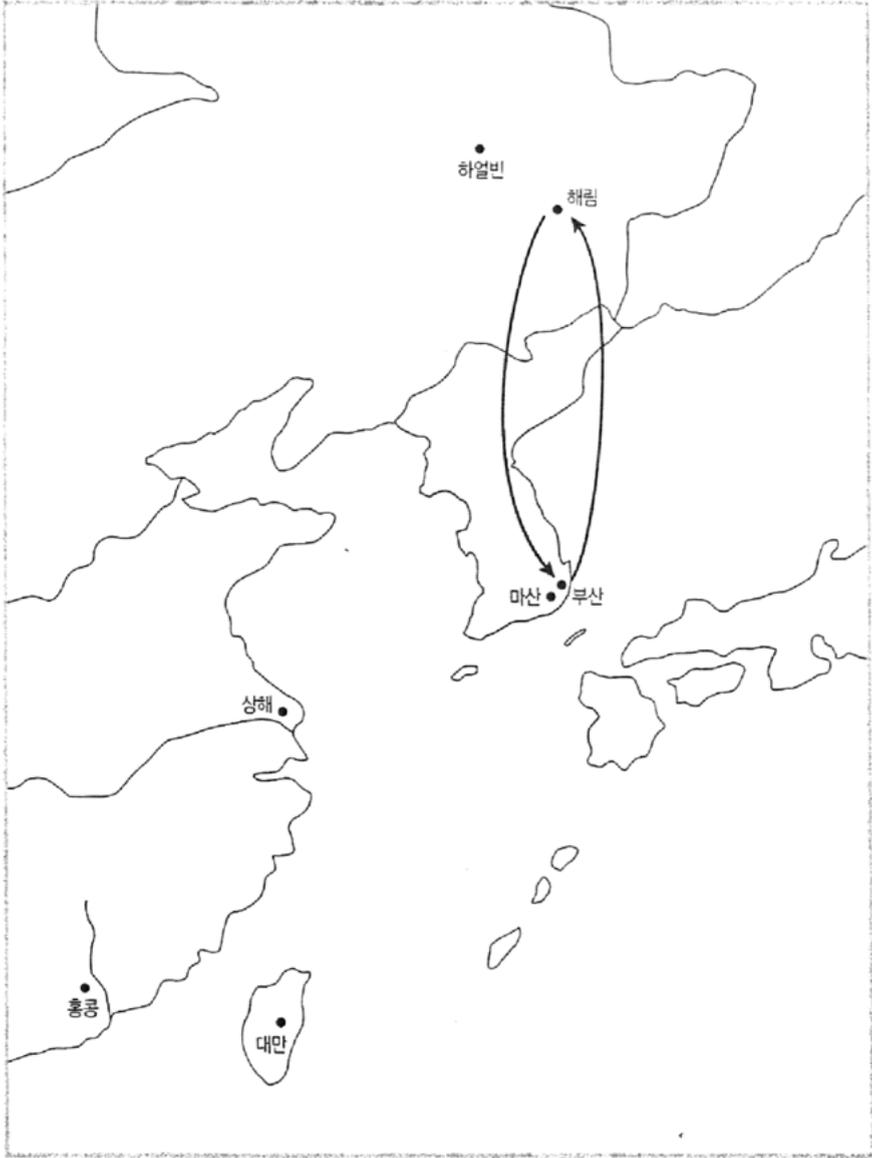
“Never, Ever Forget”

Lim Jeong-ja



Lim Jeong-ja.

1922	Born in Gyeongsangnam-do Jinju
1926 (Age 5)	Moved to Busan
1938 (Age 17)	Taken to Manchuria from near Busan Lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Hailin, Daalian, Shanghai, Harbin, etc. as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i>
1945 (Age 24)	After the liberation, cohabited with Kim for about half a year around Hailin
1946 (Age 25)	Arrived in Busan by way of Pyeongyang evacuation shelter and settled in Chungmu
1958 (Age 37)	Moved to Masan
1996 (Age 75)	Registered as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i>
2004 (Age 83)	Lived in Gyeongsangnam-do Masan
2011 (Age 90)	Deceased



Lim Jeong-ja's route: Busan – Hailin – Busan.

(In addition to Hailin, Lim Jeong-ja lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Harbin as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*, but cannot accurately remember the route of travel.)

“Whenever there was good music, I would start dancing. Before, we used to have a record player that played music. Me, for me, that was my joy. When my friends came, I would play the phonograph, and we would dance, sing, and play together before they went home. Even now, if there is good music, I lie down, be still, and appreciate the music.”

“I like music. Songs, I like sad songs, ones that are tragic. I do not like comedy. When they play tragic soap operas on TV, I am thrilled. I like stories about daughters-in-law who get mistreated by their mothers-in-law, or stories where a woman gets married but is persecuted by her in-laws and finally gets abandoned and kicked out of the house. Those are good too. I do not know why I like tragedies so much.”

“Maybe it is because I am lonely, but I like flowers a lot too. . . . I like flowers too.”

“I wonder how I got so old. Even though I am old, my heart is young. My body is not listening to me anymore. When you get old, the fight is with your body. (Letting out a sigh) *Aheego-*”

“My heart is full of sorrow. It was not like that up until last year, but this year, my heart is full of sorrow. . . . My heart is sad a lot of the time. And I cannot vent to anyone.”

“When I die, I will become a ghost of a bachelorette. It is not like I have ever been married or anything. I have become an old maid of 81 years. I have a lot of bitterness in my heart. When I tried telling this story (getting choked up), tears welled up. So I could not. And who would I tell anyway?”

A Spring

I filled the bucket with water, but just as I was about to draw it . . .

“I did not even graduate. I was attending the fourth grade of elementary school when I dropped out. I had to work for a living because my family had a tough life. I could not graduate from school, and I got a job at a [rubber shoes] factory.”

“I got the job at sixteen and worked for about a year. After that . . . I did not go to the factory but was [at home] in order to help my mother. Although I did not cook, I drew water and cleaned the house.”

“I was taken when I was seventeen years old. Aren’t you still a kid at seventeen? It was still the time for me to play the baby [for] the grandmothers. What did I know at that age? I was innocent and naïve. I did not know anything.”

“At that time, there was no water service, so we drew water from a spring. At Chungmu,¹ above the spring, there was a Catholic church. Just below it, there was a spring this wide (with arms wide open). Maybe it was a public spring because everyone in town drew water from there. Not a lot of water came out of the spring; it would just trickle down little by little. You would lower a bucket, fill it with water, and pull it up slowly. It took a lot of time to fill the bucket. I filled the bucket with water, but just as I was about to draw it, somebody came and hit me like this (striking the interviewer’s leg). He then tapped on my back. When I quickly looked around, there was a soldier.”

“He was a Japanese soldier. A soldier with a star [on his shoulder], wearing a sword and a soldier’s hat.”

“So, I asked ‘Who are you?’ He answered ‘Young girl, come talk with me a little.’ At that time, there was a man next to him, and he was South Korean. When I asked, ‘What for?’, he replied, ‘Girls, stop living a tough life in Korea. We will get you good jobs, so why don’t you come with us?’”

“He said he would get us good jobs. And that he would not harm the girls. He said that they had built a big factory and that they needed to hire more people.”

“He said it was a clothes factory. He even explained [what kind] of work we would have to do. So, I said I do not know how to make [clothes]. He replied you could go and learn. He said that you won’t know how to make clothes at first, but that there will be someone who will teach you.”

“When I said, ‘No, I cannot, I am here to get water from the spring, and I cannot go without my parents’ permission,’ they immediately forced me and put me in the truck. In the truck. I was not strong enough to resist. I was pushed in the truck.”

“‘*Aheego*, I can’t. I can’t. If I go without telling my mother, I will be beaten to death.’ I was scared, so I cried. But even though I was crying, they did not heed my words.”

“There was nothing I could do when two men held me by force and made me go with them. I told them that I would just go tell my mother then come back, but they said no. They said I could write a letter after I get there. What was I to do? I could not overcome a man. . . . They were driving, and I had no choice but just to be taken.”

“Yes, I was being taken, and I was taken all the way to Busan. . . . When we arrived in Busan, they had brought two other girls. One was a girl from Gyeongju, the other one was from Gyeongsangnam-do Goseong.”

¹ Lim Jeong-ja remembers Gyeongsangnam-do Chungmu as the place where she was abducted, but in the light of circumstances, somewhere near Busan is assumed to be the actual place.

“We slept in Busan, and the next day, we were on the train. We were going by train, but there was no end in sight to the journey.”

“Inside the train . . . the men sat on both sides of me, and I sat right in the middle. I guess they must have thought that I might run away.”

“I kept feeling uneasy. I thought these people were taking me to hurt me. I felt overwhelmed and thought about jumping off the train, but then I would be dead. What good would it be if I died? I would not be able to see my mom and dad. And in order to jump off, I would have to escape, but where is there to escape inside of a train? *Aheeyoo-*.”

“But where were they taking us? They continued to take us on the train, and we even went as far as Manchuria.”

“When we were on the train for two or three days, my legs became all swollen, since I was sitting all day long. At that time, I had nothing to eat; I did not even eat lunch. So, I was starving to death.”

Tatami Room

So I asked what sort of place this was, and they said this is a place for receiving customers.

“After we got off the train, the first place we went to was Taiwan. He said it was Taiwan. Taiwan is Manchuria, right?”²

“There was neither sound nor sight of the person who caught me. . . . I hated them and wanted to kill them.”

“It seemed that there was a middle-aged Korean woman working with the Japanese. I think that things were done through her.”

“When I asked what sort of place this was, the girls there asked me, ‘How did you get caught and taken here?’ I answered that I had gone to the spring to get water and was caught by the Japs. They said ‘*Aheego-*, what can we do? How could they take and bring this baby girl? *Aheego*, you came to a place where no one should come.’ So, I asked what sort of place this was, and they said this is a place for receiving customers. ‘What does receiving customers mean?’ They said that it means that when the Japanese soldiers come, you sleep with them. *Aheego*, what is to become of me? I sat down and wept. But

² Lim Jeong-ja believes that Taiwan and Manchuria are the same place. It is not possible to get to Taiwan by train, so it is assumed that the first place she went to was Manchuria and then she was moved to the southern part of Taiwan.

what good does crying do? I cried so much that my throat was hoarse, and I had no energy. I thought of how I could go back to Korea, but I did not know the way out, and there was nothing I could do. ‘If you get taken here, there is no way of getting out,’ said the girls. ‘We too were taken here, and so, we are stuck here and are suffering like this.’”

“There were two women there. Then, there were the girls who came with me, Jaya and Moyek (the names of the two girls who were hauled in with Lim Jeong-ja at Busan), and there was me. That is three, four, five altogether in the house. Five people were receiving customers.”

“The house looked like a Japanese house. There was a vestibule, and the floor was like a Japanese floor. And the room next to it was a *tatami* room. There was a garden in the center; in front of the owner’s room was the large garden with flowers and a pond where they caught carp. And over there by the hallway, there were three rooms all in a line, and over on this side, there were three rooms all in a row. Also, there was a room near the vestibule when you first come in, and in that room, I saw the girls and ladies all sitting down putting on makeup in the evening.”

“I was sitting in the *tatami* room when it became night and the men came to play. They came out and took only the pretty women. They only picked out the pretty girls, saying, ‘*Ano onna ga iina*’ (‘I like that girl’), and they took them to their rooms.”

“When you walk in, my room was the third on the left. The *tatami* room was like a *yojohan* (about the size of four *tatami*). The room was square, maybe the size of my room over there. There was nothing in the room, except for the futon. As far as personal belongings go, they just put in one little cupboard, that was it. All you did in there was sleep with the Japs, so what would you need to put in there? We left personal stuff, such as our clothes, in the owner’s room and did not put anything in the room where we slept.”

“When the Japanese soldiers came, I would receive them without a break until night. And when there was a party, such as a farewell dinner, I was called to go in a rickshaw wearing a *kimono*. A lot of invitations came from such places for me. I kept getting called and others were not called.”

“Other women did not know Japanese well. I knew Japanese. I guess that was why. Also, at that time, I guess my face looked alright when I put on makeup and put my hair up in a bun for the *kimono*, the big-hair style.”

Then I would say, ‘*Dozo oagari kudasai*’ (‘Please come in’) and poured alcohol for them. When they asked me to sing, I would sing a song for them. And if they asked me to dance Japanese *odori*, the traditional Japanese dance of *ki-saengs* (clapping her hands and singing), I would sing. I sang well. Japanese songs. They liked it, I guess, so when the farewell parties took place, the

invitation came for Hayashi Sadako³ to come. My real name is Hayashi Sadako, but the name I was called there was Re-chan, Re-chan.”

“When I came down [from the rickshaw], the Japanese people would be sitting there all in a circle. (Kneeling) Then I would fall on my knees and bow like this. I developed the habit of sitting like this, so even when I kneel for a long time, my legs do not hurt. I got into the habit of sitting like this so that even now, I always sit down on my knees. So, I have gotten bruises on my knees like this.”

“After they drank and if they liked me, they came to my house and slept. When I slept with them, I received money for sex. I took the money for sex and the place where I took it was the owner’s room. I then gave it to the owner. If I had a guest for the entire night, it did not matter if others came to spend time with me, I still could not come out. I had to stay in the room until the next day. I could only go out when I had to urinate or defecate, that was it. I could not. I had to please the guests. I was attractive to the guests and very popular, so the owner tried not to send me anywhere else.”

“She did not want to send me, but she was continually being told to take me to other places, so how could she not send me?”

“She said, ‘Hayashi Sadako has to go to another place, another country.’ She did not bring the girls that came with me but took only me. Only me.”

“The calls kept coming from other places for me to come. If I went, they would give money to the owner. They asked to have that female sent. They gave money for sex. So, I had to go. I had to follow the owner’s orders to live. Whether I liked it or not, I had to go. I did whatever she told me to do. With my body, I could not do what I wanted. I was a prisoner for the sin of being taken there.”

Cast

But, just try not to cater to their moods. They would pummel and beat the girls.

“They took me to Hailin.⁴ To Hailin.”

“Chinese people lived there, and the Japs had their army units there too. There were several units.”

“I was taken to Takasakono Ie (the name of the comfort facility, Yoto’s house).”

“When I went inside, there were lots of girls. On the night I arrived, they gave me a room on the second floor. It was a room with a bed.”

³ In addition to the name Hayashi Sadako, Lim Jeong-ja was called Reiko and Re-chan.

⁴ Assumed to be the Hailin city of Heilongjiang Province in China.

“I slept there and ate a meal prepared by the owner. And when I woke up in the morning, I continuously received guests, from morning till evening, till dawn, I kept receiving them. Chinese men came too. They were *gunzoku* who were civilians employed by the Japanese military. They would come and did it quickly when time allowed. They finished fast. So, when they gave me the money, I took the money from them and gave it to the owner, and the owner gave me a military scrip.”

“If a girl from such and such numbered room brought such and such amount of money, she would get a scrip. So, I diligently saved all the scrips. But, even when I collected the scrips, the owner gave me nothing. The owner took all the money.”

“When I went to the baths or when I went out to buy something, the owner would give me just a little, that was all. I did not make any money. I did not.”

“*Ae-ee-go-*. Why did she earn money in such an immoral way? The money would all turn into evil. What is good about money made from selling the bodies of others? That granny, she must have died. At that time, that woman was in her forties, so now she must be dead. She could not still be alive. She must have kicked the bucket.”

“The Japanese soldiers were terrible. Terrible! Did they care about the girls? If they were satisfied with the sex, that was the end of it. But, just try not to cater to their moods. They would pummel and beat the girls, they did. And the one that came after having drunk his fill would throw a sleeping girl down. When you see things like that, Japanese people are wicked. Venomous is all I can think of when I see that. So, there is something wrong with this arm. (Turning her right arm to the left and right) Turning this arm this way and that way hurts.”

“I was sleeping in bed, but I was so tired that I did not even know I had fallen asleep, and I would not have known even if someone had entered the room. I was sleeping without the door being locked; the [Japanese officer] caught me by the neck and threw me down to the first floor. My room was on the second floor.”

“I was thrown out, KO’d, and my arms were broken.”

“*Aheego*, how that hurt. It hurt. I grabbed my [shoulder] like this and said, ‘Mother,⁵ the Japanese soldier threw me from the second floor down to the first, and it hurts like hell.’ The mother came out and said something to him. She said, ‘I will call your unit and tell them to take you in.’ So [the officer] was scared and went back [to the unit]. The next day he was drunk again, and came in, shouting in gibberish. He then said, ‘They say that I threw a girl in this house and her arm is broken.’ So, the mother jumped out and shouted, ‘Fix my baby’s arm. What are you going to do?’ So, he told her to take me to the hospital and gave her money.”

5 Lim Jeong-ja called the brothel owner ‘mother.’

“It was summer, but they put a cast on it (pointing to the right shoulder) to here. When they tore the cast off a month and a half later, it was so disgusting, I could not even look at it. *Aheego-*, I broke out in a heat rash, so my skin was a mess. Someone had to brush my hair and feed me my meals. I could not do anything on my own. I was sitting in the room doing nothing. I could not even receive guests. Just sitting there, I suffered a lot. I would lie alone in the owner’s room, and someone had to feed me my rice one spoonful at a time because I could not eat unless I was fed. I found that you cannot get full on rice someone else is feeding you. It was also a time when I would normally eat a lot as a growing teenager. I was very hungry.”

“Even now, when I wake up, my arm hurts. Yesterday the [hospital] director asked me where I was hurting the most with pain, and I said ‘this arm.’ I could not tell him that story. I told him I fell and got hurt. So, he gave me medicine, I received a shot, and everything was okay, but after a few days, it hurt again.”

“Look at it. (Pointing to the right arm) This bone is different, right? My clothes keep going down like this. So, I am a miserable and disabled person. Who would know this?”

“Well-, Heavenly Father took care of me. I think it is a miracle that I survived.”

Yoto Furimo

I cannot describe how I was all ripped down there. I was a seventeen-year-old, a very young child.

“Because I was so young, of course, my body was going to be torn; it is just a fact of life. I was given a shot of #606 at the hospital. It was a Chinese hospital. I went there to get treated.”

“I never got sick. I was always healthy. Once a week, there was this exam to see whether I was sick or not. Well, it was so embarrassing. It was a man doing the tests; he laid me down and put instruments in me to open me up to take a look. They did it to see if I had syphilis, *baidoku*. If soldiers contracted a disease and since I received many men, I could contract the disease from the soldiers. That is why they did the exams. For the first time at seventeen, I was dealing with a man, so I was bleeding because I was all ripped down there. I applied Yoto Furimo (a yellow disinfectant); if you rubbed that in, you would get well. I was shot up with #606 a lot to prevent me from getting a disease. Even though I was hurting in pain and had the medicine applied, I still had to receive soldiers; I thought I was going to die. It hurt so much. *Aeeego, aeeego*, I was appalled.”

“We worried a lot about catching the Japanese soldiers’ diseases.”

“We used *sakkus*. There were men who said nothing when we put it on them, but there were also men who really- did not like it. If they did not like it, we had no choice but to have sex without it.”

“When they put on a condom, it was easier for *comfort girls-women*, because it did not leak. If something, like hormones, was ejaculated, I could just take it off and throw it in the trash in the bathroom. It was clean and simple and you do not catch any diseases. It was mostly the men who caught the diseases, not the girls. They would get syphilis and gonorrhea too. I always said that you should put it on; if you do not, you are going to catch a disease. (Letting out a long sigh) *Ae-hew-aeego*, do not ask me any more. It is painful. Tut, it is no use to keep talking about things like that. What happened happened.”

“I never saw a pregnant woman. But there must have been pregnant women. Even though they used me badly, I never got pregnant. It is strange. Maybe it was being with men too much?”

“Even if one were to have been pregnant, who would have known if she discarded the [baby] secretly? There were some who got rid of the baby within two or three months. It seems that if you go to the hospital and get a shot, within two to three months, the baby was aborted. It was just a fetus at that point anyway. You cannot wait too long. I saw some abort a baby within three to four months by getting a shot, but I did not see anyone give birth. What would have happened if you gave birth there? If you gave birth to a baby, what would have happened to you?”

“*Aheego*, we would have had to take care of the babies if we got pregnant and gave birth to the baby. But we were in no position to give birth nor not receive customers. We would thus end up ‘sinning’ a lot. Even if you were to have the baby, you would not know whose baby it was. Since we were with so many men. How could we know who the father was?”

Being Treated like a Criminal

It was like I was a criminal. But even a criminal would not be treated like that.

“I was a *comfort girl-woman* for eight years, but I was not in one place for all that time.⁶ They kept taking me around here and there.”

⁶ Lim Jeong-ja lived as a *comfort girl-woman* for eight years from the time of her abduction at the age of seventeen to her return home at the age of twenty-four and was moved around many different places such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Dalian, Harbin, etc.

“They did all that they did to me, and then they took me to another place. I was dragged around like a chained criminal.”

“The Japanese soldiers took me away from Hailin to somewhere else, where there were tents.”

“The tents were set up all in a line, and they were very long. A tent was more than five meters.”

“They pitched tents, and inside the tents there were beds. The beds were put in a row, and on each bed, there was enough space for one person to sleep in. There were about ten beds. They made me go inside. So, I went in. If I did not go in, they would beat me to death, so what could I do? I was scared. I went in, ate dinner, and was sitting there when they ordered me to put on makeup. I put on makeup and sat there, and then the Japs came in wearing their gun-knives. There were ten girls and women sitting there. The soldiers brought each girl to a bed, saying ‘*Ano onna ga iina*’ (‘I like that girl’). We had to do what they wanted. I was afraid that if I did not do what they said, I would die. Then, I was too naïve because I was too young. So, I did all that they said and they would use my body as a sex object and went on their way.”

“If I did not do what they wanted, immediately their [hands] went up, and they would beat me and leave. If they beat me, [I] used my teeth to bite and chew them. If I bit a bastard’s leg, they would throw a fit, saying ‘*A, itai, itai*’ (‘it hurts, it hurts’). Then [their hands] came up again right away. Did I have any strength? I bit them with my teeth. So, I guess that is why I cannot use my teeth very well [now]. Getting older gave me courage. And because I had been there a long time.”

“Day and night, as soon as I opened my eyes, I had to deal with the soldiers. I could not go outside. For years, I lived with this hardship, but where could I go and how could I leave the place? It was like I was a criminal. But even a criminal would not be treated like that.”

“Because I wanted to see my parents so much, I worried a lot, and I cried a lot. And even though I could not drink well, I drank Kaoliang liquor. It was very potent. After taking a shot of Kaoliang liquor, I do not know why but I would cry a lot, and I would think about my hometown a lot. Secretly, I would go to the bathroom to cry and to the back corners to cry. Really-, I thought to myself how did I get caught and why do I have to suffer so much like this? I do not think there is anyone who has suffered as much as I have.”

“Even if I wanted to run away somewhere, there was nowhere I could run away to, and I would not know how to get there, even if there was a place. I was dragged to Manchuria and to Hearim, so how was I to know how to get out of there? Really-, it all looked bleak to me.”

“My body was very exhausted. How did I do what I did? It was not just one night; I did it every day, every day and night. Even with machines, you have to keep on oiling them, but they used me without ever oiling me, so wasn’t it inevitable that I would break down?”

“I was receiving a few dozen men a day, how was my body supposed to heal? (Pointing to the interviewer) Miss, you would have died. My body was at least healthy and strong. Even when I ran up and down the mountains, I was not tired. In running races, nobody could catch me. Now I cannot do any of those things because I have serious health problems. Where are my cigarettes? Let me smoke one.”

“O Lord--”

“I think I am finally getting *hwabyung*. My mind is not at peace. I quit smoking, but I am smoking again. Cigarettes are not good for me. My bronchi are bad.”

“My body is not at its top form, so I should not be smoking. But because I get angry, I smoke and smoke. I started smoking more and more cigarettes, and now I can’t quit. When I visit the hospital, the doctors say, ‘do not smoke.’ But it is easy for them to say, but *han* has been piling up in me. And I have no place to vent about this stress.”

Hatanaka Chutaicho

I still remember him, that man.

“Then the officers, the Japanese officers, came; their unit was four kilometers away from there. There was a unit. They came out at night. The one who came to me was Hatanaka Chutaicho. He was a young man, twenty-four years old.”

“Hatanaka Chutaicho was very concerned about my health. Well, when men have been on the battlefield for a long time, don’t they usually think about girls? But he did not. He cared for me that much. At his home, he had younger siblings. He thought about his *imouto* (younger sister). He would shed tears asking how this had happened to Reiko-san. So, when I cried with him, he would say ‘*Sadako, nakunayo, nakunayo*’ (‘do not cry, do not cry, Sadako’). He cried, and I cried too. He treated me very well, and I received a lot of love from him.”

“He tried hard to put [me] to sleep. ‘*Nemuri nasai-o. Hai, Sadako. Nemuri nasai-o*’ (‘sleep well, Sadako, sleep well’). He put me to sleep like a baby all the time, saying that I had suffered a lot. He got up ever so gently at dawn when I was still sleeping. When I got up and looked at the pillow, there was an ashtray and something underneath it. I looked to see what it was, and he had left

money before he went. It was money for sex. He left it there. He knew that I had to give the money for sex to my owner, and I could only do that if he left the money. Since he had slept in my room.”

“So, I became attached to him. Wouldn’t you? He took care of my body and cherished me. He said I was suffering so much after having come here from Korea. And he asked how it was that I had been dragged here. ‘*Kawaisou da*,’ it means, ‘I feel very sorry for you.’ He always came to me once a week.”

“When he had some free time, he sent me letters. ‘Reiko-san, you must be so worn out. You are a woman to be pitied. You have been dragged to these places and have been put to shame.’ He asked me where I lived in Korea. When I received that letter, I cried a lot.”

“After about a year had passed, I heard from his unit that, ah-, Hatanaka Chutaicho was killed. I sat down and cried. I asked my female owner if I could visit, if I could go see Hatanaka Chutaicho for the last time and send him off on his way, but she said that I could not get inside the unit.”

“Ha--, where am I going to see Hatanaka Chutaicho again? The owner told me to stand at a distance and pray.”

“So, I could not go see him. (With tears) I had only seen him being moved out from a distance. I was sorry. He was from Tokyo, Japan, Hatanaka Chutaicho. . . . I have not forgotten his name, nor have I forgotten his rank.”

“He is all-- dead, and his body must be all rotten.”

“I still remember him, that man.”

Meeting and Separation

I lived with him for five months. I had a lot of fun.

“I was lying down and sleeping when I heard gunshots. Bang, bang, bang, bang. When I got up, there was no one around, and my owner was alone. I said, ‘Ma, where is everybody?’ She said, ‘They have all gone to take refuge. What are you waiting for?’ I am not so quick on my feet. I asked ‘Ma, where can I go?’ She said ‘There is no other way. You have to go to Hailin.’ What do I do when I get there? How do I live?”

“I took refuge but was chased by the Japs, so I came to Hailin. [A woman in the neighborhood] told me that I should get married to a good man, that if I got married, the Japs could never come for me again. [Through her arrangement] I got re-married. He was also Korean; he said he came to China when he was

little, at the age of seven. His name was Kim.⁷ He was a good man, and I liked him very much. If it had not been for the war, I would have lived in China with him, who knows. I would have become Chinese.”

“So, I lived with him for five months. I had a lot of fun. At that time, I laughed a lot even at ordinary statements, because I was young. Even if I farted, I laughed. He asked me, ‘Why do you keep laughing?’ I do not know why I laughed so much. [He said to me,] ‘Laugh a lot. When you are young, there is a lot to laugh about.’”

“After a long while, [Kim] was taken to the army. He was taken to unit 839. I went to unit 839 with the lady next door, and they said that he had not come in. They would not tell me anything more. There was no way to find out whether he was dead or alive. I wanted to see him. He was handsome. He had a broad face. *Aheego-*. When he came into the house, he would say, ‘Honey’.”

“So, I was alone and I had his money at home. I was eating [a meal] with that money by myself when I received a call from [a woman who lived in the upper village]. She was a good-hearted woman, and I made her my blood sister. She said ‘Sister, come to my house. Let’s have some sticky rice and have fun. My husband has gone out and is not home.’ So, I went there. When I went to her house, the war broke out, and I could not get back home. I left that house straight for the mountains to take refuge.”

“There were gunshots, people were trying to kill each other, and it was utter chaos. We were mad to take refuge. That sister and me, the two of us. We tried to run away, and where we arrived was a black rice field. But I had bad luck with my shoes, they fell in a hole in the rice field and I could not retrieve them. What could I do? I ran in bare feet. As I climbed the mountain, my feet were stabbed by thorny vines and bled. *Aheego-*, just then I got my period, but I had nothing to use as a sanitary napkin. All I had was the clothes I had on. Well, here (the crotch) was torn, and it hurt so much. When I wanted to drink water, I drank the water that rolled down from the mountain that I caught with my cupped hands. Some mother strangled and killed her baby to save her own life. If they heard the baby crying, unit 839 would know where they were, and they would be captured. You know how the crying of a baby sounds loud at night. So, I had been hiding here and there for about a month in the mountains. . . . I wanted to take a bath and felt like I would die of frustration.”

“My face was worse then than it is now. There was no place to wash. I did not want to get shot. *Aeeego*, it was terrifying. Scary, I say. I was so fed up with living in the land of China. . . . I had a real hard time.”

7 Lim Jeong-ja described her living together with Kim in China as a re-marriage.

“Because of the gunshots, I evacuated to a neighborhood above Hailin. What was it called? *Ah-tta*-. It has been so long that I have forgotten. When I was in the town, the Soviet army came down, Russia. They were tall, their eyes were blue, and their hair was black. I was scared, and so I hid. Those people did not harm women. But even so, *ah-ee*-, I was scared. The Soviet Union did not seem that far away, and I had escaped all the way to the land of the Soviets. Because there was nowhere else to go.”

“I had a cough all night, and my bronchi were not all that good either. The reason why my bronchi are not good right now is that when I evacuated out from Manchuria, I had bronchitis. I slept in the mountains, and it was cold, so I had bronchitis. And it was not treated and I had it for so long. Ever since then my bronchi have not been good. They have still not healed. This is a big problem.”

“After that, I came down to the Pyeongyang refugee camp. There were a lot of bedbugs because it was summer.”

“There were about fifty refugees, be they women or men. When I came to the Pyeongyang evacuation shelter, they distributed corn. But it was moth-eaten. It was stone-ground, but the quantity was only that much (indicating as much as three fingers). They gave us a bit of it, but that one bit was not enough. How could it be? I ate it, but I was still hungry and thought I would just- die. I thought, ‘If I continue like this, I am going to die. I will die without having seen my mother. Even if I should die, I should die in my hometown. What can I do?’ I was at the Pyeongyang refugee camp for about three months.”

“After three months, I was going to come back to Busan, Korea. There was a big warship. People said if we just boarded` that ship, we would arrive in Busan. What did I know? I just followed where they were going. . . . When I got on the ship, I noticed that it was very- big. There was a restaurant and places to sleep. I was on the ship for a month. How I had been suffering for months.”

Homecoming

I told my mother the story. But I could not tell my father.

“Was I seventeen years old? Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four. Seven years. It had been seven years. I went when I was seventeen years old.”

“When I think about it, I came back at twenty-four. I went at seventeen. I had just turned twenty-four [when I came back].”

“I arrived in Busan and went to the house of my eldest uncle. I entered through the back door in a flash. I was wearing someone else’s worn out and pitiful sneakers I had picked up somewhere and did not have any extra clothes. I spent, well, almost two months living in the mountains with dew coming down on me in the evenings. I looked just like a beggar. When I went into the house, a lady was washing something at the faucet.”

“I asked, ‘I am sorry, but is my aunt here?’ I said that the grandmother of this house was my aunt.”

“She said, ‘is that true?’ and [the daughter-in-law] stopped working and went into the house.”

“Mother, mother. A strange lady came, and she seems to be a beggar. She is looking for you.”

“‘Who is it?’ My aunt came running out and gave me a good look.”

“‘Girl, are you our Jeong-ja? Oh, my girl, you look like a beggar. What happened? *Ah-ee-go-ee-*, tut, tut.’ My aunt did not know that I had been taken by the Japs. And I was so ashamed, so how could I tell her the story?”

“I said, ‘Aunt, where did my father and mom move to? I went to our old home, but they were not there.’”

“‘*Aheego*, your pa and ma moved to Chungmu. I will write tomorrow and have your father come down.’ So, my father came down. [My father] came. . . . He said, ‘*Aheego*, my baby. Where did you go and suffer so much?’ My father was astounded and cried at my eldest uncle’s house so much that it was like a mourner’s house.”

“I told my mother the story. But I could not tell my father. My younger siblings did not know, and I did not tell anyone else. How could I tell my younger brother and sister?”

“When I told my mom, how she cried and cried. She cried all night. Her eyes were all swollen like this. *Ae-ee-go-ee-*. So [now] she would not let me go far to draw water. She said, ‘Don’t go there, but go to the nearest spring [to draw water].’”

“My mom too became sick because of me. Because her daughter went to the spring to draw water and there was no way for her to contact me, no way to find out anything about my disappearance. My mother had been sick inside [since I disappeared]. While I was missing, she suffered with a serious problem of heart palpitations. All because of me. There is an old Korean saying that says even if you put your child in your eye, it does not hurt because you love him/her so much. So, just imagine what she went through.”

“So, I was ashamed when I went to Chungmu. Because I had just suddenly appeared out of nowhere, the rumor that was going around was that the daughter of that house is not the daughter of Mrs. Lim. There were only one son and one daughter, but suddenly a much older daughter appeared? There were such rumors. So, when I went to the spring to draw water, someone asked me, ‘You

are not the daughter of Mrs. Lim, are you?’ [I told my mom], ‘Mom, when I went to the spring to draw water, everybody told me that I was not your birth daughter.’ When I said this, my mom went flying off the handle. ‘Who are these bitches saying such worthless things?! Get them back here, and I will tell them what is what!’ It was a big commotion. *Aeeego*, really-.”

Lingering Attachment

I have never worn a bride’s headpiece. That became my *han*.

“I was seeing someone. . . . When I came back to Korea, I got married and lived with someone whom I dated.”

“He was a graduate of Meiji University in Japan, and his last name was Hong. I met him at the age of twenty-four and lived with him until the age of thirty-seven.”

“He used to come over to my house in Chungmu. He was a friend of my younger brother,⁸ and he came often. Then we were attracted to each other and started dating.”

“I was two years older. Don’t they say that love has no borders? Love has no borders.”

“My body was ruined there, so could I have a proper marriage? No, I could not. I could not do it in good conscience. My whole body was broken and ruined, how could I deceive him, saying that I was a *cheonyeo*, and get married? . . . I have never worn a bride’s headpiece. That became my *han*. When they heard that I had come from afar, maybe thinking that I had done something terrible, the man’s family opposed the marriage. So, without my knowledge, he was set up on a blind date with the purpose of marriage. Then, he got married in Busan. Later, a palanquin came to his house to take him to his wedding. But love can only reside in one place, not two. He left me to get married, but he did not go to her. He came to my house all the time. He eventually broke up [with] her.”

“We lived with my parents. My father liked him. He said that he liked his son-in-law. My mother liked him too, but the man’s parents fiercely objected to it.”

“Also, I gave him a baby, a daughter.”

“She was not a child I had birthed, but a child that I had gotten from another and whom I raised. My body was so ruined, as you see, that I could not

⁸ Lim Jeong-ja is the oldest daughter of four boys and three girls. This brother is one year younger than Lim Jeong-ja.

bear a child. It looks like something happened to the uterus. I guess that is why I cannot bear children.”

“When we were in Chungmu, we rented out a little room in my house. A young lady lived there. The lady was seeing someone and gave birth to a child. She became pregnant and gave birth to the child in our home. But she said that she could not raise the child, so she gave her to me. That is how I got her and raised her as my daughter.”

“(Deep in thought) I have a picture that we took too. My daughter was very pretty.”

“But eventually, the baby died. She became sick before her first birthday and died after her first birthday. Her name was Hyun-ja. After she died, we ended up breaking up. We must have lived for that baby. When my daughter died, he went out and rarely came home.”

“If the child had lived then, I would not be this lonely.”

“No matter how confidently I have lived, I think, ‘Why can’t I bear children?’ At the age of eighteen, my body was so damaged that I could not bear children. That is what I think.”

“When I was thirty-seven, my mother and all my family moved to Masan.”

“Well, I did the laundry for the young ladies working at a high-class restaurant and bar, and I lived by earning money looking after the babies of the girls who commuted to work. I could live very well without Hong.”

“When I came back to Korea, I went to the inns and did the laundry and the cleaning for them; I did my share of hard work.”

“I have, well-, a strong ability to manage my life. *Aheego*, I have done a lot to live.”

“When I came to Masan to my mother, Hong also followed me.”

“He came to the house in Massan. He came and, tut.”

“Go to the woman you married. What are you doing here?” I said.”

“He said, ‘*Aehae*, did I get married because I wanted to? I got married because I could not win over the old folks. But my heart and my love all belong to you. I cannot live apart from you.’ That is what he said. And live or die, he tried to stay by me.”

“I avoided him, saying, ‘What hope is there with someone who is already married?’ But the old feelings were there. Even now, the old attachment still lingers.”

“*Aheegoe-*, this love I cannot forget. I still want to see him. Because I still feel a lingering attachment, I think I would like to see him once more. I do not know where he lives. I have not heard from him these days.”

“If I go to Chungmu where I used to live, I will get news of him, surely. But I have no reason to go to Chungmu. I do not need to go. What would be the point of finding him at this stage of life, don’t you think? He must have met a

good woman and be living with her. But as a *cheonyeo*, he was my first love, that man, even though I had been to China [as a *comfort girl-woman*]. Anyway.”

Han

Never, ever forget. I want to die after having resolved all my *han*.

“As I get old, I am weak and sick. Sick. Sickness has come into my life.”

“Because of the things that they have done to me, my body could not hold itself and is not working as it should. When you get old, everybody gets sick, right? I feel the pricks in my legs all night long. I did not know when I was young, but now that I am old, my legs get achy, and my arms hurt too.”

“Even now, when I hear Japanese people speaking Japanese on the street, I want to come from behind and stab them in the neck with a knife, having suffered so much. If you think about it, I do not think that it is all Japanese people who are like that. But I cannot help thinking of them as enemies. . . . My younger brother was shot and killed by the Japanese.⁹ My body was damaged like this. So, the Japs are my enemies.”

“Really, every time I think that I took this body that was born of my pure mother and father and devoted it to the Japs, (letting out a long sigh) ha-, I want to cut off my legs myself. Still, I cannot end the life that my parents gave me, but at the same time, nothing worthwhile is happening in my life, and I think, ‘What is the point of living if I am going to live like this?’ . . . I am very wearisome now. That is how things are now that I am old. It was not like this when I was young.”

“I am often sick today. I lie alone and turn on the TV. I lie down, then I sit, this way and that; that is how I spend my days every day. I have no one to complain to. Do I have a mother whom I can tell these stories to? Do I have a sister whom I can tell these stories to? I have a younger sibling,¹⁰ but that one is a man. How do I talk to a man about these things? . . . Is it a good thing that I can share with other people? I struggle and worry a lot by myself.”

“I want you to listen to this and make a moan and complaint for me.”

“[Never], ever forget. I want to die after having resolved all my *han*.”

⁹ In the year of 1945, when Lim Jeong-ja went home to Korea, her younger brother (twenty-three years old), who was engaged in an anti-Japanese struggle, was shot and killed by a Japanese soldier. She did not witness her brother’s passing and found out about it after her homecoming.

¹⁰ Of the seven siblings, Lim Jeong-ja and her youngest brother are the only ones still living.

“(With tears) Where can I go to tell these stories before I die? I am completely alone. Who is there to listen?”

“If I were a little younger, for example, if I were fifty or sixty even, I would just go up to Seoul and to the Blue House and just complain, I have made up my mind like this several times. I have made up my mind to complain, even though I would have to endure the shame of it. If I do not go to the president, where would I go to tell my story?”

“If I die, I will go to heaven, and there I will find somewhere to say this. That is what comes to mind.”

“My wish is to be married to a good- man, and to live a happy life with my husband. That is my wish. I was born just like how other people were born, but I do not know why my life turned out this way.”

“Life is such that a person is born and only rests in this world for a little while. I wouldn’t have *han* if only I had gotten married, had been loved by my husband, and had lived a happy life. . . . But because I have *han*, [in the next world], I wish to be born a woman who is loved by a man. I envy people who live like that. This is because I did not live a life like that.”

Interviewer’s Commentary: A Pair of Glasses and a Golden Watch

Kang Hyunju

While following a ditch down the middle of Masan City, I came across a small cement bridge. When I entered the narrow alley next to it, on the left side, there was a one-story house with a dark blue front door. I knocked lightly on that front door and entered the house. “*Halmoni*, it is me.” “*Aheego*, I missed you. I was waiting for you just- like a child waiting for her mom.” Lim Jeong-ja *halmoni* always welcomed me with a bright smile. From some point on in the day, she has been waiting for me. It is thrilling to be a person for whom someone else is waiting.

In the summer of 2002, the downpour of rain was persistent and heavy. As if the sky was playing tricks on us, there were hurricanes on both the first day and the last day that I met with Lim *halmoni*. In July 2002, I first met her when Typhoon Rammasun was about to hit the Korean peninsula. The typhoon seemed to foretell that our encounter would not always be a smooth one. I made a great effort in calming my anxiety due to the lousy weather and my fluttering and trembling heart due to my first meeting with a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman* as I put myself on a bus to Masan. I arrived in Masan in five hours. Luckily, by the time we arrived, the storm had quietened.

Before meeting her, I heard from an officer of the City Women's Welfare Department that Lim Jeong-ja *halmoni* speaks well and is a neat person. Being relieved by that word, I went to the neighborhood of Lim *halmoni*, having been guided by a town office employee. The sky lined with black clouds further darkened the dimly lit house; there were only thin rays of light seeping out of her room. She greeted me with a welcoming smile, saying that I had gone through a great deal coming in the middle of a typhoon. Her warm words melted away the many worries and tension I had been nursing up until that time.

Lim *halmoni* now lives with her nephew in Masan in a rented place paid for by a subsidy she received when she registered as a *comfort girl-woman*. She, who has no children, raised her nephew after her sister died, and they have an intimate mother-son relationship. She always consulted her nephew on all important matters, and her nephew seemed to be involved in much of her life as the only member of her family.

On my first visit, she was in the house alone. She said that her nephew, knowing of my visit, had deliberately left us alone. As I walked into the room, I saw a picture in a large frame of a woman in her mid-forties with unusually white skin. It was Lim Jeong-ja *halmoni* herself. Now she has more wrinkles on her white skin, but every time she smiles, the lines that spread out into the eyes and mouth comfort me. Her room was well organized and clean. There were three Japanese song books in the cupboards of the room, and Lim *halmoni*, who likes singing, often turned on her record player and listened to trot or Japanese songs. Songs seemed to be the only pleasure for her, as someone who is unable to move about freely and stays only in the house.

I am not sure whether it was because of my familiarity as a member of the Korean Council, because of her nephew's thoughtfulness, or because of her active and sociable personality, but, from the beginning, she did not seem to feel that there was much of a distance between us. Her well-disposed attitude and personality also had a positive impact on the interviews. She started the stories of her time at the comfort facilities with relative ease. Her memory was on the good side, and she unraveled her stories in a clear-cut manner. When she went to draw water at the age of seventeen, the *halmoni* was taken by the Japanese military and was forced to live the life of a *comfort girl-woman* for eight years in various places. In this respect, she was a typical *comfort girl-woman*. As I looked at the *halmoni* who fell into reminiscing and crying as she recollected the fading old memories that she had never been able to express before, I could sense that the mass of *han* that she had buried in her heart was vast.

Lim Jeong-ja *halmoni*, who up until now has lived the lonely life of a room keeper, poured out her stories without pause, as though she had just met a good friend she had not seen in a long time. Her breathlessly related story

lasted for four hours, only to be stopped by the appearance of her nephew who had come home for the evening. Before the second interview, I decided to take her to the hospital and scheduled the next meeting so that Lim *halmoni*, who said she had not been outside for a month, could take a breath of fresh air, as well as check up on her health.

Two days later, on Monday, when I arrived at the appointed time of 10 a.m., she pressed me, ‘Why are you late?’ She had gotten up early in the morning, put off everything, and was waiting for me to come. So even though I arrived on time, to her, it could not feel like anything else except that I was late. Very busily, she prepared to go out. After a long time trying to decide what clothes she would wear, she asked my opinion and picked a pink jacket. She wore a ring with a large gem on her finger and a golden watch on her left wrist. And only after finishing her preparations by putting on a pair of plastic-rimmed glasses did she go outside the gate. However, the glasses and golden watch among her going out items served merely as exhibitory props and did not help her much. This is because her sight is failing, and she was almost blind in one eye after cataract surgery two years previously. She cannot see the golden watch on her left wrist either, and with its dead battery its hands always point to 11:20.

I visited her house often, even on the days when we did not have an interview, just so that she could have a friend to talk to, and little by little, her confidence in me grew through our frequent meetings. Lim *halmoni* gradually began to open her heart to me as a trustworthy friend rather than just an interviewer. And because of the trust that we had built up between us and her willingness to unburden her story to someone, I was able to carry on with the interviews without much difficulty. I did not doubt that the ensuing interviews would be as smooth as the first one.

However, two weeks after my first visit to her house, from the time that her nephew remarried, the difficulties in our encounters began. When I entered her home for the second interview, the whole house was lit up with a bright light, and her appearance was much brighter and more relaxed than at the beginning. She introduced me to her daughter-in-law as “a person from the Seoul city office”; she made up that she had been a part of the consolation group during the Japanese colonial era and that I was a person who had come down to investigate the fact. From this point on, throughout the interview, she glanced outside the door frequently because she was worried that her daughter-in-law might hear her story. This was because she thought that if her daughter-in-law knew about her, she would “disrespect her and think that she was worthless.” She said that her nephew had also asked her to talk in a quiet voice so that his wife would not hear. She welcomed my visit, but she was very nervous that her past would be discovered by her new daughter-in-law.

I perceived what was on her mind and in her heart, so I reviewed the missing questions and contents in order to finish the interview as quickly as possible. I then prepared the third interview thoroughly, focusing on the problem of the route of the comfort facility and the means of transportation that had not been clarified so far. However, since Lim Jeong-ja *halmoni* lived in many different areas and moved around from one comfort facility to another, it was not easy for her to remember the comfort facility route and the means of transportation after more than sixty years have passed, so this part will never be known exactly, and that is a shame. But, maybe because I prepared more than usual or because I gave her space to tell her story by waiting patiently through her words and silences, she confided in me about things that “she did not even tell her nephew,” such as her life at the comfort stations and her married life after returning home. Now the interview was coming to an end, I seemed to see the high ground in front of me.

When I visited her for the last interview, Lim *halmoni* was exhausted from having just returned home after being hospitalized for breathing difficulties and additional stress from some small household matters. Plus, during the interview, as even the external situation was getting worse because the house was being shaken by the powerful Typhoon Rusa, her emotions were running high, and she was constantly teary-eyed. I felt that forcing the interview on her would be too much for her, and thinking that I should not tax her any further, I ended the interview. If the quiet typhoon of the first day brought ‘the day of the beginning’ by breaking her silence, then I wonder whether the powerful typhoon of the last day signified ‘the day of pause’ out of her wish for rest from all her hardship.

After that, I went to her house two months later to obtain her permission to publish her interview in a book. Lim *halmoni*, whom I had not seen in a long time, was in quite good health, perhaps due to the Korean herbal medicine she had been taking since the previous month. First, we caught up with each other by unraveling the story of the previous two months. After a meal, I looked for and took an opportunity to tell her about the book. From the beginning, every time I started the interviews, I explained the value of the oral stories and their significance, and it was with her permission that I started the whole process of the interviews. But when I actually told her that her story was coming out in a book, she became nervous. So, we decided to use a pseudonym for the book: taking the last name of the interviewer and the second syllable of the *halmoni*'s given name, we came up with Kang Soon-ja. “Who will take this book when I die?” “Definitely, I will keep it,” I said as I pinky promised. But perhaps she was still uneasy because she wanted to talk to her nephew in the next room. Her nephew said that he knows that this is a good thing, but he did not want things to get complicated with the story being revealed to the

world and went out of the room. She said to me, “He is saying not to do it. I am sorry,” and feebly put a cigarette in her mouth.

She was afraid of the attention that her nephew would receive from society when the fact that she was a *comfort girl-woman* was revealed, and her nephew also seemed to be burdened by other people’s gazes. She was concerned that this book would harm the future of her nephew. What makes Lim Jeong-ja *halmoni*, a victim of history, tacitly stay silent and what makes the people around her accept her silence without raising any questions? She believed that, in Korean society, there is still nothing to be gained by telling her story; no, in fact, there is only something to be lost. Beneath her silence, there was a desire to live an ordinary life like other people, and it may have kept her silent for sixty years. There must have been a lot of struggles as well as courage for her to break her silence and reveal her past while taking the risk of the burdensome gaze of rejection from the world. But I could not shed the miserable feeling erupting from inside my heart, and when I looked at her in such conflict, my throat tightened up, and there was nothing more that I could say.

About six months after this, I received a call from someone at the Korean Council. A miracle had happened! Lim *halmoni* had made an important decision. To a member of staff from the Korean Council who visited Masan, she gave her permission to put her story in the book under her real name. Now she has taken a step outside the world to break her silence that she kept for sixty years. No longer as Kang Soon-ja, but as Lim Jeong-ja.

“Do Not Ask Me About My Past Life. It Pains My Heart”

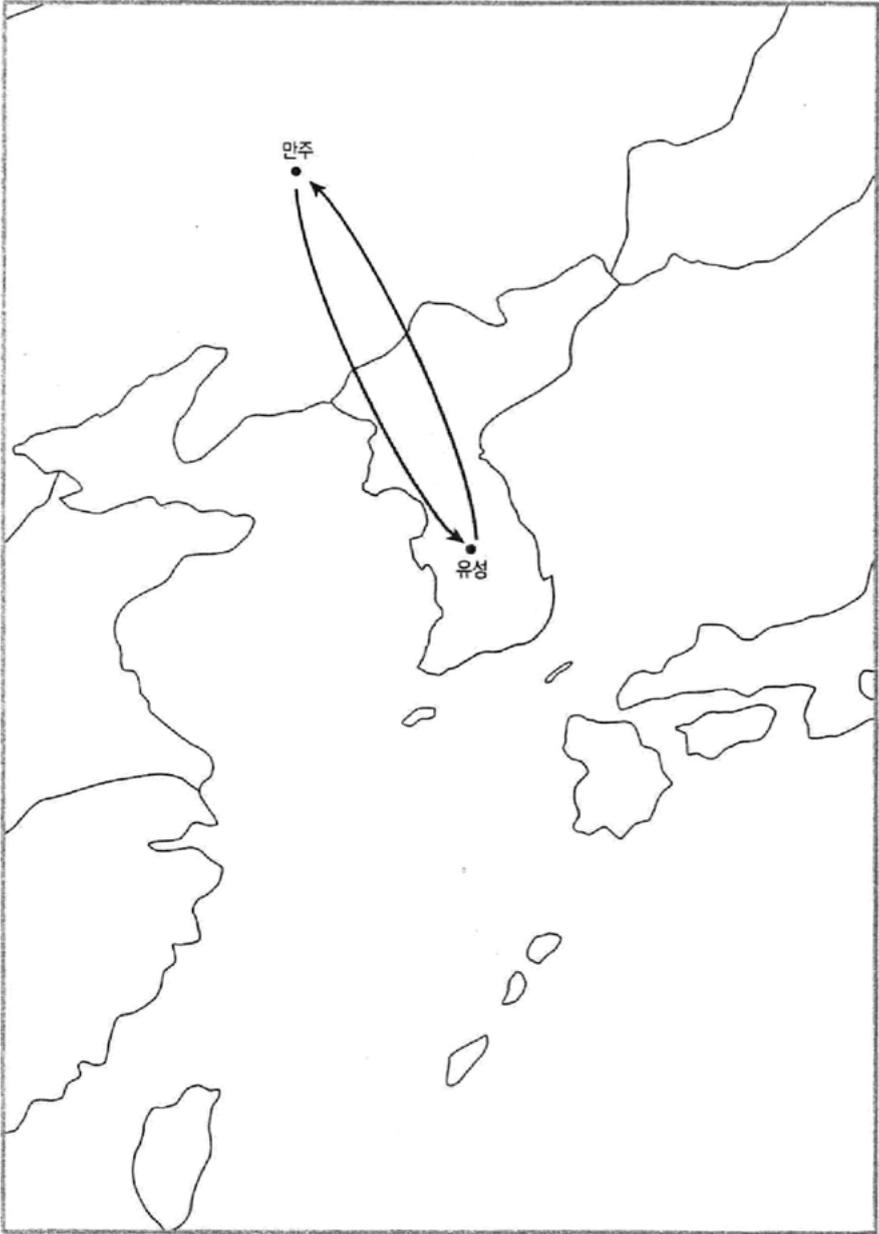
Roh Chung-ja



Roh Chung-ja.

- 1920 Born in Chungcheongnam-do Daedeok-gun (On her resident registration card, the year of her birth is written as 1992)
- 1934 (Age 15) Learned dance and music at a *gwonbeon*
- 1938 (Age 19)* Taken by the Japanese military police
Lived as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman* in the areas near Manchuria, China
- 1945 (Age 26)* Returned home after the declaration of Korean independence
Maintained a livelihood by peddling, selling on the streets, working as a shaman, etc.
- 1980s Lived with Kwon
- 1992 (Age 73) Registered as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*
- 1990s Kwon passed away
- 2004 (Age 85) Lived in a government-leased apartment in Chungchungnam-do Boryeong
Deceased

*Approximately



Roh Chung-ja's route: Yuseong – Manchuria – Yuseong.

“*Aheego*, why would you want me to tell those stories that break my heart and cause me pain deep inside? For what reason?”

“(Stroking down the top of her stomach as though there is something lodged in her chest) When I tell such stories, I get a pain deep inside. You do not know because you have never experienced it, but for someone who has experienced it, what you have suffered then grows inside you until you have this inner rage that makes you feel like this.”

“Damned bastards. They should be hit by lightning and left to rot. What do they think they are doing by denying that such things happened? Huh? When all the witnesses are still living. We are still living, still suffering from it, and still crying over it. We cry and cry until we are crying tears of blood.”

“After they took away our youths. After they made us shed tears of blood.”

Old Maid

I do not know why, but I was so afraid that I said I would never get married, even if I have to die.

“My [hometown] is near Yuseong¹ hot spring, a little bit of a walk from there.”

“There are those who farm, and there are those who do not farm there. So that means you are neither out in the countryside nor in a big city. It is a middle of the road kind of town. But the town is quite an affluent one, so there were not any really poor people.”

“My house? It was not a house with a tiled roof; it had a thatched roof. But it was a pretty large- house, seeing as how we had two servants and all.”

“We had a lot of land. Farming fields and rice paddy fields, too.”

“Many relatives lived in the [neighborhood]. Of the Kyoha Roh family. Since that was our hometown.”

“There, young ladies were not even allowed to look outside. When the sun set, we might each take a jar of water secretly to enjoy the breeze. We did not know anything. But we were taken good care of.”

“My [father] used to study literature. And he taught too – the children.”

“There was a big- study room in town. People worked during the day, and my [father] taught them in the evening.”

¹ Chungcheongnam-do Yuseong-gu Daejun-si (Daejun City, Yuseong County, South Chungcheong Province).

“My mother usually stayed at home, so she farmed the fields. That is what she did.”

“I had three older brothers, two younger brothers, and one younger sister.”

“My [oldest] brother was a good student and got married in Japan. So, he lived in Japan with my nephews. Back then, since he was smart, he was elected as a top school teacher. And he went to Japan and taught young kids.”

“Because my family had a lot of land to farm, [I] did a lot of work. I do not know how they were going to study at night, but there was night school, in the olden days. So, I used to go to night school too. I studied for an hour up there and came back down every day.”

“I was considered an old maid [at the time]. My parents wanted me to marry, but I refused. I said to my father and mother I would be alone just as now, weeding fields and farming the land, and would definitely not get married.”

Gwonbeon

‘As I sit at the crest of a hill, with my fishing pole in Changnang.’²

“At the time I entered the *gwonbeon*,³ I was a fifteen-year-old.”

“My friends were going there together, all cozy-like; so, when they asked me to go and become a *kisaeng*, I went without even knowing what it was all about.”

“They said that all I would have to do was sing and play the *janggung* (a traditional Korean drum). That is what a *kisaeng* does.”

“A [*gwonbeon* teacher] would stand in the front and call everyone’s name. When the teacher calls a person’s name and tells her to sing a song, she moved forward and sang a song.”

“[The place that we sang] was what you call now a theater. We danced and sang songs.”

“I had a good voice. Whatever they asked me to sing, I sang it well.”

“And so, because of my good singing, they shouted, ‘Encore, encore.’ I then stepped forward again and sang ‘As I sit at the crest of a hill, with my fishing pole in Changnang.’ (Chuckling) People went wild, clapping their hands in excitement to show their pleasure and approval. My voice was better than than

² Clear blue waves of water in a wide and large ocean

³ *Gwonbeon* is a *kisaeng* union and a school where dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments were taught during the Japanese occupation of Korea.

it is now; it was clear as a bell. So, I spent some time as a *kisaeng*. That is to say, in today's terms, I performed on stage here and there and was a top star."

"Seriously, [back then], my face was not like this, and my hands were not like this, as they are now. I had a small face with distinguished facial features, and it was plump too. So, when I stepped on stage, (smiling) people screamed, 'Again, again,' and 'Encore, encore!'"

"At the *gwonbeon*, there was no place to eat or sleep."

"Such things as pouring drinks for the clients were all done at the prostitution center and by the women who were getting paid monthly."

"I simply learned dancing and singing. That is all. I was the best there, so I won an award."

"The [prize] was a skirt and jacket, made of a beautiful material with light pink blossoms sewn on it."

"I completed the training at the *gwonbeon* in three years."

"When I returned home and said I was [going to the *gwonbeon*], my family went nuts and the whole neighborhood criticized me: what in the world do you think you are doing? What happened to you? *Aheegoo*, people during that time had serious prejudices and classism. [There was] a distinction between nobles and the servant classes. I was not able to move an inch. I was caught even when I tried to go to the bathroom by myself. So, sometimes, when I got mad, I would sit in the bathroom and sing. When that happened, my family would say that I was crazy. Then, I would just start singing louder than before in the bathroom."

"My father chased me with a club with no intention of stopping. I felt like dying from his beatings."

"After I went to my father with the prize and the money [from singing], I begged him to let me go. He said, 'Go just this one time. Then, no more after this. Just this once.' So then, I quit going to the *gwonbeon*."

Coverless Train

They dragged us off, took us and beat us without mercy, put us on a train, and then left with us in tow.

"(In a trembling voice) Even now, when I start talking about it, my heart aches and feels as if it is going to be torn into pieces. I cannot stand it. If I had a knife, I would like to tear them into pieces. And my throat constricts too."

"So, back then, was I seventeen or eighteen? You know we would farm the village land back then. Several of us were diligently farming with some workers,

[when] four or five men in yellow uniforms walked up. I say their eyes were sharp. I do not know how but they recognized who the [cheonyeos] were right away. They said something in a strange language, then, all of a sudden, the bastards came and dragged me off without giving me much room to resist. (Whispering) It was appalling. I was screaming after screaming for help at the top of my lungs, ‘Some gangsters are taking me!’ Then the people in the field, *aheegoo*, came running and screaming, but all they had were hoes to chase us with. But what could the people do when the men were dragging me off so fast? What was I to do? I did not know their language. Even if I shouted and cursed at them in the Korean language, they did not understand me. Well, because we did not understand one another’s language, what could I do? So, at that time, I was just taken.”

“Those Japs, or the military police, were like detectives, and they were higher ranking than the policemen.”

“I was just taken as I was farming the land in my hometown. Who knew what was going on? The older married women who were farming with me in the field said, ‘*Aheego*, what can we do? Why are they doing this?’ All they could do was scream after us. But, no matter how much they screamed, no one came to my rescue. That was how it happened. The Japs just fiercely took me away.”

“We were taken and loaded onto a coverless train.”

“The train was crowded and noisy, and I cried and cried. But what was the use in crying? Was there any way out of this? I could not do a thing. Who? Were there any Koreans who could resist them? What could they do? Many were taken like that. I suffered and cried so much. When I think about that, (choking up with tears) my heart aches and aches and eventually it feels [as if it is] burning.”

“At the time, we were on the coverless train for a few days. They gave us each a rice ball, tightly packed, with two pieces of pickled radish, the kind that we had in the olden days. They gave us water in a jar, and we drank it. With our lives under such serious threat of being dragged toward death, how could we complain against them? So, we swore at them in the Korean language without discretion; since we could not speak Japanese, we swore at them in Korean. ‘You sons of bitches! Don’t you have children? Don’t you have siblings? And aren’t you ashamed of yourselves?’ We did all kinds of things. We screamed, cursed, and swore at them. But they never understood us, those bastards.”

“I was just thinking that they were taking us to enslave us as housemaids. I couldn’t think of anything else other than that.”

“Where was it? It has been so long. The place where the train stopped was in Japanese territory, so that is where we stopped. There weren’t too many soldiers.”

“When we got off from the train, we could not speak or move our bodies because we were extremely hungry from skipping dinner and breakfast. (Pointing to her shoulder) This was all shattered. In the evening, the young girls [I came with] all suddenly disappeared. The sun set in the evening, and I was left alone. This was serious. I panicked and started to search for the people, but they had all been taken away and were gone. And later on, I was left alone, and the Japanese soldiers were making me understand that I would be taken to a place.⁴ Then, a little later, one bastard approached me and tried to drag me off. I resisted by flailing my body this way and that. Then another bastard came and they lifted me by an arm and a leg and carried me off. What could a young girl do when four or five strong men came at her? As I was cursing at them, they took me away.”

Asahi Shokudo

They dragged me and tried to take me to their rooms.

“It was not a desolate field: they had built a fortress. They had built a fortress, and we could not go out. We were not allowed outside the fortress. Two bastards were guarding the gate.”

“I saw the [troops], although they were not close. At a far distance, I saw [soldiers] clumsily coming and going and hanging up their laundry. I was able to see all of their activities.”

“Now, when I came out from the room where I slept, I could see some trees and soldiers exercising by themselves. Like those things.”

“What corner of the world will I be taken to? I was only hoping not to be sent to a bad place.”

“To put it in today’s terms, they introduced me to some restaurants, and they received some commission. And they took all the money.”

“Some people were assigned to the comfort stations, while some others were assigned to the *shokudos* (restaurants). So, one group was sent to the comfort facilities, and another group was sent to the restaurants.”

“It was not a comfort facility, but it was a restaurant called Asahi Shokudo. People were sitting in rows like this (stretching out her two arms), and you would jump around here and there, pouring drinks.”

⁴ Those who were responsible for assigning girls taken from Korea to the battlefields were notifying Roh Chung-ja that she would be sent to a place just like other girls who were sent to different places.

“*Tokkuri* (liquor bottle). Now, there was this small size of a liquor bottle. And at the restaurant, I was carrying the bottle and filling up the empty cups as they became empty (pretending to pour a drink).”

“What was I to do? As long as I was taken there, I had to pour the drinks and, sometimes, drink it. That is what I had to do.”

“[The Japanese soldiers who came to the restaurant] would tell me to sing. [Then I] would cut them off, saying to them, ‘*Watashi wa utau dekinai*’ (‘I do not sing’).”

“They would insist and say, ‘*Amusume-san, utau yare*’ (‘Hey girl, sing us a song’). ‘*Watashi wa utau wakaranai*’ (‘I do not know any songs’). ‘*Doshitara utau ka?*’ (‘Why should I sing?’), I would say. And I acted very hard against them. The girls who sang and behaved cunningly were beloved, whereas the unfriendly ones were not treated as well.”

“The Japanese went there, and sometimes Korean people went there too. It made no difference.”

“[The Korean people who went to the restaurant] were called *tsuyaku-san*. Army interpreter. *Tsuyaku-san*.”

“[Some of the Japanese people who went to the restaurant] were soldiers and some were not soldiers. But they were working at the military camp, in any case.”

“They gripped my wrists, dragged me, and tried to take me to their rooms. But I learned quickly and cursed them in their language: ‘*Bakayaro, konoyaro*’ (‘you, stupid’). This is how I learned some swear words. I was rough. Because I acted roughly against them, they said that I was a scary girl.”

“If a woman seemed to be weak and ignorant, a few of them would scheme together to take her and violate her in their room forcefully. Do you think that just one or two would rape her? It was more like four or five. Then, the girl would come out near to death and would have to go to the hospital.”

“Then, her face would no longer have the same color, *aheego*, her body drooped down like a dead body. We knew right away that she had slept with several bastards. Hanging lifelessly, my word. They would carry away, sometimes, two or, sometimes, three [girls] on their backs. *Aheego*, when I saw that, I would just go somewhere and hide; even if it was under just a bundle of straw. I automatically went and hid under it. After seeing that, hiding became automatic.”

“At the time, it felt like I would go crazy. I did not listen to them, so I was beaten.”

“I can be very stubborn. Stubborn and hard. I demanded, ‘Who do you think you are, ordering me to do this and that?’”

“And the manager complained to me that I was not at all as submissive as I should be.”

“He slapped me on my face and struck my back.”

“The girls there had to clean the [military camp] accommodation once a week.”

“We did the laundry for them and cleaned this and that room. We were no better than housekeepers. And no housekeeper was treated as badly as we were. We had to clean so many rooms, this one and that one. It is not like there were just one or two rooms. It took many working together to get the job done.”

“The laundry work we did was so hard that our bodies ached something awful. *Aheegoo*, it was not until night at bedtime that we could let go of our [work] and go to sleep. And in the morning, when we came out, they would give us a spoonful of rice packed into a ball to last us the whole day of hanging and drying all the laundry.”

“*Aheego*, there were some sons of bitches who pooped in their underwear after drinking. There were all kinds of bastards. *Aheego*, but we used to frequently pull the wool over their eyes. Who wanted to wash such nasty and smelly underwear? When you went to the bathroom, the toilets were deep; so, we just crumpled them up and threw the underwear in there. Then, the [owner], seeing that the underwear was gone, would shout, ‘What did you do with it? Give it back!’ At which time, we would say, ‘*Amita kotoga naidesuyo*’ (‘I did not see one’). Then he would say, ‘*Okashiina, Okashiina*’ (‘That is strange’). We would say and act as if we were clueless. And they would let it go. I have deceived a lot of Japs, I have.”

“Some paid us tips if we folded the dry laundry nicely and brought it to them. After a while, I became familiar with those who tipped and those who did not and only did the laundry for the ones who gave tips.”

Entertainment Performers

The yellows were all soldiers and I sang before the soldiers.

“I was one of the entertainment performers⁵ at the restaurant.”

5 After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the Japanese government formed a Cultural Propaganda Group by gathering kisaengs from *gwonbeon* to provide entertainment to the Japanese military. They accompanied and performed for the Japanese military troops in many different places in Korea and Manchuria.

“There was a performance once a week.”

“The restaurant was decorated, and the stage was somehow nicely decorated too. We moved from place to place every week. For one week, we went here for this troop, and for the next week, we went there for that troop. And we had to leave immediately when there were events.”

“The yellows were all soldiers and I sang before the soldiers. And I danced the fan dance with two folding fans.”

“At the time, I did all sorts of things to avoid being selected for the [entertainment performers]. I tried not to get selected. But inevitably, I was selected.”

“I hated all the things they did, and nothing was to my liking, but damn, I was selected because I was the best.”

“Entertainment performers. What is good about being a member of them? Do you know how tough it is to practice for the [performances]?”

“And there were Japanese women too.”

“I practiced and performed with fierceness so as not to be defeated by the Japanese. I did not want to lose to those Japanese bitches, and I wanted to be superior. So, I put all my heart into the performances, then the clapping would pour in.”

“When I saw that the Korean girls and women were ill-treated for not being able to perform well, I would tell them, ‘Hey, do you have rocks in your heads? Why can’t you do it? Do it like this!’ (dancing with her hand movements). And if [the manager] were sitting there watching them, saying, ‘*Konoyaro, atama ga bakayaro*’ (‘Hey, you stupid-head’), I would feel so bad.”

“I wore the traditional Japanese clothes, the *kimono*, during the performances. And as for my hair, I drew it back and tied it.”

“If you participated in the band performances, although you did not get paid, how should I put it? You did get some extra food.”

Women from the Same Hometown

We stayed up all night talking about the past, and we would cry, and we would laugh.

“Now, there was a place for me to sleep in.”

“The [room] was separately arranged. One group of people lay down on one side, whereas another group lay on the other side. We put our heads in this direction. And only the passage in the middle stayed vacant.”

“It was not on the floor, but it was designed like a bed setting; everyone lay on the top of thick sticks.”

“In case there were three, four, or five girls from the same hometown, we stayed up all night talking about the past, and we would cry, and we would laugh. Then, somehow, the night would be over.”

“Some girls were kind. They included Japanese as well as Korean. Later on, they started to call me ‘*nee-chan, nee-chan*’ (sister). When they called me ‘older sister,’ I would say, ‘*Aheego*, how can we go back to Korea?’ They said that they think they will die here. But they wished that they would not die here, but could go back to Korea and die there. As they said this, big drops of tears would pour out of their eyes, and I could have died out of pity for them. They had been sold too. [Agents] sold them secretly and received some commission.”

“[One girl who called me older sister] was a bit rough. Maybe it was because she lacked in humanity? I do not know. But she earned a lot of money too. She received all the money through getting tips. When we were together in private, she said (whispering in a low voice), ‘Older sister, who will know when we go back to Korea? Why don’t we just make some money from this dirty shithole? I have got this much money. And I am going to find the money after I go back to Korea.’ I saved the paper for money in a tiny bag inside my underwear around my belly. And I was going to exchange it when I went back to Korea.”

“[Our wages] were paid by the manager, a person in a high position. We were paid in paper on a daily basis.”

Armband

If I were given a fake high-position badge on my arm, then I could work less.

“If I did their errands and flattered them a bit too, they gave me rewards. And I mean that their rewards were pretty much nothing. If there was anything to eat, they would put it in a tiny, little box, wrap it, and give it to you. That was it.”

“Because I was wearing an armband, I was ranked like the first or second lieutenant. You received badges when you were seen as being nice in all the ways that you could be.”

“When you receive the badges, there is this thing that wraps around your arm on which you can put the badges. After you earn your badges and pin them to your armband, you get military salutes even from the high-ranking soldiers. (Her hand goes up to her forehead.) Salute! Like this. [On the armband],

whether you are a first lieutenant or a second lieutenant, your position is stamped. That is why they would salute and behave well before you.”⁶

“After you have done the errands and cleaning, after you have done all that, your two arms will feel like they are about to fall off. Later on, as you sit there, pitifully exhausted, [a kind-hearted] high-ranking officer might come to you, asking, ‘*Ah-ee-gu, Jintoko-san, itai desu ka?*’ (‘Jintoko-san, are you in pain?’). And I would say, ‘*Hai, itai desuyo. Atama ga itaidesu*’ (‘Yes, it hurts. My head hurts.’). ‘Ah, is that true?’, he would say. He would call me to him and give me a fake high-position badge on my arm, and then I could work less. After a few days of a little bit of comfort, I would be good as new.”

“If I were supervising, I ate well. [Some other girls] attempted to bribe [me] to get more attention. They kept bringing me things, secretly, secretly. I tried not to receive things from them, but I had no choice but to take them. But if I took things from them, I had to pay them back for what I received. So, I tried not to be unfair and treat all of them fairly well.”

A Dog Hole

I held my breath and ran away.

“I did the laundry for a high-ranking officer and that is how I met him. I would do the laundry and brought the well-folded clothes to him and said, ‘*Sentaku shi mashita, haiyo*’ (‘The laundry is done. Here’). When I gave out the laundry, I was especially favored. By that high-ranking officer.”

“The Japanese man was a *yangban*. He said he felt pity for me. How much pain I must be suffering from having left Korea for this foreign land to serve Japanese soldiers. When I came, he would even massage my back for me.”

“[I asked the Japanese officer] to send me to Kankoku (Korea). I have both my *otousan mo okasan mo minna* (both my father and mother). They probably think that I am already dead. If you don’t send me to Chosun, just go ahead and kill me. I said I would close my eyes, so please shoot me from a distance. After I said this, tears started pouring down my face like rain. And he seemed to feel sorry for me, so he gave me a towel and told me to wipe away my tears. He said he was not going to

⁶ This is presumed to be the case where the restaurant manager distributed armbands with rankings to the restaurant workers, and Japanese military soldiers would show respect to the workers with higher rankings.

kill me. *Aheegoo*-, every time I talk about the story, I get all choked up. So, I wiped away the tears and sat quietly alone.”

“Then, he said, ‘*Kawaisoune, mou sukoshi matte kudasai.*’ That is, poor thing, just hang in there just a little while longer.”

“So, in return for his kindness, I tried to do his laundry well and treated him in a friendly manner. Then, all of a sudden, the man, who was a first lieutenant, started lusting after me. He said that if I did not do what he said, I would never get out of there. I thought about it for a while, and then came to a conclusion, what good does it do for me to die here? ‘It is better to have my body ruined once but keep it open in the hope of going to Korea.’ That was the thought that came to my mind. Because I wanted to die after seeing my parents and siblings in Korea, the next time, I did not say what I wanted to say but became submissive toward him. *Ah-yoo*, he told me to sleep with him. And so, he took me. I felt I could not survive at all otherwise. In the evening, he came to me again, and I was raped by him again. I said to myself, what is the difference? I had already been raped once. What is one more time?”

“[That man] told me not to go to bed that night, but rather to go outside at twelve or one o’clock. Then, he would send me to Chosun. Will you really send me to Chosun? If it is true, I said, I will bow down to you ten times.”

“I was told to come out. So, I walked out at around one o’clock at night, and I saw that two men were standing there.”

“I could just dimly see it over there in the distance from where I was standing, the wire fence over there. The wire mesh was very frightful.”

“He said, the wire fence was over there, and he will stand guard, so I should get out quickly. He continued, if he waved a red flag, it meant the soldiers were coming after me, and if nothing was heard or seen, it meant I was safe. He wanted me to quickly run away through a dog hole and said I would be okay after I passed through the dog hole even if the soldiers saw me running away.”

“I was thankful. Even if he mistreated me, he was still sending me to Korea. Because he took care of everything, I was able to leave without being caught. So, I was thankful. He saved my life.”

“[The restaurant owner], of course, did not know this. If he knew, I had debts and I would have had to pay my debts. I ran away from there secretly.

“When I came out, it was Mukden.”⁷

“I took a train and went for a long time, then got off and *kawari* (transferred) to a different train. I continuously asked [questions] as I kept going.”

7 Mukden, Manchuria. Mukden is currently known as Shenyang.

“Getting [on the train], I said that I did not have any money and made such a big fuss about what a miserable situation I was in that the conductor told me to just get on. ‘*Yoshi*’ (‘Good’).”

“So, I rode on the train, and before I got off, I repeatedly asked for directions. *Aheegoo*, do not even start. Do not even ask. I went through all sorts of terrible hardships. (Close to tears) I even walked for parts of the journey and begged for food to eat. Do not even start.”

“I was starving so much I did not know what to do, and so just cried big drops of tears. I started wondering whether I would ever see my parents and siblings again in Korea after all this. Even while walking on the street, I would stop and start crying; then someone would approach me and ask, ‘Why are you crying?’ They would also say, ‘*Okane ga nai desu yo?*’ (‘Do you not have any money?’). (More emotional, and with a shaking voice) Then I would explain the story, and they would say how hard it was and give me some money. I suffered so much then that just talking about it gives me a very bad headache.”

Peddling

There is nothing I have not done. Don’t even ask.

“I was in China for a while, then left and went to Yuseong, where my mother and father lived.”

“Words cannot describe how it was. There was a sea of tears. All the village people hugged me and cried together.”

“Then, my mother passed away in the village, and I sold the house and moved to Gyeonggi-do. I went to Gyeonggi-do and stayed there for a while; then after that, I went to Daecheon. There is no place like Daecheon with its affordable prices and kind people. I like Daecheon the best.”

“It is God’s honest truth, I peddled all alone; I traveled from place to place carrying all sorts of things in a small basin to sell them.”

“It is all food business. Food business makes money.”

“Whatever came up, whenever it came up, I [sold it]. That was a good time. And I made good money too. I set aside three times a day and diligently sold everything. (Pointing at a plastic bag in front of her) And in the evening, I filled a plastic bag with money.”

“Depending on the situation, I did this and that, whatever worked and was called for by each situation. As I was living alone, I always carried a bag like that (indicating the interviewer’s bag) with me. It would be so much fun to see

the bag fill up with money up to here (indicating the top of the bag) that I would start selling as if my life depended on it.”

“Because I dealt with people in a kindly and friendly manner, I had many customers.”

“I even opened a store, and I did money lending also. [But] people can rip you off, or money transactions won’t go through. That is what people’s lives are like, I think.”

“I ran a coffee shop in Japan. It must have been for seven or eight years.”

“A friend of mine called me [and told me] to go there. The [friend] came to [Korea] to get me, and so, I followed her. We used to live in the same town, the house just above and just below. The friend said, when are you going to earn money if not now? Why are you living alone? You should have either children or money. And why are you doing business on the street? There is no one as foolish as you. The friend kept pulling me and pushing me, so I had no other choice but to get a passport and follow her to Japan.”

“As soon as I arrived in [Japan], the coffee shop took off and was full of customers. I earned a lot of money.”

“When it was a success, I made a lot of money. *Aehew-*, but after I returned to Korea, I became sick. I had to sell it. I had surgery and had to get rid of it.”

“I had surgery here on the groin area. (Making a fist) I had a lump this big here, so I had surgery to cut it off. (Showing her surgical scar) I have a scar here. An evil thing came up in the body, and it made this scar.”⁸

“*Aheego*, if I tell you all that I suffered, you, young ladies (interviewers) could not help but cry too. If I start talking about what I have borne, what I have to say will be a baggage-full. Who would I tell all those stories to?”

“Some of my [siblings] are alive, and some others are dead already. I have avoided my siblings in my life because they usually come to extort money from me. Without that, I can eat what I want, have no concerns or worries, and live in comfort.”

“*Aheego*, I was extorted for more than several tens of thousand dollars. I severely scolded them and screamed on the phone. I no longer have any compassion for them. And since I do not have any compassion for them, I am firm that I would not see them anymore. ‘Even if I die, even if I am drawing my last breath, I will not see you.’ I said this to them vehemently.”

⁸ Rho Chung-ja had surgery to remove a fist-sized lump from her upper thigh caused by syphilis.

A Noble Man

We would have lived together longer if he had not died.

“There was no dating. Back in my day, there was no dating. In the old days, we lived in the same town and played together, so we would talk and play. I was good at making jokes. And the guy was also good at making jokes as well. We talked back and forth and later decided to live together.”

“[That man] treated me well. When I asked him to do this, he nodded and did this, and when I asked him to do that, he did that. He never gave me any worries. I found him to be an affable and kind man. Sometimes, he would be sitting outside the gate, and as [I] was returning home carrying boxes of [things to be sold], he would come to meet me and take the leftover items. While sitting, he would also massage my legs like this (pretending to massage her leg) when I was sitting.”

“Because he could cook rice, he steamed the rice and bought some side dishes and prepared the table. Then after I was done making money, he would come to get me, and we would go home together. *Aheegoo*, but ever since he passed away, there is no end to how meaningless everything feels. And there is no end to how sad and lonely I feel. There is no one I can depend on. *Aheegoo*, there has been an awful lot of suffering, awful hardship.”

“He was a noble person. He was content to just follow me and he supported me and took care of me. He was well-mannered and spoke gently.”

“Both of my [children] died. My two sons were both brilliant, but they both died of measles, senseless deaths. It was very odd, but you cannot help it when I was destined not to have children. And no matter what I did, they died.”

Sad Heart

While I sit, I try to stretch my legs, and then I am reminded that these legs will also decay.

“[What the Japanese did to me that was wrong] was that they took me and made me live the life of a prostitute and pour and sell alcohol as their salesperson. That kind of life.”

“It is appropriate to demand compensation [from Japan] since I suffered because of the Japs.”

“Because I registered as a *comfort girl-woman* in the past when they investigated us, I receive a certain amount of money every month. It is with this money

that I have been living and paying all my bills. There is no one supporting me financially.”

“I think my heyday was when I was thirty-five or thirty-six years old.”

“It was the best time of my life when I could do what I wanted. And I had some wealth from money lending and such.”

“The worst moment was when my body was feeling sick.”

“I was most distressed and saddest when my body was feeling sick. Nothing else. When your body is feeling healthy, nothing matters much. I do not get sick easily, but once I do, I suffer terribly. I have nosebleeds and suffer a lot of pain.”

“If your mind is bright and clear, then you have no worries. But Alzheimer symptoms have been plaguing me lately, so things have been very different.”

“And I can no longer sit around for more than two hours because my back hurts. So then, I lie on the bed for long stretches of time and get up intermittently.”

“I do not know when I will die, this pitiful life of mine. *Ae-yoo-*, maybe it will be quick and easy. I feel strange.”

“These days, sadness looms my heart. It was not like this before, but now sadness takes over me. While I sit, I try to stretch my legs, and then I am reminded that these legs will also decay.”

“My old friends and dead [husband] appear in my dreams. Then they say to me, ‘Eat and stay well, your time is almost over too.’ That is what they say.”

“When the dead appear in dreams and beckon me to come, I think, it won’t be long until I go.”

“After I die, whoever wants [my wealth] may take it. Now, all I wish for is for someone to bury me. Although I would like to adopt a meek daughter who would take care of me. Aside from that, there isn’t anything else. I have no more wishes because this is just my fate.”

“*Aheego*. Do not ask me about my past life. It pains my heart.”

Interviewer's Commentary: The Memory of Sad Times

Kim Eunkyung

One day in the early summer of 2002, when the sunlight began to feel hotter, Park Jungae and I drove on the open highway along the west coast, imitating Thelma and Louise. At the end of our three-hour drive, during which we heatedly engaged in a profound conversation on subjects ranging from Seo Taiji (a well-known singer) to Park Geun-hye (former president of South Korea), we arrived in Boryeong. As soon as we passed the tollgate, we called Roh Chung-ja *halmoni* to let her know that we were near her place, and then briefly went over

our strategy based on the information we had about her. Born in 1922, Roh Chung-ja *halmoni* had been forcibly conscripted when she was nineteen years old while weeding fields in her hometown, Yuseong. She was taken to Manchuria and made to work as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*. She was a typical *comfort girl-woman* that we have come to visualize when we say those two words. After she registered herself as a *comfort girl-woman* in 1993, the *halmoni* has participated in various rallies and appeared in TV documentaries. So, we thought we could obtain her oral statements without much difficulty. We decided that, during the first interview, we would hear about her experiences before the emancipation and prepared some questions about her family relationships and the circumstances of her abduction. Reminding ourselves of what we had read in several works on oral history interviews, we set as our basic principle that we would allow Roh *halmoni* to naturally speak on her own to reveal as much of her experiences as possible. We were too perfect.

Roh *halmoni*'s place, to which we paid a visit with a jar of honey, was a rental apartment in downtown Boryeong. With the use of a cane, she was waiting for us by the apartment entrance. She looked quite a bit older than we had thought because she had no teeth. Her sun-filled and a little less than 400 square feet apartment was filled to the brim with various household goods. The first two things that caught our eyes were an old worn-out bed and a cabinet filled with nameless medicines. There were pictures on the wall, but they were hung so high that we could barely see them on our tiptoes. They were of Roh *halmoni* when she had been young, softly made-up and wearing a *hanbok*. In the six or seven pictures, she was always all alone . . .

We began the interview as we had prepared. She started to talk, giving vent to her agitated feelings toward Japan. Then, she gave us a specific account of how she had been forcibly dragged off by the Japanese military police while she was weeding in the fields. Up to that point, there was no problem. But her experiences after the abduction were a lot different from what we knew. She told us that she had been taken to a restaurant where she cooked and did laundry for the Japanese soldiers. There, other Korean girls and women were raped by the Japanese soldiers, but she was 'quick on the uptake' and did not experience that kind of thing. She only worked as a housemaid, always on the move from here to there. When, with a straight face, she said that she had never been to a comfort station, we could not help but be completely confused. We asked again. "Have you never been [to a comfort station] in your life?" "Why would I go to that kind of a place?" "Ah, you have never been there?" "Never. I just heard about it." "No one ever forced you to do anything?" "Forcefully? How? It never happened. *Ahhew-*." Throughout the first interview, Roh *halmoni* kept repeating that she did not deal with the Japanese soldiers, unlike other 'foolish girls,' and that she only did the cleaning and laundry for

them to the point that she shuddered. Was she deliberately deceiving us because she did not want to talk about what happened in the past, or did she really believe that she had only done the laundry? We were in a state of confusion because we never expected this situation. We were bewildered as to how we should take this unexpected turn of events.



Roh Chung-ja.

Toward the end of the story, Roh Chung-ja *halmoni* told us that she had Alzheimer's these days, so now she wears her identification card and apartment key around her neck on a cord whenever she goes outside. 'Oh no, Alzheimer's!' How much truth could a *halmoni* with dementia be able to tell in oral statements that have testimony as its major aspect? After the interview, on the way back home, Jungae and I had a serious discussion about the reliability of the oral statements. If her memory was really impaired by dementia, we should not proceed with the interview. But her attitude was too sincere and serious and her descriptions of what occurred too realistic and specific for us to just give up the interview. So, we decided to meet her again after a time.

Before we went for the second interview, we had many concerns and preparations with which to deal. Whether Roh *halmoni* intentionally avoided talking

about her experiences as a *comfort girl-woman*, or whether she just did not remember because of her dementia, we believed that the omission or the inability to talk about it was another expression of her wounds. So, we made up our minds to approach the interview in a somewhat round-about way. Instead of trying to dig around in her past, for her to respond with ease, we prepared questions about her family and current living situation. But even in the first half of the interview, her experiences unexpectedly just came pouring out. While hooking up a microphone on her, I asked her to sing a song and happened to tell her that I had learned how to play the *jangu* while in college. Then, suddenly, she replied that she was good at playing the *jangu* as well. When I asked her where she had learned it, and she said that it was at the *gwonbeon*. She sang *taryeong*, a traditional Korean ballad, and showed us some skilled dancing. The story was that she entered a *gwonbeon* with her friends when she was fifteen years old because she wanted to learn how to sing and dance. Because of this, when she was taken to Manchuria, she entertained the soldiers with songs and dances as a member of the entertainment performers. This time, she did not say a word about doing laundry, but, from start to finish, only about the *gwonbeon* and entertaining the troops.

And again, here was another reason why we were taken aback by her story. The staff of the Korean Council had no idea whatsoever that the *halmoni* had ever been to a *gwonbeon*, and it was something that had never been brought up during her interview on TV in 1993. At one point, we even doubted her story about the *gwonbeon*, but her description of her experiences at the *gwonbeon* matched up reasonably accurately with what the historical resources have to say about *gwonbeons*. Her story that she graduated from the *gwonbeon* after taking lessons in playing the *jangu* and singing for three years corresponded with the fact that *gwonbeons* played a role as schools for *kisaengs* during this period in history. There was no reason why we should not believe her story. But we still had this question: why had she not mentioned her experiences at the *gwonbeon* before? Perhaps she intentionally excluded that part because she thought that her experiences at the *gwonbeon* were different from those of a typical *comfort girl-woman*? Just like Mrs. Han in Kim Wonil's novel, *Memories of Tragic Times*, instead of damaging her memory, might Roh Chung-ja *halmoni*'s dementia have played a role in revealing her 'forbidden experiences' that were hidden in her heart for so long? We knew that we should avoid any hasty speculations and decided to remain open to various possibilities.

However, we still had another unsolved problem. Roh *halmoni* hardly told us anything about her experiences as a *comfort girl-woman*. The only thing that she said was that a Japanese officer demanded she spend a night with him as a price for helping her escape, and she had no choice but to accede to his

demand because she wanted to come back to Korea. That was all. Ultimately, we did not get the most crucial part of the testimony.

Why was Roh *halmoni* suddenly and consistently insisting, “Nothing like that happened,” despite the fact that she had actively talked about her experiences as a *comfort girl-woman* on a TV interview about seven or eight years previously? While we were wrestling with this concern, we heard a story from a lady who was living with her. Since a long time ago, the *halmoni* had not hidden the fact that she had been a *comfort girl-woman* from the neighbors, so most of the people knew about her past. But ever since her dementia, she has been trying to hide what everyone knew already. So, when someone would bring up the subject, she would become angry, saying, “How would those people know about that? Who told them?”

It must be that, from the bottom of her heart, she hates the fact that her past was being spoken about, no matter the way in which it was being told. She always felt nervous about her past. So, she was trying so hard to hide a past that everyone already knew about. Even during the interview, whenever there was a noise, even a noise caused by the wind, she would stop us by saying, “Hold on, hold on,” and peered outside to see if anything was going on. Although she said that she did not experience that kind of bad thing, she trembled like a leaf at any mention of Japanese soldiers and clawed at her breast. Then, we finally realized why she did not cry out loud. She was testifying not by her words, but by her body.

Roh Chung-ja *halmoni*'s dementia was not an obstacle that hindered us from trusting her oral statements. The memory affected by dementia was not a stuffed memory. To her, dementia acted as a catalyst that revealed her past experiences in various ways. Dementia disarmed her ability to selectively withhold certain memories and opened up the floodgates to new stories of experiences that she had taken pains not to tell up until now. And, at the same time, her dementia revealed the compulsive unconsciousness that made her think that she had to hide her shameful past. Unlike when she testified as a *comfort girl-woman* on TV, she adamantly insisted that she had never been to the comfort stations and never experienced bad things because of this idea of taboo that had been controlling her for such a long time. This being so, her oral statement might not consist of pure facts. In her oral statement, her real and psychological experiences were woven into each other. Thus, we would like her story, which is a quilt of many patches, not to be read in a formulaic way, as though it were made of one material.

“You Come and Give Us Compensation and Beg Us for Forgiveness”

Jang Jeom-dol

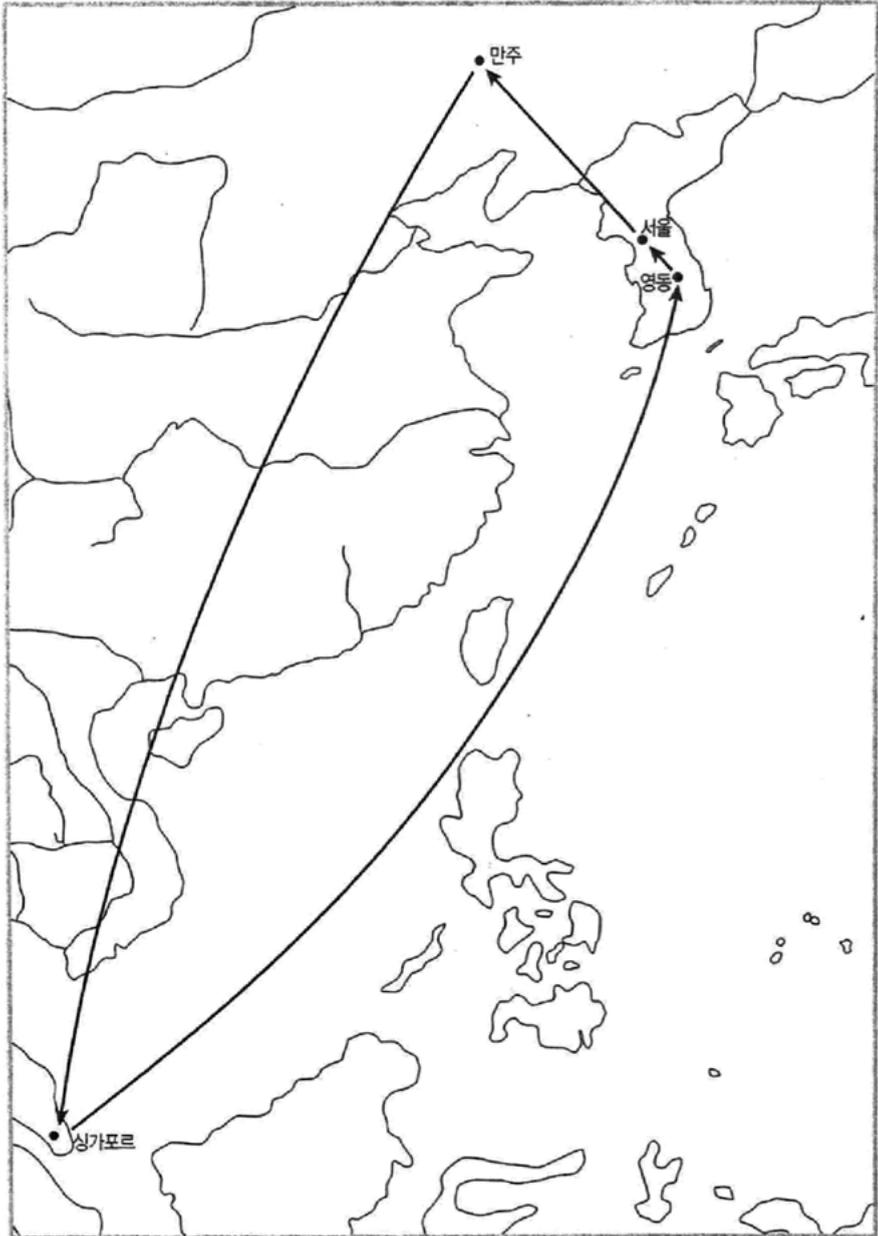


Jang Jeom-dol.

1923	Born in Chungcheongbuk-do Yeongdong-gun
1938 (Age 16)	Dragged into comfort station from Yeongdeungpo-gu Worked as a <i>comfort girl-woman</i> near the Mudanjiang in Manchu
1940 (Age 18)	Got pregnant (first baby) Moved to another comfort station in Singapore
1941 (Age 19)	First baby born. Baby died
1942 (Age 20)	Second baby born. Baby died
1943 (Age 21)	Third baby born. Baby died
1944 (Age 22)	Fourth baby, a daughter, was born
1945 (Age 23)	After the liberation, came back to Korea with daughter
1946 (Age 24)	Lived in Yang's house in Pohang
1948 (Age 26)	Worked as a seller in Gyeongsang-do, Daejun, and Seoul
1960 (Age 38)*	Adopted cousin's daughter
1964 (Age 42)	Worked as a housekeeper in Seoul Hyehwa-dong Daughter who was born in the comfort station went to the USA
1965 (Age 43)	Daughter who was born in the comfort station died
Early 1970s**	Adopted an orphan as her son (a middle school student)
2001 (Age 79)	Registered as a <i>comfort girl-woman</i>
2004 (Age 82)	Lived in Incheon with her nephew she adopted
2011 (Age 89)	Deceased

*Approximately

**Estimated



Jang Jeom-dol's route: Yeongdong – Seoul – Manchuria – Singapore – Yeongdong.

“Sometimes, when I am lying still and thinking, I get up all of a sudden, I do. I get so frustrated. (Beating her chest) I have to take a deep breath because I get so frustrated in here. Then I look up at the ceiling and try not to think about anything, and then things calm down a little bit, and I am okay. But then, another thought comes into my mind. Then, *ahee*, I cannot stand this anymore, and I go out again. After I go out, I say to myself, ‘*Ahee*, this is not working. I gotta go outside and breathe a little.’ (Taking a long breath) *Ahhew*--. When I breathe out like this, it has to be refreshing, but when it is forced, I just can’t stand it. The thoughts keep coming back and I keep thinking about it.”

“And when I think about it, it hurts me inside. They were all crazy. Ha- you have to sigh like this. But I am forcing it. It has to come out naturally, but since it is forced, I can’t sleep at all.”

“You have to come and give us recompense. It is because of you that we are old maids. We are living without experiencing happiness. So, give us reparation and come and beg us for forgiveness. That is what I want to say.”

Cotton Factory

There was a little bitty house on a hill. That is where he took me.

“[Our family] had been living in a village (currently called Jukchon-dong), about 4 km in from Yeongdong-si, until we moved out from the village to Yeongdong-eup.”

“I have never even been to the door of a school before. . . . Our father did not let me study. He said that if we let that girl study, it will ruin our family, and kept taking books away from me. *Ahhew*-, I had a good head on my shoulders, but they did not let me study; I really regret that. And now I resent my dad for it.”

“There were six daughters and two sons [in my family]. [My older sisters] were all married and lived with their husbands’ families.”

“[When we came to Yeongdong], I was at a Japanese house for a little bit. I took care of a baby, to earn a living. . . . I wanted to steal money [from that house]. You know, to help those people who did that thing back then. The independence [movement]. I wanted to steal money to give to the people involved in the independence movement. Since I worked as a babysitter, there was a baby blanket, right? I put the money in it and left. That day, the owner did not look for his money, but the next day, he looked for it. He said that I had taken it. So, I quietly put it back. Then he said, ‘Ah, I did not see it in the corner there.’ I had hidden it in the corner. I did that quickly. It is a good thing that I did not act fast and use it. If I had used the money, I would have been dead

that day. After I did that, I left that house from that day on. I had been in that house for a month. So, the man who worked as a driver and administered household matters at that house said to me, ‘Girl, you are extraordinary, you are. You should have learned some writing.’”

“You know how the movies came to the rural areas in the olden days? I used to sneak away to watch the movies for fear of our father. There was a man who worked at the local inn. That one kept following [me] around. If my father had known, he would have been beaten to death. I went into someone else’s house before I went to my house, so he could never find me again. I was clever like that. So, I do not know how I was taken there.”

“It was getting harder to stay living at our house because we were poor. . . . My aunt lived in Seoul alone with two sons. The house was big, and she was taking in boarders; so, she asked me to come there.”

“I must have been fifteen or sixteen then? My [memory] is not so good. There was the Yeongdeungpo cotton factory. The Japanese people must have put it up.”

“I told my [parents] that I was going to the factory and [headed for my aunt’s house]. “When I got off at [Yeongdeungpo] station, a man asked me where I was going. So, I told him I was going to the factory. He said that that was a good thing because he was a manager at the factory, and he could take me there. So, he took me to a place, and there was a little bitty house on a hill. That is where he took me. ‘You said you would take me to the factory. So, [why are we here]?’ He said that it was already night time, so we would go when it is daylight out. So, that is how it happened, unfortunately.”

“I was not sure whether that man was a Jap. He was wearing traditional Korean clothes so that you could not tell. Later on, I realized that he was not really military, just someone who was working for the military, you know? By his clothes, he could have been Korean, but by his speech, he could have been a Jap too; there was no way to know.”

Running Away

If I ran away, would you come with me?

“When daylight broke, they brought me rice balls. After I had eaten that, they said, ‘Let’s go.’ People traveled by train back then. We took the train and got off at Mudanjiang in Manchuria.”

“In a field in Manchuria, there was a small house. The rooms were lined up like cubicles. They were very- small. . . . The house was set apart from the rest of the neighborhood. It was in a very isolated area.”

“They put up dividers so that there was just enough room for one person in each space, and then they placed each of the girls into one space so that now, we could receive soldiers. . . . There was a blanket that the soldiers used. . . . I do not know how we lived in that cold place, in that cold place with just one army blanket.”

“There were not many soldiers; they came just one by one because we were so far away from anything or anybody else. Not many soldiers came.”

“I did not see any Koreans. Japanese *kashikan* (non-commissioned officers). Or *gunzoku* (military civilian employees). These were the types of people who came. Non-commissioned officers had three stars.”

“I was there a few days, but I thought I could not stay there anymore. It was the room and what we had to do there. And there was an older girl. She said, ‘If I ran away, would you come with me?’ ‘*Aheego* older sister! If you ran away, I would follow you.’ So, we waited for the opportune moment carefully and fled. But we did not know that those jerks were watching us in hiding. They fiercely shot their guns in the air. So, we stood still in our tracks. We were caught again, and she was beaten a lot. I remained quiet and easy going, so I got [hit less]. But as for her, ‘You coaxed her and took her with you, didn’t you?’ they said, and so she was beaten badly. They poured water into her nose. Since the olden days, the Japanese were well known for mixing red pepper powder with water and pouring it into people’s noses. They were nasty fellows if you look at what they did.”

“We would have been alright if we did not get caught then, but because we were caught, now I can’t take phone calls very well since they hit me in the ear. I cannot hear.”

Singapore

I was being dragged all the way to Singapore, not even knowing that I was pregnant with a baby.

“They said they were going to Busan. If I went to Busan, I would see my older sister who lived there. . . . So, I followed them, thinking I would escape to my sister’s. I could not resist not following them again. When I followed them, we went to an inn or someplace, in any case, we slept there. Afterward, they told me to get on a ship. They said if I boarded the ship, I would go to a good place, so they said for me to get on the ship. But after I got on the ship, it took a month. You know the thing that travels in the water, the thing that moves under the surface (submarine). It took a month because we had to evade those

things. We were going to Singapore. I was not able to eat for a month, so you can imagine what happened. I was half dead. And a baby was inside me. In my belly. *Aheego*, I cannot even speak.”

“I was being dragged all the way to Singapore, not even knowing that I was pregnant with a baby.”

“Someone said if I ate the root of a Korean pasque flower, I could abort the baby, so I ate it and felt like dying. It was extremely potent, that root of the Korean pasque flower. And they also said that if I took an iron (rubbing her stomach) and rubbed it up and down my stomach slowly, I would lose the baby, but it did not happen.”

“A few months later, I was giving birth, but I could not go to the hospital, and the baby was coming out upside down. I thought I was going to die. The friends around me kept saying to push hard. They said that the baby was coming out upside down and I should push hard. So, I pushed, and I guess, the baby was born to save my life.”

“I almost died, but I lived. The [baby] died. It was a good thing for me.”

“It was God helping me so that I could be less burdened. How was I going to raise the baby?”

“The [baby] died, and I was not able to heal my body. Was there even seaweed soup¹ or anything like that? All I ate was cold water and rice, and my teeth were all damaged because of this. After giving birth, it was about a month before they told me to receive customers again.”

The Japs

Why do those bastards keep coming?

“From downtown Singapore, about 2 km further in, there was a house in a really strange place. . . . There was only one big- house.”

“There were about twenty [girls]. They were on the second floor as well as the ground floor. We were initially in the big house, but then we were moved to somewhere else. We were moved to a house where you almost had to crawl in and crawl out. Further in still. That is to say, it was near the frontlines. . . . You know, there were places where you had to dig in the ground at night to go in. Bomb shelters. While we were digging, we could hear the warplanes flying in

¹ In Korea seaweed soup is usually made for good flow of breast milk and the health of women after giving birth.

the sky. So I went in there. But water came up to about here (indicating her waist), and bugs would climb all over you.”

“[The place where we were] was called Shinmachi. It was not like there were many places called this, just where we were.”

“For a good place, Singapore was alright. This was because not many people came there. They came maybe two or three or four a week. And I would just work in the kitchen, and if [other girls complained] that I did not come out, I would say, ‘I am cooking the food. Me. I cannot come out.’ Then the others would receive soldiers.”

“We could not even get rice there. What we cooked every day were eggplants. We stir fried the eggplants in oil. *Ah-hew-*, disgusting. We ate that and rice. And was the rice even proper rice? It was like Indica rice.”

“Rice. When the soldiers brought us rice, we ate the white rice along with the bugs that came mixed with it. The bugs would float in the water.”

“We had no clothes to wear. We had no money so we could not buy any clothes. There is nothing more to say. Even if you worked there for several years, you were lucky if you had clothes on yourself.”

“*Aheego-*, do you think that when the soldiers came, they paid? They did not. The Japs. Once in a blue moon, if you were visited by a good man, he would give you a little, or if you receive a Korean, he would give you more. But usually, there was nothing. We did not give and take money around there. I never put on make-up. Other girls bought cosmetics and such, but I never bought make-up, not even to save my life. What would I put on make-up for? What would I get for looking pretty for those jerks? I would just go in with regular hair, and did I even wash my face? I did not even wash and just went out there like that; then the soldiers just looked at me and just left. They took other girls in. (Smiling) I was very clever.”

“When those Japs came in, I would only say, ‘welcome.’ In Korean. Usually, you were supposed to say, ‘*Irassaimase*’ (‘welcome’ in Japanese). I never-, ever spoke in Japanese. I always just used Korean. When we were alone, it was Chun Ja. In Japanese, it might have been Yoshiko. You know they used to give us Japanese names, right? But between us, it was Chun Ja, if the name was Chun Ja, Hwa Ja, if the name was Hwa Ja, and Young Ja, if the name was Young Ja. We never called each other by our Japanese [names].”

“Japanese women also came there to sell their [bodies]; there were women like that. They were women who came to sell their bodies for money. . . . There was a girl with me, an itty- bitty girl. The child spoke Japanese well. She would just beat and pummel the Japanese women if they did anything wrong. We would go to take a bath, and if there were Japanese women, we would soap up and then just go in the bath. Without even rinsing. Then the [Japanese women]

would shout, “*Chosenjin Kitanai*” (‘dirty Korean’), and they would run away saying Koreans are dirty. Then, we would take our [bath] alone in peace. That is how we played. We were all bad.”

“[When soldiers came], we would say, in Korean, ‘Why do those sons of bitches keep coming?’ How we used to curse at them, sitting there saying, ‘what do those bastards want?’ What Jap knew how to speak Korean? *Aeeego-*, they were cursed a lot, by us. That son of a bitch, that son of a cow, get shot and die. Ha, ha.”

Good Men

Do you think that my father would give me to a Jap?

“A Japanese man brought me all- sorts of things to get me to live with him. Things to eat. But I told him that I did not want to. I said why would I live with a Jap? I won’t. Whenever he came to my room, he cherished me and did not sleep with me; he just brought me things to eat. At that time, Japanese snacks. How delicious Japanese snacks were. He brought me all of them. He said that he wanted to live with me and that he would write a letter to his family. He sent me clothes and asked to marry him and did all kinds of stuff. But no matter what he did, I did not listen to him then. I still remember him clearly, his face. I would recognize him if I saw him. He flipped out trying everything.”

“My father was really scary. Even in the middle of a fight, if they just heard my father’s voice, people would all just run away. That was in Yeongdong. And when it came to Japanese people, really-. When people wore white clothes, they would spray them with paint. Japanese people did. So that people would wear clothes dyed with color. So, he would beat the Japs, my father. He was that scary. So, do you think that he would give me to a Jap? Not a chance.”

“The Koreans who came to me were crew members, supervisors of prisoners, *gunzoku*, and suchlike. Once in a while, two or three of them would come.”

“There was Yang . . . he was South Korean. He lived in Pohang. And he was a soldier too. . . . *Gunzoku*. [That] man took very good care of me. He did it so that I would not have to receive customers before he came and until he left.”

“He asked me to go to his house and live with him [when Korea was liberated from Japan]. So, I said yes, let’s live together. He had been good to me until that time, so even if I ended up not living with him, I said that I would. Back then, I did not have much of a conscience.”

Syphilis

The pain was something else, but still, it was great.

“They gave me a disinfectant. When I disinfected myself, bugs, thin bugs with blackheads would come out. The water was teeming with them. Teeming. You know, *sakku*? The thing to put on when you do it. *Sakku*. There were many people who did not want to use it. . . . I used to cleanse myself with disinfectant. But what was the use? I got pregnant again.”

“I was pregnant again. I was pregnant, and there was nothing I could do about it, back then. So, I just had the baby. And again, the baby died. Died again.”

“*Uhhew*- Why did the baby die? This is what I think. You know I used a lot of medicine. Disinfectant. So, I used lots of medicine and took a lot of shots of medicine. That is why my baby was weak and got infected with diseases.”

“I had syphilis and gonorrhea and almost died. . . . I felt like I was getting peeled inside out. *Aheegoo*, I got infected in Manchuria. . . . In Manchuria, I had no time to get an exam. Even though I was there for a year, I never got a check-up. . . . I did not know then that I was infected. But gradually I felt like I was going to die. They looked just like octopus’ feet, the spots that appeared on my body. *Aheegoo*-, I still feel itchy.”

“When you get an exam [in Singapore], they give you a shot of #606. I went once a week for a check-up without fail to see if I had a disease. Then, I found I had a disease. Then, they wrote on the door. So that no customers could come in. On the door. On the door to the room where I slept. In that case, you have to keep on going to get check-ups.”

“*Aheego*, this is great.’ The pain was something else, but still, it was great. In my mind. “A Jap came into my room and asked me to have sex. So, I said, ‘Don’t you see the sign on the door?’ He said that if we used a *sakku*, it would be okay. So I said, ‘No, I can’t because it hurts.’ Then, the [Jap] got all mad and left.”

“So, I kept the sign and went to get my shots.”

“When I was cured, they told me to receive customers again and took the sign off from the door.”

Dead Friend

‘What is the good of going home after having been in a place like this?’

“One of my friends committed suicide by overdosing on drugs. She was much older than me, a girl from Jeolla-do. ‘What is the good of going home after having been in a place like this?’ She wrote this and died. When I went in to tell her to eat breakfast, she was dead, and her body was stiff. Opium, you know? Opium. If you cut your finger and suck the blood from it, and then take opium, you die. You die in your sleep. That is how she died.”

“It was such a waste. She was quiet and good. She was also very warm-hearted. After she died, we all took a picture of us sitting down. Everybody sat down in a line with a flower attached to here (our chest). You know those clothes that nurses wear? We all had them made and wore them. I had that photo where we were all wearing white. The [photo] was taken by the Japs; the soldiers came and took it. Each of us had a copy. . . . But it was all burnt in the fire when the house was burnt down.”

“There must also have been girls who jumped. I am sure that there were some girls who jumped, thinking about what kind of a welcome they would get if they went back to Korea. There probably were girls who did not come back to [Korea].”

“We were the first ones to know that we had been liberated. They came to bring us the news, the Korean soldiers. The Japs did not know. They only found out later.”

“The hallway floor was large. We were all gathered together there, all of us. The Koreans were all gathered together. The [Japanese soldiers] came to see what had happened to the Koreans and then left.”

“There were about twenty to thirty [Korean people] there. And there were men too among us. And some of them were *gunzoku*. There must have been a few of them with us.”

“*Ahee*, after the [liberation], I did not come back right away. There was a war and everybody was fighting for independence, fighting each other with guns. So, how could I come out of there right away? I was there a few months. And during those few months, we ate, and we slept. That is all we did. Like beggars on the street. Ha, ha.”

Back Home

I was ashamed; it felt like people kept staring at me.

“I bore three babies there, [but they all died]. In the end, I had a daughter. I had her, so I took her and came back after the liberation.”

“There were just two, one had a son, and I had a daughter; there were only two people who came back with a baby.”

“We celebrated my daughter’s first birthday there, and we made and ate rice cakes for her first birthday. We made the rice cakes in the tool barrel, and then we left soon after. So, we came back to Busan, but we came at night, and there were no cars. We were all on our way back to our hometown, but since we had no money, we slept in the streets. In the morning, they put a stamp on our hands, and we went on the train. So, we came to our hometown.”

“I was ashamed. Going on the train, I was ashamed; it felt like people kept staring at me. I felt like people knew. Kids might not have known, but young adults would have known from studying their books. That I had been dragged there. I was ashamed.”

“I arrived in my hometown, but my mother and father were not there. I went to my younger uncle’s house. When I [asked] where my mom and father went, [my uncle said,] ‘Do you know how much they looked for you?’ My uncle said that they asked him to look after me if I came back. That is what they requested before they left.”

“I cried and cried because my [family] was not there.”

“My older brother went to Manchuria, and he took all the [family] there, so now, all of them were having a hard time in Manchuria. Me, after I disappeared, my parents went to Manchuria, so I do not know what happened that well. But I heard stories, so I know the gist.”

“I was at my cousin’s for about half a year. I was there for several months. But I could not be at complete ease; I felt I had to always be mindful of not becoming a burden. So, I went to my sisters’ houses and stayed with them for a while.”

“But since I brought my baby on my back, who was going to like it? They could hardly feed themselves.”

Gossip

Even though I wanted to go to Pohang, I would not go because of the rumor.

“Yang wrote me a letter. But even if I looked at it, how could I know what it said? I am like a blind person with my eyes open, so what would I know? So, I just took that letter and went looking for his house. His house was in Pohang Gurongpo. When I went there, since I brought them the letter, *aheegoo*, they said that they were so thankful that their son was alive and that I had brought them his letter. They asked me to stay there until their son came home. I told them that I could not, and I had to be going, but, *ahhew-*, I do not know what

he said in that letter, but they would not let me go. They said if I did not have my parents' home to go to, then I would just have a hard life, so I should live with them. And they gave me a room, so I stayed.”

“A year later, [Yang] came home. I met him, but I did not know if I was happy to see him. ‘So, you are home. I am going to go to pick some vegetables,’ and when I went to get vegetables, he went to his mom and said that even though he had come home, I did not seem to be happy to see him. He sent a person to tell me to meet him at the temple to listen to what he had to say. What was there to listen to? *Ahee*, there was nothing to listen to, and so I did not go. When I did not go, [Yang] came back to the neighborhood and told everybody where I had been and talked badly about me. So, he is a bastard too. If he wanted to end things, that is fine, but did he have to spread a rumor about me all over the neighborhood? So, when I went to the town, all the people knew where I had been. And because they knew, I was so ashamed that I could not go and drop in on people, even if I wanted to. So, *ae-ee*, you, bastard. You are a bastard too. If you thought that about me, then why did you have to tell everybody about it? Just because I wouldn't live with him, is it okay to tell such stories to everybody?”

“Even though I wanted to go to [Pohang], I would not go because of the rumor. I am a proud person, that I am.”

Food Business

If only I did not have this daughter of mine, I would have gone to someone's house as a housemaid.

“Why do I need to go around and suffer? I thought that I had to earn money, and that is why I started to make money.”

“If only I did not have this daughter of mine, I would have gone to someone's house as a housemaid. I could not go into someone else's house, so I went to the countryside. Gyeongsang-do. I went to Gyeongsang-do, rented a house, and started a food business.”

“It was about the time that I should have put my [daughter] into school, but she had no family register. So, I talked to the principal, and somehow I put her into school. She went to elementary school, but I could not make ends meet there, and there was no way I could continue to live in the countryside. So, I came out to do some business and sold the house. When you sell a house in the countryside, you do not get much money for it. But back then, it was big money. I sold it and took my child.”

“I ran a [food business] in Daejun. Then, in Yeongdeungpo. . . . Then, I went to Cheongsong² shelter and ran a small restaurant; it was a big hit.”

“That is how we lived. We were earning a little there until my daughter died. So, [then] I moved up to Seoul.”

Aftereffects

This disease did not disappear from me. It was harmful to the child too.

“*Ahee*, what do I need to marry for? It was so itchy down there that I thought I would go crazy. Even when I scratched down there until it bled because it was so itchy, I still felt like I was going to go crazy. When I was walking on the street, I had to go find an alley somewhere to go scratch myself. I was going crazy. Crazy. I almost died. *Ahyoo*, where would I go to tell that story?”

“Even if I scratched until I bled, it was still so itchy that it was so painful. And when I peed after scratching myself, it stung like the dickens. But I could not take an ounce of medication. Medicine. I was so embarrassed that I could not go to the [hospital] to have it examined nor to get medicine for it. *Aheego*, so I went to the public baths very often, and I cleaned myself with salt water while trying to hide from others. At the public baths. It was always during the fall and the spring that I would itch like crazy. That disease shows symptoms in the fall and the spring. Syphilis does. But I still could not go to the hospital because of the shame.”

“When I was in Singapore, I was able to get shots of medication and use disinfectants, so it was not as bad. [When I came back here], I almost went crazy. Only after I burned my body with hot water could I get a little bit of sleep. When I think about that, I get dizzy. So this disease did not disappear from me. It never seemed to disappear. It was harmful to the child too. When you bear children. So, that is why I did not get married.”

“My daughter too was in a bad state [because of this], and I guess that is why she had heart disease. She could not walk from here to there. When she was growing, she was okay. But when she became older, was it when she was twenty or when she was nineteen? She got worse and worse.”

“Only if you go to America can you get cured; you cannot get cured here. In the olden days.”

2 Gyeongsangbuk-do Cheongsong-gun (Cheongsong County, North Gyeongsang Province).

“So my [daughter] said that she could not possibly live here anymore and that people said that if she went to America, they could cure her, so she asked me to please cure her.”

“*Ahee*, I will do everything to get you cured.’ So, I did my business. I ran my restaurant. And I lived in other people’s houses as a housemaid to earn money. And all the money I earned, thirteen million won,³ or was it fifteen million won,⁴ I gave to my daughter.”

“From a wealthy family in Hye-hwa-dong . . . I received five hundred thousand won⁵ as a loan. I borrowed it and added it to what I would send to my daughter. Because what I had was not enough. . . . [At the time], even if you were paid a lot, you would get twenty thousand won⁶ or eighteen thousand won.⁷ It was a time when that was all you could get.”

“After giving my daughter the five hundred thousand won I received from them, I worked at their house as a maid.”

“So, my [daughter] went to [America]. But because she was ill, she could not work and earn money. She lived on the money that I earned. If she had met someone who could help her, she would be alive, but she was all alone and did not meet anyone who could help her, so she died. . . . She did not even live a year in the U.S. before she died. . . . They said they would send me all the household items she lived with [in the U.S.]. But if they send them, the customs tax would be astronomical. So, I said that there was no use in sending them. I said I did not want them.”

A Boy

I was envious of other people who were holding their child’s hand because I had no child.

“Do you know the Office of Veterans Administration in Sangju?⁸ I was at the office to cook.”

“There was a boy [going to middle school] whose father and mother had passed away, and he had no place to go.”

³ Thirteen million won in 1965 is worth approximately \$11,018.00 today.

⁴ Fifteen million won in 1965 is worth approximately \$12,713.00 today.

⁵ Five hundred thousand won in 1965 is worth approximately \$8,467.00 today.

⁶ Twenty thousand won in 1965 is worth approximately \$339.00 today.

⁷ Eighteen thousand won in 1965 is worth approximately \$305.00 today.

⁸ Gyeongsangbuk-do Sangju-si (Sangju City, North Gyeongsang Province).

“Since I also did not have a child, I brought him [home], and, trying to do something good for someone else, I raised him.”

“But he kept acting like a gang member. He went to drink in bars and did not go to high school for several months, so he was [kicked out] of school. So, I went and begged, and he was able to go [back] to school and graduate, and then he entered the college of aviation. You know, the college of aviation? He learned how to use a radiotelegraph. A person who learns about airplanes, learns that and a person who learns about radiotelegraphs can go into any company, so I have noticed. So, he found a job in Suwon. He worked doing that radiotelegraph thing and made a ton of money.”

“At that time, I did not have money. I had given all my money to my daughter [who went to America], so I had no money. I asked him, ‘If you give me one hundred and fifty thousand won,⁹ I can lease a house in a rural area. If you help me, I will pay you back. After I earn it.’ But this scumbag did not give it to me. So, after I got a month’s salary, I rented a room. In a rural area.”

“[The son]’s wife ran away. Leaving behind two girls. She must have run away with all the money after selling everything. So, he became penniless. So, the son could not very well go to work when he had two daughters to take care of. So, he came to entrust [his two children] to me. ‘You are not a human being, worse than a dog. If you had helped me to lease a house when I had no money, then I would raise your children and do everything to help you. You had several houses, but you did not even give me a hundred and fifty thousand won when I asked for it. Don’t need this. I don’t need this. I won’t deal with a human being like you, no matter how much you ask.’ But still, he came back again twice. He then came again and begged me to help him.”

“What a sad life I lived while I was running a restaurant and a liquor business. I told him that you did not know that, that I was envious of other people who were holding their [child’s] hand because I had no child, so I brought [you in] and raised you to make you a decent person. You have a long way to go to repay my kindness. But with all the money you had, you would not give me the little I asked? You son of a bitch. Go. I do not want to see your face. I kicked him out.”

“He never came back. I sent him away, just like that. I did not want to see him at all, neither hide nor hair of him.”

⁹ One hundred and fifty thousand won in 1965 is worth \$2,540.00 today.

Registration

‘I am old now. What do I need to hide my shame for?’

“This one here who is living with me (lowering her voice) is the daughter of my younger [cousin].”

“I have raised her since she was three or four years old.”

“Her [parents] got sick. Now they call it cancer, but back then they did not know what it was and they died. With all their hair falling out and all.”

“[She does not have any family registry] so she could not report her marriage. [So] I did it for her: I let her be registered under my name. But because she is listed as my daughter in the family registry, the government denied me the [subsidy] I was due. They said it was because I have a daughter and because I have a son-in-law. So, despite my shame, I decided to register as a *comfort girl-woman*.”¹⁰

“Well-, I was very sad in front of my friends when the money did not come from the government. I was sorrowful not because of how people treated me, but because of my pride. My friends brought me new clothes. This top too they brought me because I could not get money from the government. I only got eighty thousand won,¹¹ and that was barely enough for food alone. So, there was no means to live. ‘*Ae-rha-* I am old now. What do I need to hide my shame for?’ And that is how I came to register for it.”

Weeping

I have never once cried.

“I have never once cried. How could I cry when the tears won’t come? . . . All my life, it has been that way. I do not know why the tears cause bitterness too. When my younger uncle passed away, I did not cry. So, [people] scolded me for not crying. And when my brother-in-law died, people talked badly about me, saying how in the world could she not cry when her own brother-in-law had died? *Ahee*, how can I cry when the tears won’t come? Right?”

¹⁰ Jang Jeom-dol was living on a government subsidy and received three hundred thousand won monthly. When the National Basic Living Security Act was enacted in 2001, her subsidy was reduced to eighty thousand won because she had an adopted daughter and a son-in-law on her family registry. Because of this, she registered herself as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*.

¹¹ Eighty thousand won in 2001 is worth approximately \$90.00 today.

“But you know the kinds of things on TV here? About a woman who leaves her kids and gets married? Then, the stepmother comes in and hits the kids like that and beats the kids like that. When I see things like that, the tears just pour down my face. That is the only thing that will make me cry though. I think that as long as I live here in this world, I should never do anything like that. When I think about that, the tears just start pouring down, without me even realizing. But when somebody dies, the tears won't come. *Ahee*, what can I do about tears that won't come? Do I just put saliva like this and pretend? Ha, ha, ha, ha. *Haee-go*-, even when someone dies now, the tears just won't come.”

“Of course, my heart is in pain. But the tears do not run down my face. I am not sobbing or anything.”

“I asked a friend, ‘Hey, why do you think that I can't cry?’ My [friend] said that it is because you had such a hard life. And you have had a lot of sorrows too.”

“This meant that I had grown up with so much misfortune in my life that it is scary. The tears do not come.”

“Even when I heard the news that [my daughter had died], if it had been anybody else, they might have passed out. [The person who told me the news] said, ‘*Aehew*-, I thought that you were going to faint, so I did not tell you the [news] sooner.’ ‘Why would I faint?’ I told him that you could not do anything for the dead. And I left it at that.”

“I did not shed any tears, I tell you. Why would I lie? Tears? My nose was not even runny. I can't cry if the tears do not come.”

“When my [friend] died [at the comfort station], her other friends cried a lot but not me. I just said, ‘It is a good thing that you left. My sister! I am sure you are in a good place now. You are lucky to have gone there.’ I just left it at that. There was no crying. Maybe if I meet a friend I would be glad to see, someone I had been in Singapore with, and if we were to talking about how we lived back then, how I suffered having babies, and how all my teeth fell out drinking that cold water all the time, then maybe I might shed some real tears, who knows. *Ahhew*--.”

Interviewer's Commentary: Dry Tears

Choi Kija

My first meeting with Jang Jeom-dol *halmoni* was at the Human Rights Workshop on Jeju Island that was held by the Korean Council in the fall of 2002. Because she and I were not in the same group in the camp and also because she did not have an active personality, she did not stand out among the tens of the *halmonis* who were there. Maybe that is why, even toward the end of

the Human Rights Workshop, I was not aware of her presence. Then, on the last day of the camp, I arrived late for the last tour with another *halmoni* who had difficulty walking. Jang Jeom-dol *halmoni* was wearing traditional Korean bridal clothes in front of a commemorative photography shop. With a face slightly flushed from embarrassment, she was getting her photo taken amidst other *halmonis* who were clapping for her. I have heard over and over again that one big reason why the *comfort girls-women halmonis* have *han* is that they had never been able to put their hair up and have a proper wedding ceremony. Thus, as she took the commemorative photo with a pretend-husband, a young member of staff of the Korean Council, the image of Jang *halmoni* wearing her bridal coronet was both a heart-warming and a heart-breaking sight. And my first impression of Jang *halmoni* was that of a bold and fun-loving person who did not shrink from playing at what she had always wanted to do, even though my first impression of her was also that she seemed passive.



Jang jeom-dol.

I met with Jang *halmoni* again in November of 2002 when the interviews for the other *halmonis* were almost done. Previously, another person had visited her twice, but due to personal reasons, she was not able to finish. So, with the approval of the other members, I was brought on board to pick up from where the

other interviewer had left off.¹² Because she had gone through two interviews already, I did not have the onus of explaining the meaning of our work or obtaining her permission for the interviews. Nevertheless, it was a great burden for me to listen to the rest of her story without interrupting the flow, which had been established, of the prior interviews, especially since Jang *halmoni* was used to the other interviewer. If I was not careful, she could have been forced to repeat stories of which she was loath to speak, and the interview could have turned into a torturous ordeal for her. To avoid such mistakes, I had to diligently read through the transcribed records that I had received from the previous interviewer and thoroughly understand her story before I went to the interview.

However, Jang Jeom-dol *halmoni*'s transcribed interview was too convoluted to understand. Of course, I knew that most people do not tell their life stories in chronological order. Because I was not hearing it directly from her but getting it second-hand in written form, it was impossible to draw any sort of ordered map of her life story. In the transcription I had received, she would be talking about her hometown when suddenly she would say that her family went to Manchuria, without revealing when or why. And then, just as suddenly, she would be talking about the campaign of looking for dispersed families. She would say that the first place she was taken was the field in Manchuria, and while explaining the story of the comfort station in Manchuria, all of a sudden, she would say that she had a dead baby in Singapore. Then, she would start talking about how she gave her daughter money because her daughter had asked for it to go to the United States where they could cure her illness, but that her daughter had died in America after less than one year. And again, while she was talking about how she went from one relative's house to another because she was so poor right after the liberation of Korea from Japan, abruptly, she would then say that she had so little money that she decided to register as a *comfort girl-woman*. In Jang *halmoni*'s story, the past and the present were so intertwined with one another that I could not make logical sense of her life from the transcribed interview. Thus, on the day I was supposed to interview her, I was very nervous with anxiety about 'what if I hurt her feelings by not being able to follow her story?'

Jang Jeom-dol *halmoni* lived in Incheon with her niece, whom she had added to her family registry, the niece's husband, their son, and their daughter. Because their house was so spacious, from the outside, it looked as if she was living a very comfortable life compared to the other *comfort girls-women*. However, she had

¹² I collaborated with Jin Hyeonjeong, a former member of staff at the Council, in interviewing and recording the interview of Jang Jeom-dol *halmoni*.

applied for a rental apartment and was only in the middle of waiting for it. She was just living with her niece until the apartment was ready and gave her money to cover some of the monthly living expenses. Despite the fact that she raised her niece, she said that she did not want to be dependent on her niece or her niece's husband. In 2001, when the National Basic Living Security Act was enacted, Jang *halmoni's* government subsidy was cut off because her niece's husband was able to make a living. At this point, she registered as a *comfort girl-woman*, in spite of the shame, so that she would not have to burden anyone. That is how “proud” she is, as she says herself. Jang *halmoni* was the last person of all the women who have registered with the government as a *comfort girl-woman* to date (January of 2003). Perhaps, if the National Basic Livelihood Security Act had not been enacted, she might never have revealed the fact that she had been a *comfort girl-woman*. It is not hard to assume that, aside from the 207 women who have officially registered themselves as *comfort girls-women*, including Jang *halmoni*, there are many women in our society who have not revealed, or cannot reveal, themselves as *comfort girls-women*. In Korean society, life after having revealed that you were a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman* is less about enjoying material compensation and more about suffering the mental anguish that is deeply entrenched behind the material benefits.

As in the transcribed records I had read, when our interview started, Jang *halmoni* began to tell incomprehensible stories whose occurrences defied any order in time and space. I was still unable to understand her story, so, in frustration, I had to continuously interject questions here and there throughout the interview such as, ‘why,’ ‘who,’ and ‘when.’ Fortunately, she was not annoyed by my questions and willingly followed my intention of arranging the stories in chronological order. When I actively intervened in her story and arranged it in chronological order, I felt that I could put that complicated memory of hers in context. And I returned from the interview quite satisfied that it was a ‘big success.’

But when I compared the two recorded files to make the edited copy, I began to realize how violent my interview had been. My interview, arranged in chronological order, was a story of acquired text that I wanted to hear, not the story of Jang *halmoni* in her own language. In her language, it did not matter when and where she was born, how and with whom she lived, and when and how she had been dragged away. In her language, she was giving us a few episodes about her family, not a temporal arrangement, in a way to come to terms with her family by remembering them through her hometown, expressing resentment against her brother who had led her family off to Manchuria while she was away, having been dragged away, and showing the desire to meet her family again through the ‘Korea Family Reunion Campaign’ program. In addition, the memory of being poor right after she came back to Korea is connected

to her present poverty, which gave birth to the registering of herself as a *comfort girl-woman*. This report led to shame, and this shame led to the memory that Yang had spread a rumor about her so that she could not go back to Pohang, and finally, Yang raised the memory of the comfort station. In this way, her language was not related to a schematized causality in chronological order, but rather her language composed her own story based on complicatedly intertwined memories that transcend time and space. But I, who was only used to the schematic causal relationships, was overwhelmed and could not understand the story that was unique to the *halmoni*. And instead of trying to understand her story, I attempted to fit her and her story to me.

While reflecting on my mistakes, a little late I might add, I made some new attempts in trying to save the framework of her story in this edited version. First of all, ignoring the temporal arrangement, I laid out each episode that transitioned from the past to the present and the present to the past through association, and then connected the independent episodes to make one story. In short, I tried to edit her story in the format of a dramatic movie or documentary. However, a movie, by virtue of being audiovisual in nature, can show the unexplained in-between stories from various angles, but a compilation made up of only text is not able to explain fully all the stories that are not explained between episodes. If we start talking about her hometown and then talk about her family having gone to Manchuria, the reader would imagine either that the *halmoni* was dragged off while she was living with her family or that her family had gone to Manchuria to find her, as I did when I first read her interview. If the story of Korea family reunion campaign is presented at this juncture, how can anyone understand its context? So, for this compilation, I cannot help but consider what the reader can comprehend. It will not be easy for readers to understand the episodes based on associations, as I understood the associations of her stories only after I had asked her questions and arranged the stories in chronological order. That is why this edited version must be rearranged with the individual events in each episode put in chronological order to help the readers with their understanding.

When I met her in person and listened to her story, I felt that there was a great contrast between her and my first impression of her on Jeju Island that she would harbor a desire for marriage and an active attitude toward life. Instead, I felt a dryness from the *halmoni*, who seemed not to desire anything in life. When I asked her why she had not gotten married, and if she had any desire to do so, far from expressing such a desire, she said, "I do not envy those who are married at all." And she only took the photo on Jeju Island solely because other people had kept asking her. Her dullness was felt in the story, especially when someone close to her had died; she did not cry. Even when her

daughter died, there were no tears. But when she said that if she met the people with whom she had been at the comfort station and could talk about their suffering together there, she might be able to cry, I had the thought that her emotional dryness in her life might have started from the time when she had been a *comfort girl-woman*. Perhaps, rather than talking to people like me who could never understand the pain of those times no matter how vividly she tells her story, if she could meet other *comfort girls-women* who suffered with her and share the stories that they have in common, then she could eliminate to some degree the frustration in her heart with her tears. What on earth were the experiences she had that dried up Jang Jeom-dol *halmoni*'s emotions so?

“To Whom Shall I Say This? Does Anyone in Heaven or on Earth Know What I Went Through?”

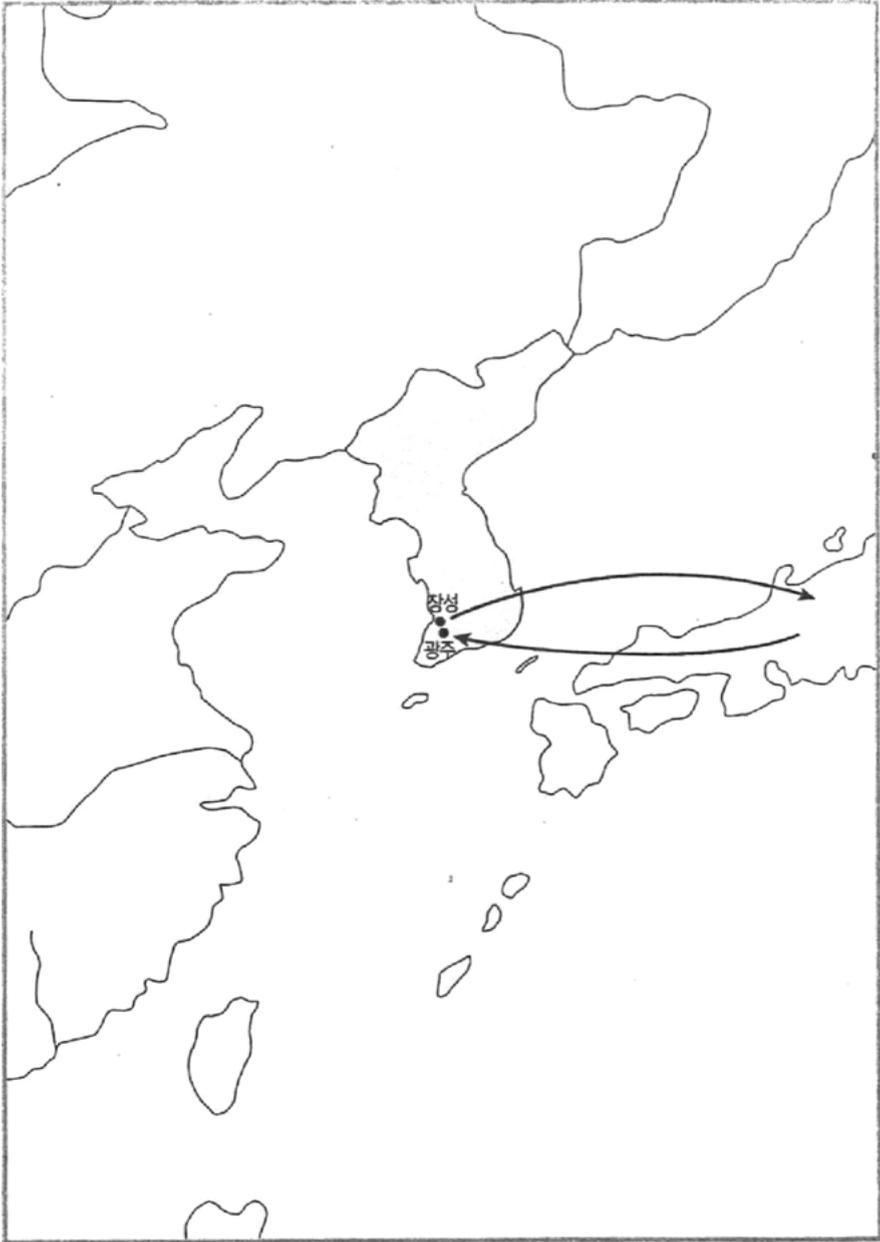
Kim Bong-yi (pseudonym), Choi Seon-soon (real name)



Kim Bong-yi.

1927	Born in Jeollabuk-do Gochang
1942 (Age 16)	Taken as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> Lived as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> in Japan
1945 (Age 19)	Returned home and settled down in Gwangju
1948 (Age 22)*	Lived together with Wang
1956 (Age 30)	Marriage registration, gave birth to a daughter
1970 (Age 44)	Husband passed away
1993 (Age 67)	Registered as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> through the Association for the Pacific War Victims
2004 (Age 78)	Lived alone in Jeollabuk-do Gochang
2013 (Age 87)	Deceased

*Approximately



Kim Bong-yi's route: Jangseong – Japan (specific locations are uncertain) – Gwangju.

“When I was little, people used to call me smart and clever. I did not do bad things, so why am I in this state? . . . But since I have come back from there, as though I have committed a great sin, I cannot hold my head up high.”

“*Ahee*, it is very embarrassing. I was completely unaware. But it shows. The fact that people do not see me as a human being and ridicule me breaks my heart. The heart of mine.”

“When I am down, and I cry, lamenting that there is not another woman as wretched as me, [people around me] say, ‘Did you go there because you wanted to go? You went because they god-damn made you go. What use is there for you to take things like that to heart? Don’t do it. Don’t.’ If I had not gone alone to Japan . . . if I had not been taken to Japan, by those Japs . . . I would not have been raped and I might not be living a life like this.”

“I understand you want to publish a book. That is because many will come to know what they did, and the Japs, those bastard scumbags will get what is coming to them. . . . That is why I am telling you my story. Also, do not ever put down my given name or my last name.”¹

“Even if it is a long time from now, I do not want my children or grandchildren to know.”

“As long as my name, last name, and pictures are not included, you can publish it and send it all the way to Japan. Those bastards.”

Draft Notice

I ran away and hid here and there until I went to Jangseong² where they caught me.

“Was I sixteen when I went? I must have gone during the spring.”

“Before I went to Japan, I lived here with my father. I lost my mother when I was little, and when I was going to Japan, my father, the second of my two older brothers and I lived together.³ At that time, I received a draft notice.”

¹ After the original volume was published, Kim Bong-yi decided to reveal her real name, Choi Seon-soon.

² Jeollanam-do Jangseong-gun (Jangseong County, South Jeolla Province).

³ Kim Bong-yi’s family was her father and mother, two older brothers, one older sister, one younger brother and herself. She lost her mother when she was little and her younger brother died as a child. When Kim Bong-yi was drafted, her oldest brother was taken to a mine and her older sister was working at someone else’s house.

“It was a notice to send me to Japan. After the notice came, I ran away and hid here and there until I went to Jangseong where they caught me. Honestly speaking, I think that, more than the Japs, the Chosun agents who worked for the Japanese were the much more evil people. They gave me hell. Gave me hell.”

“It was a red or a yellow ticket that was issued. ‘Japanese factory recruit’ was what was written on it.”

“I guess it would have been awkward to have put *comfort girls-women* recruit on there. So, they came up with a different name for it and issued the tickets. But everybody knew what it was; they said, ‘*Ohmae*, you got a *comfort girls-women* notice!’ So, everyone hid their [girls], but those bastards came and [took] them all.”

“*Aheego!* Every time I think of that time, *aheego*, my blood boils.”

“Ah, when we went to hide somewhere, they came searching for us, and they would say, ‘Here they are,’ and took us away. . . . So, before, the young girls would hide in large jars and place cotton wool on top of them. Cotton wool on top of them. . . . Everybody hid, and those girls all lived. They did not go. That is what they said. I heard it too.”

“I was hiding at home, but I had to go to buy medicine at Jangseong, and that is when I was seized. My father was not well, and so, I went to buy medicine for my father. So, on my way to buy medicine, that is where I was taken.”

“Even though I had a brother, he was not home at that time; he was trying to avoid the draft by the Japanese Empire. The Japs were trying to recruit soldiers, but they were not called *gunin* (‘soldier’ in Korean) then but *heitai* (‘soldier’ in Japanese). So, there was only me, and I was the one to go and buy the medicine.”

“When they took me, two total strangers dragged me away. And those who took me, they were pro-Japanese collaborators. Secret agents for Japan. Even if there were people around, it would have been useless. I do not know whether there were people around or not. But they came out of nowhere and just took me away.”

“Had anyone tried to stop them, he or she would have been beaten too. ‘Who do you think you are to stop us?’ they would have said. Some people might have stared at us, but there would have been no one to stop it.”

“One person or two people, as many as they could catch, they took away. They dragged you away. If you were lucky, you were taken away in a car.”

“In a room, they gathered people there. And when we arrived there, there were already several there. Maybe three or four, or four or five. They incarcerated us, not allowing us to come or go. They even followed us when we went to

pee. . . . We could not run away; we could not do anything. So, there anyway, we slept a day and boarded a ship the next day.”⁴

“*Aheego*, I had extreme trouble. To whom should I say this? Does anyone in heaven or on earth know what I went through? *Uhhew*, I cannot even say it. Seriously. So, we were going, Lord knows where, and in the middle of our voyage, we were all gathered together. We were going on the ship, and there were people who died along the way. When this happened, they would just dump the bodies overboard into the sea and keep going. If anyone made the smallest of mistakes, they would pummel her. I was hit by a gunstock here, and now that I have become old, my head aches something awful. (Pointing to the right, top part of her head) It is here; it is always on this side. I think it would have been better if my scalp was cut and my head bled back then, but, rather than bleeding, my head started to get a bruise here. I think my brain shook so that it made me dizzy. It hurts and it was awful.”

“We screamed at them, saying, why are you taking us? So, we were beaten. On the ship too, if you were quiet and still like a corpse, you would not be beaten.”

“*Hoo-yoo*, if you screamed on the ship, they would beat you and drown you in the water, and if you died, they would throw you into the sea. That is what they did. And they said, when you go to the Japanese factories, you will earn money that you could send to your home, so why are you acting like this? When you see the factory, you will faint from astonishment at how enormously grand it is.”

“I did not know [where we were going]. I did not know. I matured way too late. The menstrual period that everyone had? I did not even have that. Not even when I went to Japan. All the other girls had it, but I did not, so I thought I was some kind of handicapped person. But when I was nineteen, I started it. So, I told myself that I was not handicapped.”

“I changed my last name and told them that my last name was Kim. My family comes from a noble bloodline too, but it was so filthy and nasty that I lied. In Japanese, the name was Kintoki-san. [On the ship], they told me to call out my name, my last name and my given name. And it just popped into my head, so I said, ‘Kim Bong-yi.’ Then a friend came up to me, saying that we were distant relatives and we had the same last name, and she was extremely good to me.”

⁴ Kim Bong-yi, due to her mental disturbance from trauma, could hardly remember the locations and routes she took while being transported. She recounted that she took a truck to Seoul and then a ship to Japan in the second interview, but said she went to Busan in the fourth interview.

“Even dogs and hogs could not have done what they did. Not even dogs and hogs. *Aheego*, I have lived through all the gross and nasty things they have done. I did not die but came back alive.”

Stable-Like Comfort Facilities

They piled the girls into those rooms and let all kinds of freaky men come at us, all kinds of freaky men.

“I went to Japan. When you hear people speak, you can guess where they are from. The Chinese speak Chinese, the Russians speak Russian, and the Japanese speak Japanese. Where I was, they only spoke Japanese.”

“As for the factory, there was nothing like it to speak of but only a fence, a wire fence around the camp was what they had and the long room was partitioned into smaller rooms. They piled the [girls] into those partitioned rooms and let all kinds of freaky men come at us. All kinds of freaky men.”

“The building had no name. You know the stables in our country, how they build them long, right? That is how they built it, long-.”

“[Guards] stood outside the door; here in Korea, it would be equivalent to outside the gate doors. They carried guns, the guards. And wire fencing surrounded the facility.”

“There were no Japanese women. We were all Korean. If one died, they would take the body, take it somewhere right away.”

“They laid out *tatamis* and pushed down one person on each mat, just like that. We lived under the mountain slope, and although we wanted to run away, there was no place to run away to, especially since they were guarding us all the time. One of our friends did flee, but did she know where she was going? She did not know the roads, she did not know, so she just went anywhere, and was captured. They said that she went to a much scarier place.”

“A *tatami* mat was about this size (just enough to fit one person lying down), and they would put one of those Japs on it with you to sleep with. And there were places you could walk around without your shoes on.”

“They put down straw, and on top of that, they put down a quilted mat, that was a *tatami*. And when you sat there like this, there wasn’t much cold air coming in. But, [during the winter], my feet were freezing, and we crossed and closed our legs against the draft.”

“We wrapped up our clothes in a piece of cloth and put them aside. We wore skirts that came down to about here (pointing to her knees). If not, we wore clothes like baggy pants and a blouse for a top.”

“There were no side dishes. We only had rice balls, rice balls with a little bit of salt. When we brought our bowls, they would give us food like they were feeding dogs. But because we were too hungry and did not want to die, we ate them anyway.”

“We each ate alone in our rooms, but if there were an event, we would go to the cafeteria and eat. When we went to the cafeteria, the tables would be set up in rows. It was a place for the soldiers to come in and eat. We would be placed in front of a desk where we would just stand and eat. We could not talk or do anything. We barely had time to shove in a spoonful of rice before we had to come back to our rooms.”

“[Sometimes], we had a bit more time. For those times, we sat quietly. Did we have any places to go? We would just sit in our rooms. Or we would go stand a bit behind the wired fence before coming back.”

“I wanted to talk to [other people], outside the building . . . but except for when things were slow, I could not go out to get some fresh air to meet with people, there was no time to talk. Since we were all busy with receiving soldiers, we were all stuck sitting in our rooms not being able to see the outside.”

“There is a thing called Jinja Sanpai (shrine worship). In Japan, I went there to sing *kimigayo*.⁵ It was like “East Sea’s waters and Baekdusan Mountain” (the first stanza of the Korean anthem) in Korea. But in Japan, it was *kimigayo*. You had to sing the song. If you did not and just stood there, you would surely be beaten again.”

“Everyone gathered together and sang the national anthem before they all went inside the building. They did not sing it every day, only when they came out. The soldiers lined up and came out in order. What would we say, platoon one, platoon four, and platoon five, like that. They had platoons too, they did.”

Accessories

When we refused them, they would beat us while abusing us in Japanese, saying, ‘Who do you think you are? You are nothing but accessories.’

“*Aheego*, at that time, *aheegoo*, what in the world? All of a sudden. I think that is why I have become mentally ill. At that time, they took a sixteen year old young girl, in American age, fifteen. He took off his underwear and,

⁵ During the Japanese Imperial period, the song was originally a ceremonial song to laud the Japanese Emperor and later it was adopted as the national anthem.

showing me his penis, said, ‘*Chinpo kudasai, omanko kudasai*’ (‘Here is my dick, show me your quim’). I was petrified. I just blurted out, *uh-mae, uhmae, uhmae*. All I could do was cross my legs tight (pressing her legs tightly together). ‘*Bakayaro!*’ he shouted and he took me and started to beat me. At that time, my flesh was ripped, and I started bleeding, *aheego--*.”

“He forced it in. Did he take off my clothes? He ripped them off. He did not take his clothes off, either. And they said, later on, that I should not wear underwear but just wear a skirt instead. Then, when the Japs come, all you do is lift up your skirt. I asked the other girls, and they said they all did the same.”

“The Japs, even when I bled, they did not care.”

“They just kept on going. People said that those Japs did not know whether they would be dead today or dead tomorrow, so they did not care whether they were getting lukewarm rice or cold rice.”

“The Korean soldiers explained: the Japanese soldiers have become spiteful and they are heartless. This is because they do not know when they are going to die on the battlefield, so they have made up their minds, ‘At least let’s get some before we die.’ So, those Japs became heartless without any mercy or compassion.”

“Even the young ones barely avoided deadly abuse. But, me, because I was a little bit out of my mind, I was less abused. If the girls gave birth to babies, they would take away the babies too.”

“*Womae*, the soldiers, do not even talk to me about them. The fighting men, there were a countless number of them.”

“There was no time to rest. Until ten at night, there was no time to rest.”

“It was at the height of the war. Of course, there were a lot of [soldiers] but not enough girls. And that was why they kidnapped girls.”

“When we refused them, they would answer back to us that we were merely accessories to the soldiers. They would say, ‘Who do you think you are? You are just accessories,’ and they would beat us while abusing us in Japanese.”

“Whether they entered in order or not, I do not know; anyway, they came in. With the guards standing outside the doors. . . . With the wire fence completely surrounding the camp outside.”

“I think the [least amount] of them coming in was seven or eight.”

“The [girls] were each in their rooms. . . . I do not know how many rooms there were. A room was yea- big, just enough for one person to lie down in. So, over here, one girl, and over there, another girl.”

“There was the room that I was in. Then, next, the girl in that room became my ‘older sister.’ The girl in the room way over there got pregnant and had to have an abortion. But there was no place to get rid of the baby. So, she wrapped

the dead baby in her clothes. But, no matter what, even though her private part did not heal from the abortion, those Japs still came at her.”

“If Korean men left without having sex, they would get hit. Each had their given time. So, since they had to time it right when they left, they pretended to put on their clothes and even to button up, putting on their guns as a finishing touch. The Korean soldiers were way better. If we were not Korean girls, those Korean soldiers would have done it too, but because we were all from the same country, they said they could not do it. But, of course, among the Korean soldiers too, there were bad ones who did do it before they left.”

“The Japs, even if they were wearing a *sakku* to begin with, they would just take it off and throw it off after a little while, they would say that they did not like it.”

“They brought their own condoms to use. I think the army distributed them to the soldiers to prevent pregnancies. But the Japs would take it off after a while saying that they could not enjoy the sex with it on. And when I told them that they had to wear it, they would scream, ‘bakayaro!’ (‘stupid!’).”

“Not long after I arrived there, I contracted gonorrhea and saw pus come out. Because I had gonorrhea, pus came out, and it hurt too.”

“So, I asked some soldiers, Korean soldiers in the mountains, to go and pull up some medical herbs for gonorrhea from the mountainside and bring them to me. We have them here too. But after they brought them to me, there was not a good place to boil them. So, I carefully washed the herbs in the stream water, and boiled them in the same water. And I drank and washed with that herbal water. That is how I was cured.”

“When [I] was about six or seven years old, I had seen some elderly male adults in the neighborhood pull up herbs from the mountains by the roots and washed them in water. So, I asked, ‘Grandma, what is this?’ to which she said, ‘Medical herbs for gonorrhea.’ . . . ‘If pus oozes out of your penis, and it hurts, you cook this and eat it and apply it.’ I never forgot that. The pain made me remember it. So, when I remembered it again, I asked the soldiers to get a little bit of it for me, and then, I boiled it like this and drank it like that. If you wash it once, you drink it two or three times. Every time I urinated, there was a pain, and I just could not stand it. But I was cured by concocting the brew and drinking it. Even now, if anybody asks me about it, I teach them how.”

“Men are promiscuous, right? If you screw around, naturally you would contract such diseases. And you know some men have gonorrhea, right? If you have sex with such men, then you catch the same disease.”

Mental Disturbance

To tell you the truth, it was so quick and easy to go crazy. I have gone crazy.

“At the least, I have to smoke; if I don’t do that, I will die. (Making downward sweeping motions on her chest with her hand) Here, right here, is filled with anger. With anger. If I think about all the things that those Japs did to me, I can’t even believe it sometimes . . . and it all turns into rage.”

“I would say strange things. A friend stopped me from going out of the room, telling me that I would be beaten to death and that I should not go out. And when I tried to leave, she locked the door and I would slip away. I heard from her later. I cursed up a storm.”

“I started to swear at people. Shoot that Jap to death. Look at that dog going by. Dog. Dog, dog, the dog is going by. Shoot it to death. Dog, dog, that dog, dog. I kept going. Every time I saw Japs. Would I be saying things like that if I were sane? No, I would not. Did I want to be beaten to death? But I said those things because I was out of my mind. So, the older sister tried very hard to take me out of Japan. Very hard.”

“How did I know [whether I was out of my mind or not]? Because I had *won* and *han* (deep resentment) against the Japs, when I saw them, I sat cursing, ‘Fucker, son of a bitch, I will beat you to death, I will stab you with a knife, *uh-yo-yo-yo*, calling the dog, son of a bitch is coming, son of a bitch, *uhyoyoyo*.’ I cursed all night long, and when the Japs came, I was overcome with *hwabyung* (sickness from too much anger). My legs, I have a temper even now, my legs, I cross my legs like this (crossing her legs in an X shape). *Aheego*, my legs hurt, so I can’t now.”

“After I was raped for the first time, I became a mental case. I was shocked into that state of mind. *Uheegoo*, just talking about those Japs fills me with disgust, disgust.”

“When such things suddenly pop into my mind, as it does even now, (putting her hand to her heart) all I can do is tear at my heart. I say to myself, ‘*Uhmae*, why am I like this? What is wrong with me?’ Even when ten years have passed and twenty years have passed, why am I still like this?”

Homecoming

‘When you returned home, your body looked all blackened like a corpse, so I washed you.’

“I have a clear memory of when I went. I went on a ship. And, when I arrived there, of how I was at the mercy of the Japs. Now, I know all too clearly that I went on a ship and went in a car. And I went in the car to some suburbs and mountains. When I returned, I do not know how I returned. I do not know how I made it. I heard others telling my story, but I do not know.”

“The liberation took place three years after I was [dragged off]. At first, I did not even know that Korea was liberated. We did not know. But we heard the murmur from all over the place, and less and less soldiers came. What the people were saying amongst themselves was that Korea had become liberated. I came to my senses and realized it was true.”

“Then they told us to go, and we left there. At that time, the trains were completely full, and so many people tried to get on so that some even sat on the rooftops of the trains. That is what they said. The older sister got a hold of me and tried to get on a train. People asked her how she was going to get on a train with someone like me in tow. They said we could not get on and tried to block us. But the [older sister] said that we came from the same neighborhood and that she was like my older sister so how was she supposed to leave me behind? She thought it was her duty to bring me back home and help me get well. We Koreans are not such harsh and merciless people, right? So, we sat in the corner of a coal bunker and returned home. The Japs didn’t feed us and we were going to starve to death on our way. So we were given tickets for food to eat on our way back. So I was told.”

“[After returning to Korea, I went to the older sister’s house], and her mother placed her daughter and me safely in a room, saying, ‘*Aheego*, my pitiful one. What if you had died?’ . . . They say that my friend’s mom bought medicine and gave it to me every day. Did they say that the drug was opium? I was injected with the drug for three months, they say. After being injected for three months, I came back to my senses. When my mind returned to normal, and I began to talk, she reduced the amount of the injection. She said that it would be bad if I was addicted as I was pitiful enough as it was. So, she would give me a little, skip a day, give me a little again, then skip two days and so on, reducing the amount little by little.”

“Mom, how did I look when I first returned home?” I asked. “When you returned home, your body looked all blackened like a corpse, so I washed you.”

“I called the sister’s mother ‘mother.’ Her mom washed me, and the sister and I took a bath together. And I stayed in a room with the older sister. That is how I recovered.”

“I returned to my hometown after I was fully recovered. After I arrived there, I asked around. And when I asked around, people said that they were still living, my father and my older brother. So, I asked where they were and

went home. Then, ‘Who are you?’ asked my father, ‘Who are you that you call me father?’ I said, ‘*Aheego*, dad. It is me. I did not die and came back alive.’ I told him my name. I told him my name, and I said, ‘I am not dead, I am alive. I was taken by the Japs and did it but I am home now.’ Then, he hugged me and wept.”

“My [father] was only thinking that everything was fine now that I was alive and had returned home safely; it did not matter what kinds of things I had done in Japan. He said that talking about it will only make you sick inside. He knew about the draft notice of Japanese military *comfort girls-women*. He also remembered how I had tried to run away from them. Then no matter what happened, it was good to see my face, now that I was back home alive. And we left it at that. He did not say anything more about it. He did not say anything more because he said that it would make me sick inside.”

“What could I have done when I was being violated by those bastards in Japan? They were harsh and merciless. Without compassion. I heard that even though I was violated by the Japs many times over and went out of my mind, I did not run away. And thanks to my friend, I was saved. Didn’t I almost die three times though? When I think about it now, it is like that. How is it that I am alive and in the world? And how is it that I escaped to see my brother’s face, even when my parent and sibling did not know where I was, when they thought I was dead, and I had not once been able to relay news of myself?”

Relationship

Let us two pitiful people live together, he said. He did not have parents or siblings either. So, we lived together.

“[After I moved out of the older sister’s house], I worked as a housemaid and found myself a room. But I could not keep on working as a housemaid. If I tried to work a little, I would start getting pain in my body and it seemed to be getting worse, so I could not do it anymore. So, I went to a factory to work, but I could not do that because the things I had to lift were too heavy.”

“For a long time, I did not [work]. I just couldn’t do it. They asked me to lift a huge piece of metal, but it was too heavy, and I could not lift it. In today’s money, it was two dollars per [day]. In those days, it was two or three cents, but it was not even enough to buy a small square boxful of rice. But back then I lived on what little I received.”

“Other people said that instead of living like that I should find an old man, so I got me an old man. He had also been to Japan, carrying military coal,

cannons, and bullets to deliver to the soldiers. Ten friends went there together, and as he carried the weaponry, he heard the sounds of a cannon, so he hid in between the rocks. But when he came out, all his friends were dead and only he remained alive.”

“The old man knew I had been to [that place]. When we met, I told him everything. I did not want him to say anything to me later, so I told him everything.”

“At that time, the old man told me how he had been to Japan and had come back. The old man and I were ten years apart.”

“We did not have a wedding ceremony. Now, I have become this old, without ever having had a wedding. I met him when I was twenty-two or twenty-three.”

“We could not even register our marriage because the [old man]’s family registry was in Kaesong. The village foreman took care of it using his influence and we paid him to do it. So, his registry in Kaesong was moved over to Seoul. So, in Seoul, we checked it and found that indeed it had been moved over, and so, we registered the marriage.”

“I was about thirty when we [registered the marriage]. His children were all registered under my name. Registered under my name.”

“My husband was a kind-hearted person, and if there were a pitiful child, he would bring him or her home and raised them. He would bring pitiful children home and say to me that they are to be pitied so let’s raise them and make them our own. When I started to refuse them, he would say, ‘To be honest, they are just destined to die. What else could they do?’ So, then, I would raise them. I have raised infants too. That is why there are a lot of kids under my name. There are four.”

“Even if they are someone else’s kids, if you bring them home and raise them, they take after you. They used to suck my empty breast. They all know that I gave birth to them all. They all know that I gave birth to them since they sucked at my breast from when they were infants. Later on, milk gushed out from my breasts.”

“When I was about to [give birth to my daughter], the old man was not at home. Without even saying a word of complaint that my belly hurt, I groaned alone at home and gave birth to a daughter by myself.”

“After I gave birth to a baby alone and the baby cried out loud, an old man from the neighborhood came over and rebuked me, ‘You crazy woman, lying there like that alone without saying a word.’ After scolding me, the old man cut the umbilical cord, washed the baby, and laid her down.”

“After that, I did not conceive so I could not give birth again. If I could have conceived and given birth to [another] baby, I would have liked to have had a son.”

“But the older people said this. If you had relationships with this man and that man, if you have had a lot of men, then you won’t get pregnant. But if you just have a relationship with one fellow, you might be able to have a baby right away.”

“The [old man] wanted to start a business, so I obtained a small loan and gave him the money, but, *aheego*, he went bankrupt. We had to sell the house to pay back the debts, but there was no place for us to go to, so we had to sleep in the cold. And because the old man was too old to find a job, I had to do all the work, and so there was not a thing I had not tried. I carried piles of bricks as a construction worker, hoed the ground, and set out rice plants. I did all sorts of work so that we could survive.”

“As a person working at a restaurant, where couldn’t I go? I looked around for a room. We first lived in a town. We lived there for a little while in a house we moved to, but after that, we had no place to go, so we set up a tent near a residential area. We nailed stakes on the four corners. We got some leaves from the mountains to put on top of the roof and laid a rice straw bag on the ground. And we lived in there for several months. But after several months, the weather turned cold so we could not live there anymore. Meanwhile, a friend of my husband was renting two rooms in a house, and he let us live in the upper room, while he was using the downstairs room. We lived in there for a while, and then there was a house on the hilltop, so we rented a small room there until we went to a shrine hall. We lived there for a while like that, and then my husband died. But even after the old man died, I still lived there for a few more years. All without paying any rent for the room. The nicest person.”

“The old man and I lived together for over ten years. He used to be a restaurant chef; he was a first-grade chef. When my first son had just graduated from primary school at age thirteen, the old man died. I did not shed a single tear. When I thought about how I was going to support the children, the future looked completely bleak.”

“All my family members think I gave birth to them. None of them knows. They all think I gave birth to them since I covered it all up because it is a secret. I was afraid that the head of the bereavement committee might say something about it, so I spoke to him, urging him never to say anything. I urged him.”

“When my then future [son-in-law] came for his first visit to marry my daughter, I could not do much for him because I had nothing. I said to him, ‘I do not consider how well I wear and I eat. Even though I do not give much consideration to eating well and putting good clothes on, what I know to be real happiness is this: that you do not fight or swear at each other but live in a

devoted, loving relationship.’ To this, he said, ‘Yes, I will remember it.’ As he promised, even when he becomes angry, even when his wife says something to him, he does not retaliate because he remembers what I have told him, he says. So, those two get along great without fighting. But my oldest daughter picks fights with her husband all the time.”

“My oldest son beats his wife as he would a dog; I cannot stand it and it worries me all the time. It breaks my heart. He tells me that he does not do that, but I can’t stay at his house for more than three days. Before even three days pass, my whole body becomes out of whack from all the stress. ‘I know you want me to stay with you, but I can’t live here even if it is just for ten days, even if just for ten days. So, just let me live the way I have been living, and when I die, just cremate me.’ That is what I told him.”

Registration

I said I would never do it. But, down on his knees begging you like that, how could I not do it?

“When it was first uncovered, it was around ten or twelve years ago. I went to the field to work, and somehow, we got to talking about it. [To the person I was working with,] I said ‘*Aheego*, do not even talk about those. Even if I could tear them to pieces to death, I would still be angry.’ Then, the person I was working with heard the head of the Bereaved Family Association announce that people like me should register. He then came to me and told me what he had heard from the BFA chair. I said that I would never do it.”

“There was a search for the people who had been to Japan. . . . There was a young man in the photo I showed you before, remember?⁶ He came and knelt on his knees and pleaded me to register as a *comfort girl-woman* . . . I simply said no to him. . . . But, with a young man down on his knees begging you like that, how could I not talk to him about what he wanted me to do? He came over several times, and I finally gave him my approval. . . . After that, really, since I was about to die of hunger, the government let me receive some subsidies. And that is how I am living today. Otherwise, I would be dead. From hunger.”

“Japs, what do you call that that we will try to seek justice from them? So, what he said was we would be doing protests and so forth, so if I were not able now, I could just stay at home. And they often went to Japan to protest. My

⁶ A photo of the chair of the Bereaved Family Association, which was in the town newsletter.

whole family suffered at the hands of the Japs: my brother went to a Japanese coal-mine and suffered. And my elder sister's husband, although he got hurt a little but fortunately kept his life, was also in a Japanese coal-mine that collapsed. My brother's son also died, as well as my elder sister's husband; everyone died. Out of my four siblings, everyone died, and I am the only one that is left. Yes, they say that my life is supposed to be long. I wish I could go quickly, but they said that my life is supposed to be long-lived."

"Some Japanese lawyers asked me questions.⁷ Even if they asked me, I did not want to talk. I stayed by myself, but I said a few words, and I said to them so that they would hear me and understand, even though they sat some way away from me. I said, 'Sons of bitches. Sons of bitches.'"

"I said it [on purpose] so that they could hear me. [They] said nothing. What could they say? They did wrong. What could they say when their ancestors did wrong?"

"Japs, do not even talk to me about them, *aheegoo*. They are vicious. I just want to rip them into shreds. Just one, just four, if I could just rip them apart with my bare hands, I might just let off some steam. While I carried on like this, the person next to me said, 'Grandma, what are you saying?' And the BFA chair also said, 'That gentleman is here to help us. Why are you swearing like that at him?' So, I said that I am not just swearing at him. When I think about the Koreans, who carried a knife at their sides and went around being despicable, how dreadful they were when they took us, they were worse. So, when it comes to that, whether they are Koreans or Japanese, they are all the same; they are all appalling. I do not understand how they could sell Korean girls like that. To save their own necks, they became traitors. So, when I started to cry out against Korean people, our own countrymen, who went around collaborating with the Japs, the people next to me stopped me from going on. They are here to help us. They are here to help us with our legal battles, they said. You should not swear at them. 'Grandma, don't do it. Don't do it.'"

"I told him to go to Japan and tell them that that is how much I see the Japs as my enemy. I said it on purpose, on purpose."

Nightmare

Often when I sleep, those Japs appear before my eyes glimmering. . . . Each time I wake up from the dream, I have to sigh, '*huh-yoo, huh-yoo*.'

7 On August 12, 2002, BFA staff and Japanese lawyers visited Kim Bong-yi at her home while the Pacific War Victim's Freedom Association was preparing for a trial for post-war compensation.

“Because of my dreams, I wake up in the middle of my sleep. For someone who has to get up often to pee as it is, I do not have pleasant dreams. You know when you are just half-asleep? At those times, I see them coming glimmering, glimmering. I cannot see their faces or anything else, but I still see them coming glimmering. Then I open my eyes and stay awake.”

“They do not harm me in my dreams. I do not know whether they are wearing uniforms or not, but in my mind, the thought comes to me that they are Japs. They may appear in my dreams because I think of them as my enemies and want revenge.”

“Japs, swear words just come out. So, I call them Japs. Often when I sleep, those Japs appear before my eyes glimmering. . . . I do not have to even think about them. So, each time I wake up from my dreams, I have to sigh, ‘*huh-yoo, huh-yoo-*,’ and I have to swear, ‘*ohmae, despicable, despicable.*’ I just swear.”

Redress and Me Today

Money may be important but they should give money only after having begged for forgiveness with their hands put together.

“My heart is breaking. My heart is breaking. They took us in the flower of our youth and ruined our lives; of course they have to compensate us for it. They have to pay reparations, as well as beg us for our forgiveness. Look at the president. Even if it was his son who committed the crime, the president admitted to his own guilt in raising a bad son and asked for forgiveness, right?”

“If I am compensated, I am going to buy a little land for me and for my husband’s burial, and I am going to give some money to my son for my funeral and memorial services. I know you might say what is the use of having your son do memorial services for you? I still want my son to do it. I am also going to use a little bit of it for myself. I want to buy some food for elderly people around me. That would be nice. *Aheego*, that is my dream. Some say we will receive it, and some others say we will not. It looks hopeless though. Ah, they can only promise the money if the government says they will pay. If they promise the money without a guarantee from the government, what are they going to do, if the government does not come through? If it does not happen, we will make noise and rise up.”

“Money, money may be important but they should give money only after they admit their wrongdoing and beg for forgiveness with their hands put together. But the money they collected, collected from the people living in Japan, is not worth it. That is like taking a flea’s intestine. With the little money that the government, the Korean government issued me, I bought this small hut.

Although the land does not belong to me, at least the hut is mine. And because it is mine, it is very comfortable.”

“In the olden days, [I] used to know a lot. But, I turned into a complete idiot after I went to Japan. So I just stayed here like this keeping house, because I was afraid that someone would figure out what I had been. I moved out here from Gwangju. I was afraid that someone would figure out, I just stayed hushed, hush, hush, hush. And I could not go anywhere to say anything and I just kept my head low like an idiot, but now the cat is out of the bag, and everyone knows. In the beginning, I did not go outside and shut myself in my room. So, my friends said that nobody went there because they wanted to go; at that time, people who went there were dragged there by force. Come out and get some fresh air and talk to people. That is what they said to me. So, now, I listen to my friends and come out to get some fresh air, walk around, and even say a few words to people.”

“Some neighborhood friends and I formed a *gye*, a rotating private fund group. With the money, we traveled: we went to the Seol Ak Mountains, the Rocking Stone, and the so-called observatory. When we looked through the observatory telescope, we could see North Korean people building their houses and other things. I went there, too. I traveled as long as my eyes could see; I stopped traveling when I could not. It has been almost seven or eight years since my vision went bad. I can’t go anywhere. How would I go out? If only I could see well, I would have organized another *gye* and gone to Kumgang Mountain.”

“I used to be the senior citizen center’s president too. When people could not seem to find the spirit to play, I would incite them to sing songs, and then sit back down. But now that I cannot see, I can’t do anything.”

“When I went to the eye doctor, he said that it started from the brain. Since the problem stemmed from the brain, I could not have surgery, and now I have been living like this for several years. And as I get older, I keep getting pain in my body. I keep getting sick, and I cannot stand it. I cannot go out anywhere or do much of anything. So, I just stay still in my room alternately sitting, lying down, and sleeping. That is my routine.”

“It is only because I went to the [hospital last year] that I am in the condition I am now. Otherwise, I would be much worse. I could not do anything. I was dizzy and fainted, so I went to the hospital. I stayed there, and then I came back out. Now, I am in my right mind and can cook. Before, I was not able to do anything. Before I went to the hospital. The hospital told me that if I felt well enough, I could go home. I attempted to leave the hospital three times but ended up going back in an ambulance again.”

“I made a friend at the hospital. She would come over during the day on Sundays and Saturdays, and sometimes, she would come in the evenings. She

is not even sixty yet. But even if she is not yet sixty, I still call her older sister and go over to her place. If she had been ill-tempered and mean, I would not have visited her, but she remained loyal as a good friend as she did at the beginning of us becoming friends with each other.”

“I do not want to hear any negative talk from others. That is my personality. If I work a bit harder, I can avoid hearing negative talk from other people, so why would I live my life listening to them? And I never do that. To other people.”

“Who do I want to see the most? I want to see my mother just once. Yes, I lost my mother when I was little, so it would be great if I could see my mother once more before I die. Other than that, I [do not want] anything else. I would be content just to see her in my dreams because I miss her so much. . . . *Ahee*, she died when I was young, and I do not remember her face very well. I want to see her once more. It is my greatest wish. . . . Her face, I cannot remember. And even if I do not remember her face, I really want to see her, I tell you. I do not know. Maybe I will meet her again after I die?”

Interviewer's Commentary: In Search of Lost Memories

Jin Ju

I have never once met a person who had lived with personal experience of the colonial era deep within her body. So, for me to meet a *halmoni* with a background as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman* and hear her story and share it with her was an anxiety- and fear-provoking event, but at the same time, one which was a precious opportunity to come face to face with a living eyewitness to history. Who is this *halmoni*? Is she a good talker? Does she have a good memory? Will she be uneasy and uncomfortable around us⁸ interviewing her? While going to visit the *halmoni*'s house for the first time in July 2002, I kept thinking about her in the car.

Kim Bong-yi *halmoni* lived alone in a quiet and clean village in Gochang. Impatiens balsamina and balloon flowers were blooming in the small garden, and the house was quiet. Even though it was the middle of a hot summer, the door to her room was closed. So, I called her from in front of the wooden porch. “Yes-,” was the reply as the door opened and an old woman of a small stature came out from the dark room. Kim *halmoni*, who was almost blind, was accustomed to being in the dark even during bright daylight hours. Together with

⁸ Usually a team of two or three people interviewed the women.

Kim *halmoni*, we turned on the light to brighten the dark room and exchanged greetings. Afterward, we told her that we wanted to hear her story and to publish it in a book; then, we explained about the Korean Council. Kim *halmoni* asked us how we had found out she was a *comfort girl-woman*, and then nodded her head as we discussed the importance of the interview. She told us that if she could be of any help, she would tell us everything she remembered. Then, she began her story.

I understand that. Many people should know so that the Jap, the Jap should have his behind struck with a big stick. . . . That is why I am telling you my story. . . . If my name, last name, and picture won't be put in it, you can take it and send it all the way to Japan. Those bastards.

To listen to the *halmoni*'s story is an act of resistance to the history of the ruling class that has forgotten and denied the history of the people; at the same time, it is an act of detecting the traces of how the past life of a *comfort girl-woman* has been impacting the current life of one who had been a *comfort girl-woman*. On the other hand, for Kim Bong-yi *halmoni*, the oral statement has the meaning of 'many people should know' that 'the Jap should have his behind struck with a big stick,' and that 'you can take the book and send it all the way to Japan.' By sharing her life with many people and by even letting Japan, which had endlessly denied the existence of *comfort girls-women*, know about it through her oral statement, she wanted to resist against Japan, the country that had trampled on her life.

The story of the *comfort girls-women* is not the story of the tiger we heard from our grandfather or grandmother when we were little. Kim Bong-yi *halmoni* never learned to write, so she had never written her own story, and she had never expressed her experiences and feelings as a *comfort girl-woman* before others either. It is never easy for anyone to open up and reveal the painful parts of themselves in the presence of others. In the first interview, as though I was about to listen to my grandmother's tiger story in front of a brazier's flame, which I used to do when I was little, I was busy bombarding her with short questions scarcely before she had finished speaking in long breaths. Soon after, I noticed that she sounded like she was out of breath, and how I regretted my actions. Unlike what I had imagined, she did not have a story bag. Her story consisted of things like a piece of a phrase in a long sigh, a short, back-and-forth conversation with us, and a complaint that came out of frustration. Since it has already been several decades, and because she has had a mental illness due to the traumatic shock from her life as a *comfort girl-woman*, she did not remember exactly where she went, what happened there, or how she came back. Her 'memory feelers' wandered in time and space. However, vivid

memories, such as memories of those with whom she formed precious relationships or memories about the terrible situations and feelings of her experiences that have been too clearly imprinted on her, were being pulled out of her, one by one, through the meetings with us.

After the interview began, the very first thing that Kim *halmoni* shared was the feeling of shame that she herself felt about the fact that she had once lived a life as a *comfort girl-woman* and the sense of shame that she felt when the fact that she had been a *comfort girl-woman* was exposed to others. She began to painfully tell her stories, from the story of being taken by the strange visitors to the story of being beaten on the ship. I think this is very closely related to what she understands about giving an oral statement of her own experiences and what she wants to say. In the first interview, she roughly described the process of such events as the forced abduction, the assault on the ship to Japan, the relationship with an older 'sister' she met at the comfort station, the mental illness at the station, her life after emancipation, etc. The life at the comfort station was condensed into just two words: 'mental illness,' which transcended time and space, and about which she was reluctant to elaborate with any specifics. In the first and second interviews, we just followed her pace and tried to form a rapport with her through family or everyday stories. And in the third interview, we tried to approach and dive deeper into the topics that she had been reluctant to talk about, namely, more specific situations she encountered at the comfort station and her feelings about them.

When Kim Bong-yi *halmoni* was raped by a Japanese soldier for the first time, she was so shocked and frightened that even now, while telling the story, she pulled in her entire body and frequently made downward sweeping motions over her chest to calm herself. She could not continue talking unless she smoked a cigarette because of the mounting fever of anger inside her. Sometimes, my whole body would tremble while listening to her story because I could really feel how difficult it must have been to tell us about each moment of her experiences and how frightening her unforgettable memories can be in the way that they still dominate her life even now after several decades have already passed.

This account of Kim *halmoni*'s life is the one that emerged out of the four interviews that we conducted. The task of hearing and organizing her whole life from the four interviews was not an easy one at all. By arranging her vague memories in time, I restructured the story with the significant experiences in her life that I thought important. Also, during the oral statement, together with the circumstances of her experience and the emotions that went along with them, I tried to reveal her subjective understanding, interpretation, and evaluation of her experiences. When her memories were not chronologically accurate

or not consistent, when she could not remember the numbers, names, and such, and when the content of the story was changed in part, I was concerned about the authenticity and completeness of the oral statement. But I think what is more important is to record what memories remained after sixty years, what story she was trying to tell us, and, at the same time, what we were trying to hear from her. This is because we were not listening to her story already biased as to what the life of a *comfort girl-woman* was like at that time.

As she joined the Bereaved Family Association as a member, Kim *halmoni* registered with the government as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*. In the 90s, when her sight was better than it is now, she diligently participated in rallies to demand compensation from the Japanese government, and now she sometimes participates in memorial services held by the Bereaved Family Association. She is well aware of the many cases of other victims whom she met in the association, and this has had a significant impact on her views on the Japanese government and on her memory of her life as a *comfort girl-woman*. One part of her damaged memory contains the experiences of others that she has heard, and her antipathy toward the Japanese is manifested in her daily life. While having a conversation with an old lady in the neighborhood, she said that we should not use the solar calendar because it was from Japan. She invoked a curse on some Japanese who came to visit her with staff from the association, and she emphasized that she would be glad if the book would help to make the Japanese government apologize and provide compensation.

Kim Bong-yi *halmoni* often calls herself a fish that landed on the cutting board. This means that there is nothing that she cannot talk about since her life as a *comfort girl-woman*, which she wanted to hide, has already been revealed. By actively showing the pain that she has been suffering, the *halmoni* pleads her case and wants to gain strength for the time remaining in her life and to receive help. Meanwhile, she still feels ashamed for having been a *comfort girl-woman* and opposes putting her name and picture in the book. She would also feel ashamed if her children and grandchildren found out that she had been a *comfort girl-woman*. While she acknowledges that the fact that she had been a *comfort girl-woman* was something she could not control in the historical circumstances, on the other hand, as far as family relations were concerned, her former status remains an embarrassment in her life that she cannot overcome.

Kim *halmoni* can only see a little out of one eye now. She has no teeth, so she can only eat soft foods, and her stomach is not good so she is constantly suffering from indigestion. She wants her body to be well so that she can move and make use of it, but after her eyesight started to go bad, there is almost nothing she can do. When she started to go blind, she often burned herself, but now she has gotten used to everything the way it is, so she rarely injures herself

now. There are a lot of neighboring *halmonis* who come to enjoy themselves at her house because of her affable personality. Once, when she was hospitalized, an old lady living in the same neighborhood, who is like a younger sister to her, took care of her and because she liked Kim *halmoni*, she moved to the same village. Kim *halmoni* is quite proud to tell people about this. She seems to have transformed her image of the past, full of shame and painful scars, into a new image, one that is reputable and clean, and seems to be recovering through her surrounding relationships.

What does this work mean to Kim Bong-yi *halmoni*? At the beginning of the interview, we explained how important it is for her to testify in history and how important it will be to her descendants. And, nodding her head, she told us that she understood. We also learned that this work is a collaboration with the person who gave the oral statement. But we also acknowledge that true collaboration is hard to realize just by the act of being there together and exchanging stories. When the interview was almost finished, I said, "*Halmoni*, this work is really important and meaningful to us," but she curtly said, "It means something to you . . . but it does not mean anything to me." At that moment, my heart ached from her reaction, and I did not know how to act in this contradictory situation. It is the heartbreaking double-sidedness of all those who have the marks of a painful age. Their hearts believe and hope that their stories can become known to the people of Korea and Japan, but they collapse with the powerlessness that ensues from reality.

What can I say to return Kim *halmoni* to a place where this work is meaningful? It is probably not something that can be expressed in a few words. It is also important to hope that this will not happen again, but it is more important to create a society in which *comfort girls-women* can coexist with others and survive without lowering their heads on this earth. I do not know what she will say when she reads this, but later on, when she and I read this together, I hope the day will come when I will be able to answer her if she says that it was meaningless. And with that wish, I dial Kim *halmoni*'s phone number again today. "Is this Jin Ju? Are you doing well in this cold weather?"

“There Was Not a Thing I Could Do that I Wanted”

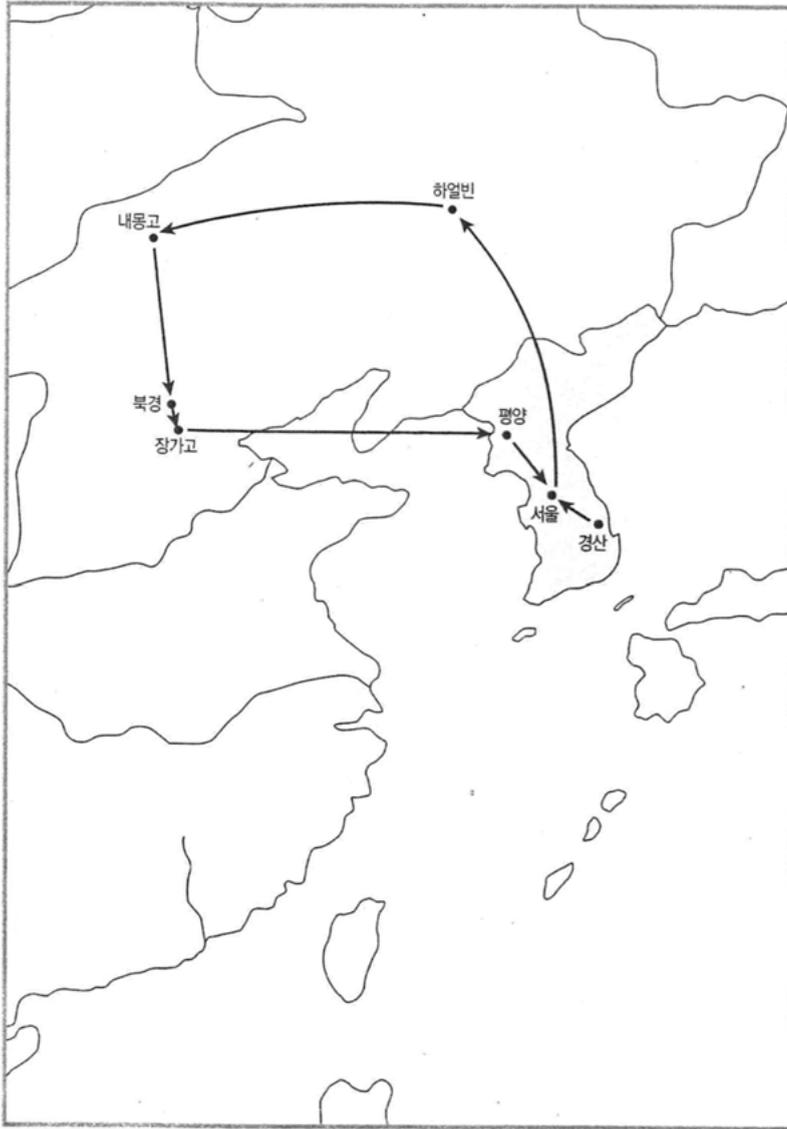
Kim Soon-ak



Kim Soon-ak.

1928	Born in Gyeongsangbuk-do Gyeongsan-si
1943 (age 16)	Taken in by employment fraud Gyeongsan – agency at Daegu – agency at Seoul – Harbin – Inner Mongolia – Beijing
1944 (age 17)	Lived as a <i>comfort girl-woman</i> at Zhangjiakou, Beijing
1946 (age 19)*	Came back to Pyongyang via the Yalu River
1947 (age 20)*	Lived as a prostitute in Seoul
1948 (age 21)*	Worked at restaurants in Gunsan and Yeosu
1949 (age 22)	Pregnant with her first son Gave birth after going back to her hometown
1953 (age 26)	Lived with the money earned by her dollar business and small prostitution business in the Dongducheon area
1957 (age 30)*	Gave birth to her second son
1977 (age 50)*	Lived as a housekeeper Ran a cold noodle restaurant
2001 (age 74)	Registered as a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i>
2004 (age 77)	Lived by herself in the government-supported apartments in Gyeongsangbuk-do Gyeongsan
2010 (age 83)	Deceased

*Approximately



Kim Soon-ak's route: Gyeongsan – Seoul – Harbin – Inner Mongolia – Beijing – Zhangjiakou – Pyongyang – Seoul.

“Do you know that my greatest wish in life is to receive a gift? I have never received a single stem of a flower. I like flowers, but I have never received them. . . . I envy those who are recipients of flowers.”

“Real flowers are lovely, but, after a week, they become all dark and withered. *Aheegoo*, I do not like to look at them like that. So now, I bought these (fake flowers). Now, you can look at them forever. And when they [get dirty], you just have to get some clean water, spray [it] on them, and put them back, and then they will come back to life right away.”

Symptoms of Doubt

Maybe the hospital knew the problem I had when they examined me. They told me to calm down.

“You know I did not want to live anymore. I wanted to throw it all away, all away, all the things of the past. . . . I saw my sister drink alcohol to death, so now, I made up my mind to drink till I died, and I was going to drink more than she did to die, so I just- drank soju, five bottles of it. Then I saw Hoon *halmoni* coming,¹ and I wanted to beat my breasts. . . . Now, when I watch TV, I see that even someone like that goes on living, so who would look in on me? Where can I go to tell such a story? What should I do?”

“My eyes, eyes, I went to the hospital to check my eyes,² and they told me to bring my guardian, but I had no one to take with me. So I paid thirty thousand won³ to a person I knew and brought that person with me.”

“Maybe the hospital knew the problem I had when they examined me. They told me to calm down. Ha! That is it. I think that the hospital knew. I [felt like] people were coming after me all the time, and I would get startled and frightened even when I bumped into this, this vanity. . . . That is to say, such an illness has found a home in me and won’t leave. They said depression and, you know, symptoms of paranoia. I was being paranoid about people and things. When I see things left on an edge like that, I have to straighten them out to feel relieved. Even with a simple pair of socks, when I take them off, I have to wash them right away for my mind to be at ease.”

¹ Kim Soon-ak is describing her witnessing of Hoon *halmoni* moving into her hometown, Gyeongsangbuk-do Gyeongsan-si. Before she moved into Gyeongsan-si, Hoon *halmoni* lived as a *comfort girl-woman* in Cambodia, was found in 1997, and recovered her citizenship in Korea.

² Kim Soon-ak had cataract surgery in 2001.

³ Thirty thousand won in 2001 is worth approximately \$34.00 today.

“I feel very anxious and always irritated. I have been like this for a long time now. I swear to myself and say *aeeee*, fuck, I should go and get a drink, and then I have to drink like a fish before I can come home. Only then can I get some sleep and not even notice that I am hungry; it is only when I drink that I feel a little relief and stop feeling anything. . . . That was the great extent of the illness that I had.”

“Men, women or children, I did not want to meet anybody. I should have met with people and talked with them, but there was no one with whom I could communicate. Even if I told my story, there was no one who could gently say to me, ‘*Uheegoo*, so that is how it was. You have had a real tough time.’”

“Now I am much better. I do not say things like this without drinking alcohol.”

Licensed Quarters

My body was ruined and I lost my chastity.

“There is a saying that a woman ruins her body when she sleeps once with a man. But I slept with tens of men, so how can my body be whole? I am completely ruined now. . . . At the outset, I went out to earn some money but was taken to the wrong place. I lived a wrong life, didn’t I?”

“[After the liberation], in November or December in the lunar calendar, I crossed over to Seoul. But, I had never been to Seoul, so how and where would I have gone? Could I have gone to a place I know? Where could I have gone? . . . I was shivering from the cold so much that a delivery man came over and asked, ‘Are you waiting for someone?’ He must have taken pity on me; he said he would buy me something to eat. So, he took me to a restaurant and bought me a meal. . . . I told him to send me to wherever they have food, and he sent me to a big restaurant. So, I worked there.”

“If you work at a restaurant, you are given meals and a place to sleep, but you do not get money.”

“[The delivery man] said that if I was really interested in earning money, a grown young lady like me might consider selling my body instead of working at places like that and that there are young ladies like that around.”

“So I went to a place of prostitution, and sold my body; when I did that, I [saved] a lot of money very quickly, very quickly. Then, I bought myself some proper clothes. And I came to a realization. So, I did not go back to my hometown for several years.”

“Since I had gone this far, I was going to save up a little bit more money before I went back to my hometown. The kids (her younger siblings) and my mom were living very poor so once I earned some money, whether it be one or

two years, I would go home, once I made some money. That was all I was thinking. . . . After all, it was to earn money that I left. Even though my parents would have been happy just to have me back alive.”

“I ended up looking for the licensed quarters because my body was ruined and I lost my chastity, that is, I was not a pure young lady. Realizing the kinds of places I needed to go to earn money, I asked around in several agencies and found such a place to go to.”

“There were many Korean ladies in the red-light district. They only picked the fine ones, slim and pretty. Fitted with the right clothes, I was something else. I was downright pretty at that time, I guess. . . . I spoke six languages then, the languages of six different countries. I knew the word for ‘cigarette.’ Once I heard a word, I knew it. I knew that *dambae* was a cigarette, and I knew the word OKAY. I also knew that the ashtray was like SJ.”

“To earn more money, to earn a lot more money quickly, I went to Jeollado, to Gunsan. In Gunsan, I went into a good house, received customers, and earned money; then, I went to Yeosu.”

“When I was about twenty-one or twenty-two, I went to Yeosu. Now, what do you call it these days? You do not sell your body there, you sell alcohol. A bar. When the bar is filled with many customers, you set up a big table. And you go to a table like that and drink alcohol with the customers. That was when I started to drink.”

“I poured the alcohol for the customers, helped them with paying the bills, and seated them. Then, I would receive *tokui* (regular) customers in groups. . . . That was when I completely stopped selling my body.”

“When I was at the restaurant, scores of [customers] frequently asked for [me] because they liked me. I was funny, and I could drink so well, I was a whole lot of fun to play with, really.”

Police Officer Lim

That is when I started to feel a little bit of an attachment to Korean people.

“A police officer took a liking to me; he thought I was a good girl. One of the regular customers. . . . When he was off duty, he would come around and talk to me. That is when I started to feel a little bit of an attachment to Korean people. I thought of him as my boyfriend. . . . All my friends at the restaurant too said, ‘He is your boyfriend,’ and whenever he came around, they would say, ‘Police Officer Lim is here,’ and always called me to wait on him and they kindly gave us

a single table. We were very close, and we slept together once. So, of course, I knew I had slept with him, but did not know that I was pregnant.”

“When I did not get my period, while I was sitting around with my friends, one of them said, ‘*Aheego, ya,*’ (in a small voice as though whispering), ‘You slept with the police officer, didn’t you?’”

“‘Yes, I did,’ I said. Then, the friend asked one of the other police officers, and he told her that [officer Lim] had gone away somewhere. I was pregnant and, while I was thinking that I had to earn some money to go back to my hometown . . . a riot erupted in Yeosu. So, [thinking] I should not stay there, carrying the baby in my belly, I came down to my [hometown]. What was I to do? I couldn’t see any trace of this man anywhere, and I was pregnant. I got pregnant only at age twenty-two.”

“It had not even been two years that I had been friendly with the man, actually, not even one year, I guess.”

“Before I got pregnant, I sent a letter to my [hometown] and was told that my father had passed away.”

“Since my [father] transported things from place to place, he tried to find me wherever he went. . . . My mom said, ‘To find you, your father went several times looking for you but could not find you. He heard stories from someone that you had gone to Seoul. Your father told me that.’ After the liberation, my father got sick waiting for me before I came back. He would sit on a ridge between rice fields and wait and wait many days, wondering whether his Soon-ak would ever come home. But he passed away a week before (choking with tears) I arrived my hometown.”⁴

“When I wrote in the first letter [that I sent to my mom] that I was employed and earning money, my family was so thankful that I was alive. . . . My mother said that my father died only waiting for me. And after [my father] died and I tried to come home, she said that there was no need for me to come back. So, I kept on sending news [by letters].”

“Later, when I came back to my [hometown] pregnant, my mom said, ‘You pitiful and desperate one, you are pregnant without a husband.’ My mom is blunt like me. So, [I] told her, ‘He will come, I reckon. There is no news of him yet, so what do you want me to do?’”

“I came here and gave birth to the child and stayed for around three years.”

⁴ Kim Soon-ak halmoni arrived in her hometown area but she did not contact nor visit her home. Unfortunately, she found out that her father passed away one week prior to her arrival in her hometown when she later contacted her family by a letter.

“Since my mom was there, I told her that I would go and see if I could find a place to earn money or a person whom I had known before and went up to Dongducheon.”

“As I was wandering from place to place, I realized there was no place to put the [child]. Where else could I put him except with my family?”

Business

I sold Yankee merchandise and women for Yankees.

“During President Park’s administration, I sold Yankee merchandise and women for Yankees. [That is] what I used to do. That is all that we had learned. What I learned, really.”

“I had to feed and educate the child. When my child was eight, I went up to Dongducheon⁵ with him. I sold Yankee products, and I sometimes went to the Eastgate market to do dollar trading. I gave money that I had exchanged to the Yankee prostitutes. And then, in turn, the Yankee prostitutes gave that money to the American men that they knew.”

“In the course of doing repeated business, I would drink with them Yanks and talk with them. . . . I was twenty-five or twenty-six, nearly close to thirty. When they came, urgently calling me ‘mama-san,’ I would spoon-feed them rice and hang out with them together with the other girls. In this way, I became pretty close to the American people.”

“To enter into the U.S. Army base in Korea, we needed a pass. But, if there was someone I knew who was standing guard, I would tell him, ‘I am going in, so give me a little break,’ and then the guard would say, ‘Ah, okay, okay, mama-san.’ Well-, they were fine with it. And I would get in.”

“This overcoat here, when it was cold, I would take a dish or some such thing and put it inside the overcoat and bring it out with me.”

⁵ Dongducheon is one of the special districts where prostitution was permitted by the South Korean government in spite of its adoption of a law prohibiting prostitution in 1961. These special districts were usually near the U.S. Army base. On some level, the South Korean government managed the prevention of venereal diseases among prostitutes. The violation of the human rights of young girls and women associated with sex tourism and prostitution for foreigners, which were supported by the South Korean government, became the impetus for church women organizations such as Korea Church Women United and non-church women organizations such as Korean Women’s Association United to start engaging in activism for the issues of *comfort girls-women* after their discovery that the root of Japanese sex tourism went back to the system of *comfort girls-women* during World War II.

“I did not earn very much doing ‘business’ with the girls”.

“I did not have a home, so had to rent rooms with the girls. . . . I could not afford the whole house at once, so I rented rooms here and there. I had a room for myself and my child. I paid in halves with the women. I divided the money equally: when we earned two won,⁶ I gave one won⁷ to the girls. And that was why I could not earn much.”

“After the girls learned all that they needed to know, they would just leave to set up their own businesses whenever they wanted. . . . They found themselves single rooms and wanted to do things their own way. So, how was I supposed to hold onto them? I brought the girls, who had no personal connections or stable status, from the merchants in Seoul, and then taught them everything they needed to know. As soon as I did that, they would leave whenever they felt like it.”

“I was not educated much, but I have a heart that wants to help others who are worse off than me. That is, I do not want to claw my way to the top, that is what I am saying.”

“I had three or four girls. . . . Then I started the [dollar] business.”

“After I did that business, I could keep up with living. I sent my [son] to school, and we ate. Otherwise, if I kept on doing only the ‘business’ with the girls, it was nothing but filling their mouths and was only good for the Yankee women. . . . I was thinking. The only thought I had was that if only I were young, it would have been better if I did it myself. I mean, I was already defiled, but it was just my child that was keeping me from doing it.”

“I gave birth to my [second son] at that time. That was the first time I stopped the ‘business’ with the girls and started selling Yankee products at the market.”

“After I gave birth to my second son, I went to a place that was like an orphanage. I gave my child to the orphanage, but he did not want to go. So, I had no choice but to feed him and raise him. That is how it was.”

“I lived in Dongducheon, Uijeongbu for over ten years. When my [first son] was in the 2nd grade of middle school, we left [Dongducheon] and got a room in Seoul to live there.”

“I worked as a housemaid. I worked for a rich man, the owner of Lucky Group, for only about a year and a half. Then I went to another house for seven to eight years.”

“I worked as a [housemaid] for over fifteen years. I also had a restaurant that sold cold noodles when I was raising my kids.”

⁶ Two won in 1953 is worth approximately \$0.03 today.

⁷ One won in 1953 is worth approximately \$0.017 today.

Name

I am Soon-ok. That is what I was called when I was little.

“I am Soon-ok. That is what I was called when I was little. I am not sure whether it was because my father was illiterate and was ignorant or because the letters of my name were mixed up when we changed our name to a Japanese name. My birth registration was done late. It was only after my mom had given birth to my younger sibling that my parents went to [register] me, and by that time, I was already nine or ten years old. . . . When my Resident Registration or Provincial Resident Registration ID card came out, I saw that my name was Kim Soon-ak. ‘Ak,’ it said.”

“I am the first child. Below me, I have two younger brothers. We lost the one that was right after me. He died when he was in his fifties. We were all very poor, and from his poverty, my brother died of alcoholism. I heard that another brother of mine is living in Busan, but him too, I think he barely manages to make ends meet.”

“My father was a farmhand, going around working at other people’s farms. That is, he worked the lands of other people. After a while, he finally acquired a field, but [it was] a field full of rocks and things. A field with rocks.”

“He worked a small farm. And we barely had enough to eat; like horses, we ate the vegetation that grew, and we shared it with the cows. Like other mountain village people, that is how we lived.”

“If my family were well-off, would my parents send their girls away just because they were called? Or would they send their girls to the factory?”

Yamada Factory

I went to the factory to unravel threads.

“I never forget. Um-, I went to the Yamada factory to unravel threads, but what I left with was a ruined body and a lifetime of suffering.”

“There was a place called the Yamada factory. The Yamada factory was in Daegu, that was all I knew.”

“I knew an old man whose grandson or granddaughter was known to work for a factory where they raised silkworms and where they unraveled silk threads. I was always playing with the girl of [that house]. Thinking that I was close with his granddaughter, the grandfather of the house told me, ‘You can now go to that

factory.’ From my neighborhood,⁸ I was the only one who was going to the factory. When I arrived in myeon (Namcheon-myeon), there were a few more. Then I went to Daegu, and there were a lot of people who had been recruited [for] the factory. About thirty or so. . . . There was a rumor and everyone was saying that [girls] were being taken away. So, I thought it was better to go to the factory. I saw people working at the factory, and that made me relieved and excited. I went because I was told that I would be going to work at a factory.”

“At the time, I was sixteen. All the [girls who gathered together] were of a similar age.”

“My mom washed a little bit of lettuce. After eating lunch, when I was coming out of the house, my mom started crying profusely (getting red in the eyes) and firmly clutching at my hands, she cried a lot.”

“My father always told me that he would marry me off to a rich man, and my mom did not want to send me to work. When I think about things like that, what comes to mind is my letting go of my mom’s hand. That lingers in my eyes.”

“My father believed that he was sending me to a factory. He was ignorant of what was going to happen; he did not know anything.”

“Now that I think about it, I think that that old man used to frequent brothels for *yangbans* (upper-class people of Korea).”

“When I think about it now, there must have been an agency to gather *ki-saeng*. The agency recruited all the girls from all different regions.”

“I ate lunch, came out, got on a train, which I had never even set foot on before, in Namcheon-myeon, and rode it all the way to Daegu. It was the first time that I had ever been on a train.”

“That old man took me all the way to Daegu.”

“We were gathered at the Daegu agency. . . . I do not know how many days we stayed there. Then we all- went out to take the train, and we took the train to Seoul. I think that they were taking us to Seoul to sell us. . . . I was in Seoul, and there were twenty to thirty women. They told the other girls and me that the women went somewhere but that we were too young to obtain permission to go. . . . That, that was how we were taken. That was how we went.”

“[I] was taken to an agency, where there were people from Seoul who came to get girls, to buy cheonyeos. Those people paid money to buy us, that is to say. So, we stayed for several days in Seoul, but we were not getting sold because we were from the countryside. Because we were wearing shabby clothes from the country villages. So, the agency put better clothes on us and sold us

⁸ Gyeonggsangbuk-do Gyeongsan-si Namcheon-myeon Geumgok-dong (Geumgok-dong, Namcheon Town, Gyeongsan City, North Gyeongsang Province).

for more money. I think that is how they sold us off. Nobody knew where we had been brought to or where we would be taken next.”

The House of Prostitution

Upon our arrival, [we found out that] soldiers, it was a place for receiving soldiers.

“We were put in fine clothes so that we could be sold; some were sent to Japan or Harbin. And after others had been sold off to many different places, those that were left were sold to work in the city of Seoul. . . . I think there were about twenty, at the time that we were being sent away.”

“We thought that perhaps in the places where you can make a lot of money, that is how things were done – you got sold. We did not know one way or the other and just followed the agents. Upon our arrival, we found out that it was a place for receiving soldiers.”

“We went there when the [war] was about to end.”

“They dragged us around when, at times, the [girls] would all disappear, then they would gather more women from other places, and then there would be a lot of them around. . . . They did this maybe for about a year. The reason why we moved around a lot was that the soldiers were withdrawing; when there were not any soldiers left, we would move somewhere else where there were soldiers; this happened again and again. It was because the [Japanese soldiers] kept withdrawing. Ultimately, we ended up selling our bodies. . . . We were sold to pay off their debts. . . . They mistreated us so much. Those people did not even feed us well; they just dragged us around and around. There were about seven to eight agents, I think.”

“We even went all- the way to Mongolia. I need not say any more, do I?”

“We stayed in Mongolia during the summer, but I am not sure how many months it was.”

“We did not continue to stay there. We were wandering from place to place: we would eat, then we would wander, and since there were no more soldiers, we would wander again.”

“Then, after summer passed, when it was just about to become fall, we came to Beijing. . . . I think we went to Beijing. The city inside Beijing.”

It was called Zhangjiakou.⁹ . . . I am not sure if they spoke Chinese or Japanese, but anyway, when we entered the valley, we saw that they had built

⁹ Zhangjiakou is a city in the northwestern area of Hebei.

houses there, where the Japanese lived, but I think it was a Chinese neighborhood. They were still in the process of building more and more houses, but we were in the parts that had already been built.”

“Everything was built with dirt. The houses were suddenly built in the mountain valleys, anywhere there was an empty space.”

“The size of two *tatamis* laid down side by side is how small a room was. There was one futon and one blanket. (Indicating some summer blankets) You had to sleep on a futon as thin as that. We had to sleep on this thin futon. Each room was made just big enough, like this much¹⁰ for one person. A room was as high off the floor as a bed. Since they put briquettes under the floorboards and the walls were made of dirt and stones, it was not cold, at least.”

“There was a sign that said, ‘House of Prostitution,’ so all the men were coming in. . . . So we had no choice but receive soldiers there.”

“I do not know how many of these houses there were, but near here, here, here, there was our house, and then in the upper neighborhoods, if you went out a little bit, there may have been a few more, who knows? And maybe if you went below the mountain, there may have been houses like that too.”

“Koreans were entrusted to do business in these houses. My [owner] was around fifty or sixty years old.”

“The owners ran the place, and [us] girls were just the money makers. If I were to talk about it. . . . The owners could be husband and wife, or they could be siblings. Who cares. This was just a business to earn money and to feed their family.”

Meat

Like pieces of meat spread out in the marketplace, we were.

“Sunday was really- a very crowded day, but they lined up, all standing along in single file to come in. That is how it was. When the soldiers lined up in single file in front of me, it reminded me of how we lined up when we went to the bathroom, you know? In front of each girl, that is how the arrangement was. That is what I am trying to say. . . . On Sundays and Saturdays, there were thirty, forty men you would have to receive per day. Soldiers. It took maybe ten minutes, five minutes. Do you even have to undress all the way? You just open here (shaking loose the inside of the waist of her trousers to open them).”

¹⁰ It is the size of a blanket for one person.

“I do not even know if it took ten or twenty minutes. I just closed my eyes tight (closing both of her eyes) and lay down just, just like a piece of meat laid out in the marketplace. (Rubbing a lighter with her hands) On normal days, we got a straggling number: we received about five or six or sometimes a little over ten soldiers, and on Saturdays and Sundays, we received thirty to forty soldiers. The girls with skill and speed would even take fifty to, well, sixty soldiers a day.”

“I was not able to receive so many. I had about thirty, I think.”

“We started at about 9 a.m., and we received customers until about 6 p.m. And then, from 7 or 8 p.m., the commissioned officers came in. The commissioned officers. . . . These ones would come and pick the girl that they wanted. And if they had a *tokui* (regular) girl that they went to, they would find the girl and go into her room. If we had no customers, then we would just sleep that night.”

“When the soldiers came out for their days off, they had assigned times. The commissioned officers had to come out at a time designated for them, and the lower-class soldiers came out from the morning. They all had to come out according to what had been written and signed by the [army.] If a soldier came out early, then he had to return early. . . . There was no sleeping over with me or other *comfort girls-women* on a soldier’s day off just because he had nothing else to do. There was no time to waste.”

“The soldiers came in through the gate and, like the way that they would buy tickets at the theater, the soldiers gave money [for tickets], and the [owner] gave them a piece of paper with a stamp on it. Then, each of the soldiers was given a *sakku*; you know the thing that he had to put on. So, he was given two things: the *sakku* and the piece of paper. Once the soldier got those things, he got in line. . . . So then, we would receive one customer briefly, then the second. But if things went wrong, there was a place to wash.”

“There was a place to wash your private parts. We went there, the *senjo* (wash room), quickly and came back. While washing, the door was wide open, and another soldier might come in already. And since the door was open, but no one was in there, some soldiers might have been undoing their pants (pointing to her waist). And sometimes, when it was crazy busy, we would not even go [to wash] ourselves; that is, if the *sakku* did not burst, we would not go, but if it did burst, then we would feel gross and could not continue.”

“[When we went to wash ourselves,] the owner would yell, where had we gone to and why were we not receiving a customer and just generally raised hell. You know, the one that managed everything.”

“The soldiers had knives on their belts. And they had bullets on their belts. Because of these, when they did not undo their belts all the way, well, [we] would get our sides stabbed, and our stomachs stabbed. All- over our bodies, even our chests. We would even be cut by their dog tags.”

“I, I- did not contract any [diseases], so I had to receive the soldiers every day. If you became sick, then you would get an injection, and after a week, you would get another injection and would be told not to receive soldiers. Because you would be eating and resting all the time, the owner did not like that and made fuss about it.”

“Some girls got pregnant and had to rest for a few days after the abortion.”

“If the girls did not come back from the hospital, then it meant she had failed the test. But since I did not fail, I had to receive [soldiers.]”

“It tore and stung. And when I went to wash myself, it stung so- much that I could not stand it at all. If I said that it hurt, then they told me to use antiseptic. But, when I went for tests, took medicine, drew blood, and got an injection, I never failed. So, I had to do it.”

Bookkeeping

There was a can like this. This was where we put them. So we could tell how many men we received.

“They named me Sadako in Japanese, and then they started calling me Teriko, whatever they liked to call me. . . . Teriko in Chinese characters is the combination of the character for the pine tree and the character for big bamboo.”

“If it was a little quiet in the morning and evening, I just took a bath. There was a person who cooked for us.”

“There was no time for lunch. I was handed some rice balls with salt on a flat ceramic plate, about three or four balls. Like food in jail.”

“You had to tally up [all the pieces of paper that the soldiers gave you]. (Picking up a small canister) There was a can like this. This was where we put them. [So] we could tell how many men we received. If I brought that to the office, they would have to count it so that they could write the sum down in their books.”

“But we were ignorant then. Even when the condoms burst, we carried on, not taking the time to wash ourselves because we thought that making more money was the best thing. But were we allowed to touch any of that money? Did they give us any?”

“If we did not have clothes, we told the owner that we wanted new clothes. The [owner] then gave us money to buy clothes. And could we just live on one set of clothes? We had to buy Japanese clothes. The cheap kind. Those cheap ones.”

“We had to tell the [owner] how much we were going to spend, and then the owner gave us just that amount of money. They never gave us whatever we wanted. . . . In today’s money, for instance, we would ask [the owner] to give

us ten thousand won¹¹ or twenty thousand won,¹² and that is how much they would give us. And they would tell us, ‘This is how much you spent.’ Although we never received a cent, they would calculate once a month how much we had each made and how much we had each spent. They would tell us that.”

“*Aheegoo*, how frustrating. This was what I had been reduced to. That was the first thought that entered my mind.”

“I thought, when girls grow up, they get married. Well, is this what it is like? The girls were seventeen or eighteen years old, so they started their periods there.”

“Since I left when I was sixteen, I should have known more about sex. But we did not know how it should feel or how things should be. I say we just did not know any of it. What a relationship between a man and a woman should be, we did not know. We only knew that it should be after marriage that men and women lived like that.”

“There was no one I was close to. . . . Even now I cannot hold up my face properly in front of anybody, and I only lived for drinking. Even back then, all I met were women whom I did not know, and there was not a thing I could do that I wanted. And at the time, I was full of anxiety. . . . I had to do whatever the owners told me to do. If they said to eat, then, I ate. If they said sleep, then, I slept. If they said stay here, then I stayed there. I do not really know what happened during that time. But, aside from that story, there are not any, any, any, any other stories really to tell.”

Refugee

On the train we were coming out of, we were loaded up just like luggage in the baggage car.

“In the mountain villages where things were getting settled, when the owners were trying to enjoy their profits, Korea was liberated from Japan.”

“When we heard that we were now liberated, we came out. We heard and immediately packed up all our stuff.”

“When we left Korea, we reached Mongolia through Harbin. Also, when we were on our way back, we got on the train and went up to Beijing through Harbin station. We were all refugees. . . . On the train we were coming out of, we were loaded up just like luggage in the baggage car.”

¹¹ Ten thousand won in 2004 is worth approximately \$10.00 today.

¹² Twenty thousand won in 2004 is worth approximately \$20.00 today.

“After several days, we got out. Then in Beijing, there were people who said that they were soldiers of the Korean independence movement. They were in their forties, fifties, and sixties. They [draped] the national flag of Korea in the town plaza like a theater; there must have been hundreds and thousands of people crowding around. They gathered us together and picked us out: Chinese, Korean.”

“Having divided us into groups, the Korean independence soldiers tried to lead the Koreans out by looking into ships departing for Beijing and Tianjin. But that line of ships had been cut off. You could not board the ships anymore.”

“I did not know how far I had gone by train. I also did not know where in China I had come to. The trains could not proceed anymore, or people either, for that matter. Pyeongyang was still very far away. You had to cross the Yalu River, but I was still wandering around in China.”

“I walked for days and nights in China. . . . I started walking from the 15th of August for a month until September. While walking, I slept in barns, and people gave me meals cooked with sorghum, the stalks of which were used to make brooms. They cooked sorghum, and after cooking it, they roughly ground it in water. I was so hungry I could not stand it, so I firmly chewed the sorghum. I could not even swallow the water. That is how we lived, really, to come back to Korea alive.”

“I came back to Korea the following year. I lived in farmhouses in North Korea for almost a year. I lived in North Korea. . . . I arrived in South Korea about a year and a half or two years after the liberation.”

“After our country was liberated, I had no idea whether the country had gone topsy-turvy or what had happened. I did not know anything. . . . Anyway, I did not know whether my neighbor had lived or died. I did not understand how things were like that. In such chaos, the fact was that I did not die but lived. . . . When I think about this, I think, how did I survive? And even in my own thoughts, it is amazing to me.”

Shame

Should I tell my child? What should I do?

“Should I tell my child? What should I do? I thought about this. This is because this is not something to boast about. For us South Koreans, this is a shameful shame.”

“Anyway, in my conscience, I am a defiled woman. It means my body has been ruined. Even if I got married, I would not hear anything good.”

“Where can I go with this body of mine? And what manner of man can I meet?”

“The way I am down there, no one will take me because I lost my chastity, I say. How can I take others despising me? The world keeps getting better and better like this, and my life too is getting better. Even if I live in another person's house, my fortune will flourish.”

“I hate men now, I say. I just want to [live] life for myself; that is the only kind of boldness I have. I had many who told me they were from the North and suggested that we live together.”

“I do not know how to read or write or anything, so all I would end up with is mistreatment. That has become *han*, *wonhan* to me. If I think about how my body has been ruined, I am telling you that my body has been ruined. Other friends all had good fathers and mothers, and so, they were able to get married, have sons and daughters, and now live happily. But here, I tell you, the country people curse me, they call me a bitch. No one says any warm words to me. So, even the children in Seoul, they used to call me, ‘*Halmoni*, *halmoni*,’ when they were little, but now that they are grown, they do not need to know what happened to me. They know that I live alone, but there is no need to tell them why things are the way they are.”

“I talk with other *halmonis* here, tell jokes, and play Korean card games. That is all I know. . . . Card games too, I do not play long. If I play for three or four hours, my back starts hurting.”

“I am trying to live just a little longer. That is what I do.”

“Now, I compare myself to people who are worse off than me. But I have always been like that.”

“These people in the [apartments] tell me to clean, knowing nothing about what is inside here (indicating her heart). I am in no position to say whether I like it or not. Even with this eye [that had the cataract surgery], shaded, I still go around cleaning. It feels like my eyes are going to sink into their sockets. I can't see what I am picking up and no one knows what I am feeling inside. How I hurt. . . . As a human being, I have no one to be mindful with and no place to lean on. There is not a soul who knows the bottom of my heart.”

Interviewer's Commentary: The Registration Certificate of *Comfort Girls-Women*

Cha Hyeyoung

Whenever I visit the house of Kim Soon-ak *halmoni*, I am mindful of how I am dressed. I check to see if there are any rips in my jeans, if my hair coloring is

not too noticeable, and if the shoes I have just taken off are neat. Kim *halmoni* says, “I hate what my eyes hate to see.” When she sees the young people in the neighborhood, with their hair dyed and their jeans intentionally ripped, who just pass by their elders without a word of greeting, she cannot just let it go. She may be poor, but she does not show undue greed and lives her life very diligently, so for her to be displeased by the wasteful behavior of today’s young people might just be a matter of natural course. Because I know what she is like and also because I do not want to seem unmindful of her expectations of me, every time I visit her, I always end up giving my appearance a second look.

I first met Kim Soon-ak *halmoni* in the year 2000 when I started to work for the Daegu Citizen’s Forum for *Halmoni*. The look of Kim *halmoni*, who had registered that year as a former Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*, was that of a woman with a thin frame on whose face were deeply carved wrinkles. And those wrinkles served as evidence of her suffering. She did not try to deny the fact that she suffered and complained of her chest strain, symptoms of paranoia, and problems of anxiety. She even made a self-diagnosis that all these symptoms were due to an underlying illness of *hwabyung*. Kim *halmoni*, who did not look me in the eye during our conversation, frequently beat her breast several times, wallowed in self-pity, and complained of her pain and suffering. From her overshadowed face, her thin body without an ounce of excess fat on it, and her coarse hands, I could sense how heavy the years have weighed on her.

When I first visited her house, the first thing that I noticed was the Registration Certificate of *comfort girls-women*, i.e. the Notice of Decision for Registration, which hung in front of her bedroom door. The certificate was hung where it could easily be seen on the wall. As this paper certified that Kim *halmoni* is one of the *comfort girls-women* survivors, it had the date of the registration and the signature of the Health and Welfare Department clearly stamped on it. With young eyes full of curiosity, I looked closely at the certificate that I had only heard about. I suppose she must have become conscious of my behavior and the *halmoni* said that she had recently received the certificate, after which she put it in the frame and hung it up. While visiting the houses of other *halmonis*, I never saw another Notice of Decision for Registration. And even if I had, I would never have dreamed that anyone would hang it on the wall. Since they did not know who, when or how someone might visit their house, most of the other *halmonis* wanted to hide the evidence of their experiences as *comfort girls-women*. But Kim Soon-ak *halmoni* seems to be willingly and openly publicizing hers. So I was very curious about her motivation for this. Unlike this curiosity of mine, she brought up the story about when she first received the certificate and was as happy as she ever was at that time. I thought that the reason why she was so pleased was due to the financial support and the lease to the permanent

rental apartment that she would now be able to receive. At that time, I did not think there would be another level of meaning to the certification paper. It was only much later that I found out that the certification paper had a much more significant meaning beyond just the financial one. After Kim Soon-ak *halmoni* registered and received the certificate, people from the welfare office of Gyeonngsan-si, officers of the province office of Gyeongsangbuk-do, etc. visited her on her birthdays and other Korean holidays. Looking forlorn, she once said, “Who can understand what it means to be alone,” so the visits from those who conducted the nation’s business became the greatest reward and consolation for her. She was endlessly thankful for the little cares that they showed: Is she comfortable? Is she receiving the monthly payments on schedule? Does she need



Kim Soon-ak.

anything? And so on and so forth. Also, as the neighborhood came to naturally know who she was, many people began to take an interest in her. After the documentary about her life aired on TV, the number of people who recognized her went up dramatically, and she was very content to see the people in the neighborhood, who recognized her from seeing her on TV, greet her first. After she regained her health, Kim *halmoni* uncustomarily went on some outings and very naturally and gradually made friends with the people in her neighborhood. Now, she often invites her friends to her house and from time to time they enjoy playing some Korean card games. In this way, she can now cast away some of her loneliness and lonesomeness.

Also, after her registration as a *comfort girl-woman*, she was able to talk about her past for the first time with the participants of the Daegu Citizen's Forum for *Halmoni*. The visits from the volunteer workers, the medical support, and her participation in the assembly opened her heart, which once was tightly closed, and enabled her to open up about her experiences as a *comfort girl-woman*. On her own volition, Kim *halmoni* started to talk, and the freedom that she gained from this was compensation for all the times that she had not been able to express what had been buried in her heart. This freedom has not only brought contentment in life for her presently, but it is also changing her. Now, it is hard to find in her the shabbiness or the fatigue of the past. Even the wrinkles on her face are naturally fading away as she is gaining some weight and her whole face is looking much brighter. “I am getting younger and younger as the days go by. I did not know how to ride the bus before. That should tell you everything,” she said, enjoying the new image of herself that is different from her past one.

In 2002, I exclaimed that I would do the interview without any hesitation because the time that Kim *halmoni* and I had spent together had been long. However, I realized that listening to another's life story, recording it with words, and expressing it was not going to magically happen just because we were close. Rather, I found that, sometimes, the fact that Kim *halmoni* and I knew each other so well became a hindrance. The things that I already knew about her were of no use in constructing her recorded file that was made up only of her own words. When I took out the recorder and asked her again about the narrative that she had already told me before, she did not seem happy. She asked abruptly why I kept asking questions about things I already knew well and expressed her frustration that she could not communicate with us young people. And whenever she was frustrated, she would say, “I want to talk with you about other things than this.” She wanted to talk about the small day-to-day stuff, but for the sake of the interview, I could not give in to her requests. Between me, who had to draw out her story, and Kim *halmoni*, who for the most part did not want to talk about her past, knowingly or unknowingly, there were tussles from time to time.

To obtain her consent for the interview to progress, I tried starting with everyday topics before leading her into her story. And at times, I would use the strategy of drinking with her. And some days, I even tried spending the night at her house.

It was a hard thing to get her whole life story within a few interviews. This was especially true in the case of Kim Soon-ak *halmoni* because she declined to talk about her second son and remained silent on the subject. Since I have always been confident that I had an especially close relationship with her, even to engage in small talk and boasting in front of her, I did not doubt that I would be able to get her whole life story in its entirety. But ultimately, in this finalized version of her story, due to her insistent opposition, I had to be content with practically no mention of her second son, as I promised her. Although she talked about her experiences as a *comfort girl-woman* in a bold manner, she tried her best to avoid talking about her life after the liberation and her return to Korea. She seemed to have more painful wounds from her life as a prostitute and the circumstances surrounding her second son than from her experiences as a *comfort girl-woman*. To actively reveal this pain of the wounds of Kim *halmoni*, unlike the other *comfort girls-women* stories, this story was not edited in chronological order, and her life after she came back to Korea is featured first.

After the close of the interview that seemed never to end, I made another visit to Kim *halmoni*'s house with a light heart. "You do not know how much you dragged out stories from me," she said. What I heard in this was that the interview had been very hard and burdensome for her and that she would never again do such lengthy interviews. Even for Kim *halmoni*, who was accustomed to doing a lot of interviews, to take out the memories that she had long hidden deep in her heart one by one was a painful process that left her sleepless at night. She does not want to repeat this pain again, so at a certain point, she adjusted her story accordingly.

However, Kim *halmoni* seems to be satisfied with the changes in her life. Because she thinks that it is since her registration as a *comfort girl-woman* that she has been able to live within the bounds of the interest and love of other people, she hangs that certification paper on the wall proudly. Even when the other *halmonis* in the neighborhood ask why she hangs such a certificate on the wall when it cannot be a source of pride, she does not seem to care. Although it has changed its position somewhat with the increase in the number of her household items, it still hangs on the wall, where it is noticeable.

“It Passed Along With the Blow of Wind and Waves of Water, Time Has”

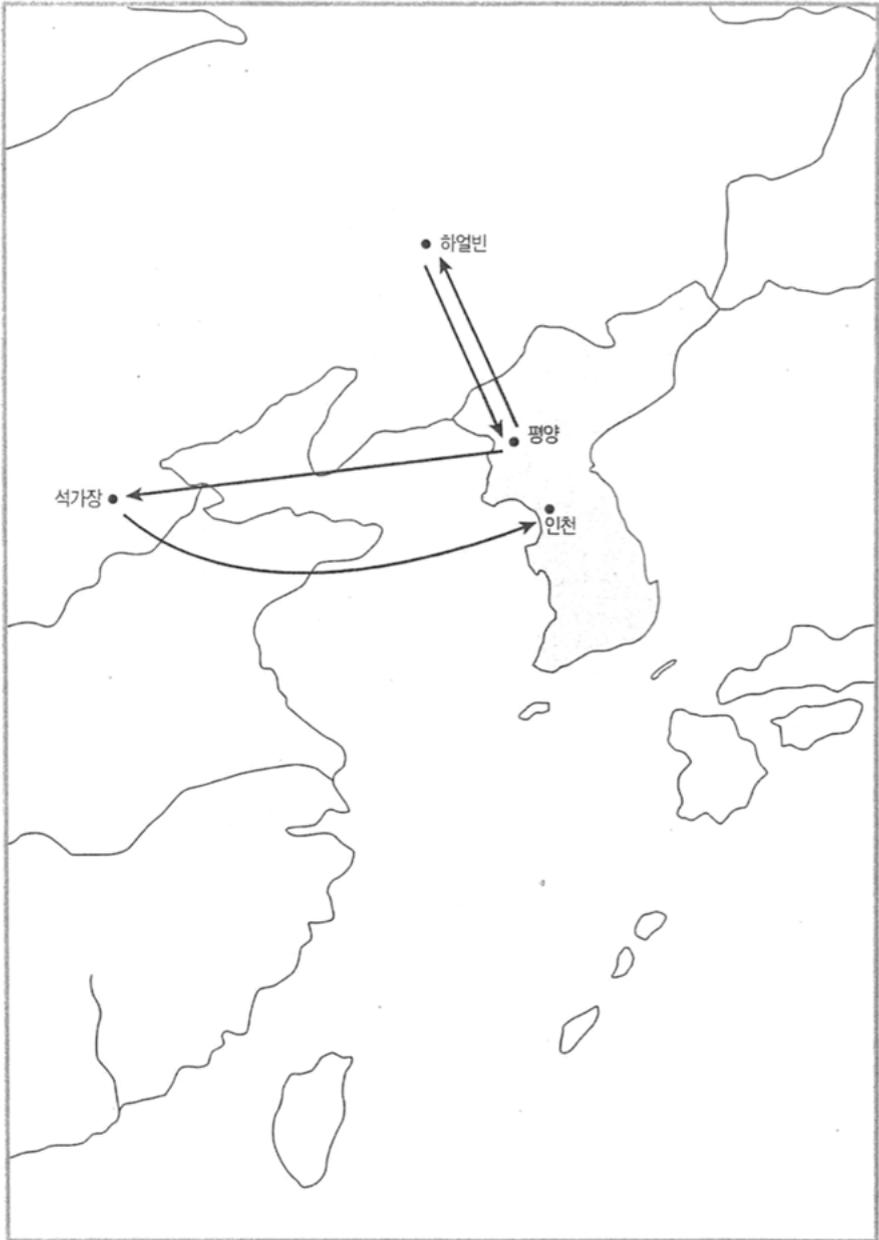
Gil Won-ok



Gil Won-ok.

- 1928 Born in Pyonganbuk-do Huichon (According to her Resident Registration, her official birth year is 1927)
- 1940 (Age 13) Lived as a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman*
- 1941 (Age 14) Returned to Korea having contracted a venereal disease
- 1942 (Age 15)* Lived as a *comfort girl-woman* again in Shijiazhuang, China
- 1945(Age 18) Returned to Incheon, Korea
- 1948 (Age 21)* Married a widower in Chungcheongbuk-do Onyang
Brewed bootleg liquor for living
- 1954 (Age 27) Lived together with Hwang, a married man
Set up a general store and wholesale store in Gyeonggi-do Bucheon
- 1958 (Age 31) Adopted a son
- 1976 (Age 49)* Fell into poverty because she guaranteed somebody's debt
- 1998 (Age 71) Registered as a *comfort girl-woman*
- 2004 (Age 77) Lived in a government-subsidized rental apartment
- 2019 (Age 92) Living at Our House of Peace, run by the Korean Council

*Approximately



Gil Won-ok's route: Pyongyang – Harbin – Pyongyang – Shijiazhuang – Incheon.

“If I remembered all of that, I probably would not have lived.”

“It could be because I am old, but sometimes I sleep all- day long: I eat breakfast, then go to sleep, I eat lunch, then go to sleep, and I eat dinner, then go to sleep. Then, maybe because I have slept all day, at night, I cannot fall asleep. When that happens, I try to revive my memories, but I cannot even imagine what it was like. Then, I say, ‘*Aheego*, thank you, God.’ If I could imagine all those scary stories, I would not have lived to this day. I tell myself that, and I console myself. That is how I live. Now.”

“Ignorance is bliss. Even if this did not happen to you yourself, even if you only witnessed it, it was enough to make you shudder.”

“I was not able to have children. Well, I have not done anything that most people do.”

“I have not lived a life that a human being should have lived but, as someone once said, it passed along with the blow of wind and waves of water, time has.”

A Penalty

I went, asking to be bought for twenty won¹ so that my father could be released from jail.

“I was born in Pyeonganbuk-do, Korea, but we came out to Pyeongyang when I was very little. I remember riding on top of my brother’s load of blankets while crossing a stream. Since that is the extent I can vaguely remember, I might have been about four or five, or maybe I was five or six years old.”

“There were five siblings altogether: there were two older brothers above me, as well as an older sister, then me, then my younger brother.”

“Should I say that our father overdid it with the drinking? Or, he just liked to sleep out a lot. . . . I say that because he wandered around quite a bit. . . . But then, after a while, my father came home, and during the time that he lived with us, he operated a junk (secondhand) shop. Before meeting my father, my mother ran a business selling fish, like selling on the street in a stall today.”

“In Pyeongyang-si Amdong, when my parents went to run the junk shop, they must have put me into school. But one day, when I came home from school, everyone was talking and everything was in chaos. They said that my father had gotten arrested. While running the junk shop. It is like that now too, right? If you buy stolen goods from thieves, the buyer also goes to jail. So, back then too, that is how my father went in.”

¹ Twenty one in 1940 is worth approximately \$121.00 today.

“With my home devastated like that, was I going to keep going to school?”

“Maybe for about two years? I think I went to school for more than a year. . . . That meant my older brothers did not go to school a lot either. My oldest brother too, after moving from Pyeonganbuk-do Huichon, things were hard, so he put all his efforts into helping and working with our mom. I did not see him study.”

“Since my father went to jail for running a junk shop, I could not go to school to study anymore. So . . . I must have been a mischievous child. They sent me to a *gwonbeon* to learn. They said there is a difference between a learned person and an unlearned person, so they put me in there. Someone did.”

“In the olden days, there was such a person as an educated *kisaeng*, as opposed to an uneducated *kisaeng*. They made the distinction between a person who went to a *gwonbeon* to learn and a person who did not. Someone who had graduated from a *gwonbeon* was called an educated *kisaeng*. This is where the music of the Pyeongyang *kisaeng* became known. At the *gwonbeon*, I learned *seodo*, folk songs sung in Hwanghae-do and Pyongan-do, Korea, even though I did not know the meaning of its lyrics. After several months of going there, I was caught by my older brother and was beaten pretty severely. In some ways, I was a little wild. What would a thirteen-year-old know about a *gwonbeon* to go there?”

“At the time, I must have been twelve? Or, the early part of thirteen? I must have been around that age. So, I was attending there for a while, but then I hurt my right thumb and could not play the *janggu* (a traditional Korean percussion instrument) anymore. So, a girl at the *gwonbeon* and I were saying, ‘Let’s go and earn some money’ and we left to go to Manchuria, I think.”

“I think there was talk that the fine to release my father out of jail was twenty won, at the money rate of that time. So, I was going to earn that money to pay the fine.”

“Along with my friend . . . I do not even know how I knew. That is, in my childish mind, I thought twenty won was going to free my father out of jail, so when the friend said that we should go and earn money, I just went along.”

“I do not know whether I was sold, or if I just went on my own accord, but what I am sure of was that I was thirteen years old. At thirteen, I went to Manchuria. By crossing the Tumen River.”

Yokone Surgery

So, before I became fifteen years old, it was all over. I had become maimed.

“When I went to Manchuria, China, I went with several other people, but I did not even know who they were.”

“I could not even see any Koreans there, and even the Japanese, they were not ordinary people, but soldiers. Only soldiers came and went. All I remember is that it was tremendously cold. That is all that comes to mind, the cold.”

“For a little child who knew nothing, this was ineffably hard. I do not need to tell you how hard things were when I first arrived there. Maybe that was the hardest thing of all that I have suffered. And the owner, the grandmother, was very scary. Whenever I saw her, I was more scared than when I was shaking in fear of the soldiers.”

“I do not know; maybe it was just too much for a little child.”

“Not long after I arrived there, I contracted a venereal disease. It was called *yokone*.”

“*Yokone* is bubonulus in Korean. It was like (indicating both sides) a swelling on both sides like that.”

“I had a high fever. And so, I could not receive customers anymore, so you can imagine how awful they treated me.”

“Now that I had contracted a disease, and they could not use me the way they wanted any more, they gave me surgery. But that surgery was done in such a cruel and atrocious fashion. Japanese people. They would never have done such a thing if it was one of them, their daughter, or their Japanese daughter. They performed the surgery on both sides, blocking my fallopian tubes. Eventually, when I became over twenty years old, lumps of ovaries the size of this (making fists) were found in both sides of my abdomen.”

“So, before I became fifteen years old, it was all over. I had become maimed.”

“Since I had gotten surgery on both my legs, I could not walk. ‘Bad energy’ entered inside of me, so would I get well? I did not get well. Since they could not use me anymore, they sent me back to Korea with a man, a Korean person.”

“I could not do the thing that they wanted, so they scolded me something awful. But the one who brought me said, ‘She did not bring this on but she got sick. Please take it easy on her.’ I thought he was helping me a great deal speaking on my behalf. So, when he said he would take me home, I followed him, without any fear.”

“I did not know whether [the man] was a soldier or not; I had never seen him before. But they just let me go with him. At that time, where I was was not a place where you could just come and go as you pleased without papers.”

“If it were today, you would need a travel certificate or a resident registration card. There must have been something to guarantee who the man was. Back then, of course. I do not think I could have just gone to China because I felt like it or to Manchuria because I felt like going there. I think that back then too, the woman, that is, the pimp, must have asked [someone] to prepare the papers. Or, she sent me after she had prepared them. Anyway, that is what I remember again.”

Going Back Home

I would go to the army unit so that I could make money there and not have to go back to one of those places anymore.

“I recall that my mother still sold fish even after I had come back from Manchuria. I think that it was not long after I had gotten sick in Manchuria and returned home that my sister got married.”

“Night and day, no matter what, we had cooked millet, not cooked white rice. Not even barley rice, just cooked millet. Since my older sister had gotten married and was not around, I would always climb up and sit next to the hearth to make cooked millet night and day, even when I was little. When there was no wood, I would go around looking for wood too.”

“Not far from our house, there was a Japanese military unit where they made guns. We were poor and financially hard.”

“I would go to the army unit so that I could make money there and not have to go back to one of ‘those’ places anymore.”

“In the morning, when I stood in line to work, there would be old people and children too. They would pick several people, just the number they needed for that day. So, when you went in, they would call your name and give you a belt. Without a belt, you could not go around in that place, since it was a place where you made and cleaned bullets.”

“I would also meet up with friends from the *gwonbeon*. They would know what time I would come out of the unit and wait for me in the streets. They would lend me their clothes, and we would go singing at various businesses. They were something else. They say that girls who went to a *gwonbeon* had a way about them that was different from the others, even just making an entrance, for example. We would meet and talk about this and that, and then someone said we should go to China. . . . If we went to China, we would be comfortable, and we would make a lot of money. So, I think, we headed toward there.”

“Although I swore that I would never go back to one of those places again, back to one of those places, I ended up going.”

Back to China

I would never have gone again if I knew. I went because I did not know.

“To go to the northern region of China, I crossed the Yalu River.”

“It seems I went with a friend. I heard when and at what time she was going to go, so I went to Pyeongyang station, and there were a lot of people who gathered there.”

“All of them were people like us.”

“We attended the *gwonbeon* and we thought we were going to work at a bar singing and selling liquor. We did not think that it was one of those places.”

“That is to say, I was being very thick, very thick.”

“Even we, who were the ones to go there, did not know until we arrived there, so how could my [family] know? No one thought it was going to be one of those places. Especially the second time we went, we were utterly ignorant. Since I had suffered so much the first time I went, I would never have gone again if I knew. I went because I did not know.”

“I went to Manchuria because I did not know. But when I came back, I tried everything not to go back, such as going to work and doing very hard labor at the military unit. So why would I go to China again?”

“But my mother, she knew I was going to China. That I know now. That is because the day that I left, my mom gave me a *jeogori*, a traditional Korean short jacket, in this color (indicating an orange cloth) and with this color on the bottom, a green skirt. Yes, she prepared for me a satin skirt. I cannot remember why my mom gave me the clothes. Well, maybe because I said I was going to go singing somewhere, so she thought she would give me a set of clothes, I guess.”

“At that time, we were not so comfortable that they could afford to buy me new clothes. My father was just out of jail. My sister was just married, so my mom would not have had anything with which to do this for me. I guess she got me the clothes because I told her I was going to go somewhere to sing, I do not know. So, when North Korea and South Korea unite, *ahhew-*, when we all meet again, I have to ask her things like that. But, since it has been over sixty years, my mom and father must have passed away by now. (Silent for a moment.)”

“I did not go there alone. Several? Many people went to Shijiazhuang² or another nearby town in China; I do not recall right now exactly what the name of the place was. We did not go straight to Tokiwa (Gil Won-ok’s comfort station) but stayed there for about a day. What I do remember is that the first meal that they gave us there consisted of cooked white rice and soybean paste soup with beef.”

“My word, they put spinach in the soybean paste soup, but instead of thin slices of beef, they put in thick slabs. They boiled that in the soup and gave it to us.”

² A location in the northern region of China. Many Japanese military units were situated close to there.

“It was soooo good! While eating it, tears just poured down my face, thinking of my mom and dad. *Aehew-*, here I am eating white rice and meat soup, but what are all my family members eating? They were probably eating cooked millet.”

“So, even though I must have been starving, I could not eat anymore, because I kept thinking about my family. [Because] I was like that, everybody in the room got teary eyed.”

“Only when I arrived there did I know that I had come to [one of those places again]. So, when I first arrived at the place where they cooked the spinach soup for us, I must have suspected and said that I did not want to go there. But when I said that I did not want to go to a place like that, there was a Korean man with us. I think [he] said if you did not want to go, you had to pay a lot of money, but how were you going to pay? I think that is what he said. I think that that is how he threatened me. So, I had no choice but to go there, and I kept asking, ‘Is that a singing place? Or a place where they sell liquor? What kind of a place is it?’ Then he scolded me, saying, ‘I told you that it was a bar! Why are you still talking!’”

Tokiwa

Even during the day, when the soldiers come, I had no choice.

“When I arrived there, I saw that they did not sell a drop of liquor. And there was no one around and the only people who came by were Japanese people.”

“The comfort station I was in was called Tokiwa.”

“When I refused to work, the owner said, ‘Who do you think you are? You think you have the right to refuse?’ She must have hated me.”

“There was no freedom. I could not go out at all. Even during the day, when the soldiers came, I had no choice, well, those people, I just.”

“Most of the [soldiers] came not in the morning but from the afternoon to the evening, I think. The reason why I think there were more of them from the afternoon to the evening is that we used to sleep in in the morning and wore less make-up. Then, the women who supervised us would chase us around and scold us, saying, ‘Do you know what time it is? Why aren’t you fully made-up? How are you going to receive customers with that face?’ That is how I remember that.”

“After they made us put on make-up, they sat us down, this way, in line.”

“It was like a hall today and I remember sitting in chairs which were set up around the edge of a large hall.”

“Then there was a woman whose job was to peer at you. When she came in, by the way that the people were acting, she knew whose turn it was. Then,

she would tell each person where to go. If she called your name, ‘so-and-so’, you would have to go to your room.”

“There were times I would find myself out sitting in the chair again, but those times were very rare. Sometimes, before I had even had a chance to wash myself, someone else would come in. That is the kind of hardship we suffered.”

“When the soldiers came in, they came in after having bought a ticket, maybe. In any case, if they showed that ticket, they were allowed in.”

“All they brought us was that ticket. I had to take it and hand it to the ticket office. I never once received any money.”

“As for receiving Japanese men, I was less scared of those who came in without having had any drinks; I do not know why, but I was scared to death of those who had drunk. . . . Just hearing the voice of someone who was drunk made me petrified. . . . *Ahhew*, I said to myself, what a relief it would be if he just did not take hold of me. . . . The same thing is true now. I am still afraid of drunken men.”

Violence

It is the same: the soldier who struck that sword down on me in one explosion of anger or the greedy one that did such things.

“The biggest curse was someone who did not finish quickly but gave me a hard time by taking long time. They did not care whether I was dead or alive, just long as their selfish desires were met and sapped my strength.”

“I do not even know how many were like that. If it had been just one or two, I would not have complained. Sometimes, really, I felt like going crazy. I was so busy that I hardly had any time even to clean myself down there. When I bled or when I just could not stand it anymore, I would refuse to do it because it was so hard, so hard. But then, they would beat me for refusing. I think that is how it was.”

“When I think about how I was mistreated by them, it was just terrible and very hard. I guess I was mutilated because I refused.”

“(Showing the scar on the crown of her head) This was from a Japanese sword that they struck down on me still sheathed; if they had hit me with it un-sheathed, I would have been dead for sure. Even now, the scar is this big. I tell you that my clothes were soaked in blood, and I could not take them off, so I had to rip them off. Just imagine that. (Getting teary eyed) I was beaten so very badly and I sustained a wound to that extent. It is only because I am talking about it in passing that it seems okay, but if I actually imagine what it was like . . . I am only human, too, and why would I not bear *han* against those

people? I really do not want to imagine those people at all. I, hew-, I am trying to forget.”

“Ahheegoo, there were times when I rather have died than be treated like that. There were several times. Well, it is the same: the soldier who struck that sword down on me in one explosion of anger or the greedy one that gave me a hard time by prolonging his time with me. Anyway.”

“I think I was very foolish. There were people who attempted to run away because what remains in my memory is some of them being caught and being severely beaten. But I have no recollection of ever even having a thought about running away. All I thought was, ‘How can I go back home? What can I do to gain the favor of the owner so that she would send me home?’ I was thinking only in this way, and about how foolish I was.”

“If there were thirty people, and one person ran away, then the twenty-nine left behind were all but dead. If one ran away, it was just that the rest would suffer more than the one that ran away. There would be less freedom, and we would not be able to say a word. If they said, ‘Get up,’ then you would have to get up. We could not do anything else under any circumstances. And there was always someone running away. *Aehew*, I am only talking about it calmly now because we are sitting here like this. *Ahhew*, it was horrific.”

“Even among the Japanese, there was a very kind man. He would come in after having paid, but if I showed any signs of exacerbation, he would leave me alone. *Tsukemono* (Japanese side dish), *kimchi* (Korean side dish). ‘Do you have *kimchi*?’ he would say. Then, ‘Could you make some?’ Then, he would bring me some Korean cabbage. But, did we have any seasoning? We would have Korean cabbage and salt but not fish sauce or anything like that. So, I would tell him to bring me some garlic, ginger or scallions, and [he] would bring some. Then, even at my young age, I would make him some *kimchi*, for which I would be scolded from the owner for making up work. But I still made it for him in secret. Then, in return, he would give me things like army blankets, toothpaste, and toothbrushes. Things that were handed out to him he would bring to me. So, I do not think there should be any discrimination between people in the world: Korean people, Japanese people, Chosun people, or American people. Among any people, there are those who are kind and there are those who are evil.”

“I am trying to remember what his last name was, but I cannot seem to remember. But I have not forgotten my name. How can I forget my name? My name. My name was Yoshimoto Hanako. I remember my name and Tokiwa. Aside from that, I do not know anything.”

Contest

People nominated me, and I was a contestant in a contest.

“At that time, I had an excellent voice. When I sat down and sang songs, people always gathered. That is how good my voice was.”

“People nominated me, and I went out for a contest, a singing contest. If many people did not nominate you, you could not enter, in my memory.”

“That contest was a kind of singing competition, in today’s terms. Only the good singers were gathered together, a lot of them, from houses with a sign (comfort facilities). I was from Tokiwa, so I represented Tokiwa. And there were other names too.”

“I know because the participants came out to the contest and announced what house they were from, what other house they were from. Before then, we had no idea what house was in what neighborhood. Most of the facilities, at least the ones that were well-known, participated in the contest.”

“I think I was the only participant from Tokiwa. Even though the facility where I was was a big one, I think I was the only one to go out to the contest. The singing contestants numbered maybe thirty to forty? Or was it forty to fifty?”

“I sang a Japanese song, but now I can only remember a little bit of the first part. *‘Haruyo otomeyo otomeyo da’* (‘Oh spring, oh young lady’).”

“The audience was composed only of soldiers. I do not know whether they worked within the unit or outside of it, but I at least know that they were not civilians. They were all wearing uniforms.”

“Since it was girls who came out to sing, I found out that there were a lot of girls there. They said one or two were picked from several tens of girls, so I knew that there were a lot of Chosun girls like me in this area. I would not have known that if I had not gone out to such a contest.”

An Official Gazette

Who would not want to go back home when she heard that her parent had passed away?

“When I was in China, I must have sent a letter to my home. That is how I received the return letter from home that my father had passed away.”

“Was it 1944? I received a letter saying that my father was in a critical condition. Then, the official gazette came announcing his death.”

“To my way of thinking, if something like that happened, if I talked to them about it, they would send me home. That is what I thought. But the [owner] became wide-eyed and said, ‘What are you talking about? What nonsense! When would you ever come back once you leave?’”

“Without having been able to say a word, I just cried like an idiot. Crying is all I had as a weapon. Who would not want to go back home when she heard that her parent had passed away?”

“No matter what you have done, if only you had the fare, you would want to go home. I could not go (her face crestfallen). I did not have money either. When they did not give me money or send me home, I really-, really- hated them. So, after having heard the news, I have not been able to write another letter home.”

“Then, somehow, on August 15, 1945, Korea was liberated. But even if we were liberated, I did not feel a thing: I did not feel elated or think, now I am saved. It just all felt pointless, empty, and next to impossible to me.”

Liberation

I said I would go back home after earning some money, but again, huh, the way was simply closed off, both coming and going.

“When everything was over, there was a lot of talk. Just because we were liberated on August 15, it did not mean we left right away. We still could not even set foot outside. Somehow when I listened to people talk, I heard, ‘There is a ship at a such-and-such a time.’ So, I tried with all my might to get on that ship. Even when we arrived in Incheon, we could not come ashore because there was an epidemic, like cholera or typhoid or something. So, we waited for two weeks on the ocean.”

“After having been stuck on the [ship] for two weeks, we came out, and they gave us rice balls, I think, to eat. They also gave us money: thirty won,³ three thousand won,⁴ or three hundred won,⁵ I am not sure. In Korea. Then, they gathered us all in Jangchungdan or Jangchundan Park. At that time, you could go to North Korea, if you wanted, and you could go to South Korea too.”

³ Thirty won in 1945 is worth approximately \$182.00 today.

⁴ Three thousand won in 1945 is worth approximately \$18,161.00 today.

⁵ Three hundred won in 1945 is worth approximately \$1,816.00 today.

“I talked to three of the girls who came out with me, and we said, ‘Will we be loved if we go home empty-handed? So, let’s earn some money for a few months, and then go home.’ And the place that we ended up was Cheonan, South Korea.”

“We decided to earn money for about three months. I think I had three friends with me, but not even a few months had passed before it closed off like this. . . . Again, huh, the way was simply closed off, both coming and going between North and South Korea.”

“In Cheonan, I worked at a bar as something like a hostess today: I sang and poured drinks, and when the customers came, we took turns singing. I went there to earn money, but back then, I carried a lot of pain. So, when I went to watch a movie with my friends, if there was anything at all that was sad, I would cry and cry. Then, we would go into any bar; if it was a Chinese place, I would ask for kaoliang liquor and get so drunk that I could not think straight and sometimes I would fall into a sinkhole. Then, my friends would take me home, clean me all-up, and change my clothes.”

Housekeeping

I thought that if I could only quit the bar, that would be the best thing. But when I left, I found that it was not.

“Then, I continued to work where young women sold liquor, taking home a monthly salary. The salary was not small. But I did not think about needing a lot of clothes and make-up if you wanted to sing. So, even if you received a monthly salary, after buying a little here and there, you soon realized the money you had was not enough.”

“I went around only those places. I went to Onyang Sinchang-ri,⁶ and I met a man, a gang member, whose wife had died, but who had one son and a mother who had been a paralytic for seven years. I went into that family to stop living the type of life I had been living.”

“At first, I thought that at least if I lived with that man, since he can use his fists, I would not starve. Working at a pub, even if it is just to pour drinks, is hard work. So, to turn away from that life, I lived with that man who can use his fists so that at least no one could come after me.”

“That time was before the 6·25 War (Korean War), so I was maybe twenty-one or twenty-two years old since the war broke out when I was twenty-three.”

⁶ Chungcheongnam-do Asan-si Onyang (Onyang, Asan City, South Chungcheong Province).

“My [husband], when he went out, did not come back for ten days or even a month. And when he did come home, he did not come home alone. He brought women home, he brought debt home, he did everything under the sun.”

“During all this time, because there was no way to survive, I would gather wood and discarded papers and things from the garbage at a mill to burn. But eventually, it was the fourth day since I did not have anything to eat.”

“So, when I had gotten my hands on a bag of rice somehow, I brewed rice wine. My paralyzed mother-in-law would tell me from inside her room how to use the yeast and how to boil the rice. Then, I would try whatever she told me. I made alcohol and sold it. Even if I had to boil mung bean sprouts without seasoning, people liked it and drank alcohol. And I earned a lot of money too.”

“I might have lived for about five or six years like that. Even though I was suffering so much to survive, things were not working, so I had no choice but to run away. Again, I had no place to go but to a [bar]. When I left, the man looked all over for me. He went all the way to Bucheon to look for me.”

Uterine Surgery

In any case, it is too cruel how tenacious it is, my life, that is.

“Now, my belly continued to swell, and a vaginal discharge burst forth. So, I went to the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department several times and went through an exam, and they said that I might have lumps, but nothing was done then. It was only when I went to the Christian hospital that they said I could not wait any longer and that I needed to get surgery right away. So, I had the operation probably because of their urgent impulse.”

“The lumps were on both sides. When I had the *yokone* surgery on the lymphatic glands in the groin, the doctor had blocked my fallopian tubes, and it made lumps in my abdomen. So, (putting her fists on both sides of her lower abdomen) like this, this big, since there were these lumps on both sides at the end of the fallopian tubes, they needed to take those out. If they did not, I would have been in trouble. I think that is what I got done at the Incheon Christian Hospital. That is when I was twenty-eight years old or so. I had both of them taken out.”

“How cold- it was when I got my surgery. In any case, it is too cruel how tenacious it is, my life, that is. At that time too, after the surgery, they gave me a drip, but it was frozen when they attached it to me. Not even a thousand or a hundred grams went in before my whole body turned black, and I started shaking like a leaf. Then, the doctor in charge came in and just yelled at the staff, ‘I

did the surgery flawlessly, so you take responsibility for this!’ and walked out. What good does yelling and leaving do? One hundred grams went in, and even though they stopped it, I was still shaking like a leaf. But I did not die. Ha, ha, ha, ha. So, I was not even injected with a shot before they discharged me in about a week. Or was it nine days? Anyway.”

“Several days later, I was discharged and left the hospital. But at about four or around this time in the morning, I was so hungry I could not stand it, even though I tried to, and tears just came streaming down. I tried to hold back the tears or, at least, to be quiet so that other people could not hear me from the outside, especially my landlord. I lived in rented rooms in a house owned by someone else, and the owner nursed me devotedly, but imagine if a woman cried in the wee hours of the morning all the time, how troublesome would that be? So, I tried not to cry, but still I was so hungry that I could not stop myself, and the tears would just continuously pour down. So, I would pull the blanket over myself, but even if I did that, I could not stop crying and being sorry for myself. I would stay like that for a while, and the hunger would go away. I do not know how I lived.”

Living Together

And with the money he got from me, he would run after other women.

“Then, next, I was working at bars in Seoul Guro-gu Oryu-dong and Gyeonggi-do Pocheon, selling my voice for a living. At that time, I was not selling my body, I was selling my voice, I tell you. I lived like that for a while, and then in Pocheon, thinking, ‘It is not a sin living with a married man since I am supporting myself.’ I started living with a man with three sons and a daughter. But I was not born lucky because the man was not satisfied just taking money from his wife but from me as well. And with the money he got from me, he would run after other women.”

“The man worked for an electric company, and his salary from the electric company was not much. But he had to put four kids through school and feed six household members. So, he had nothing left to give. But he could not compete with me in his desire for living. My desire for living is very strong.”

“If I did not give him money when he asked for it, he would go to the room across from me and turn on the gas to kill himself. And he would say if I die, I won’t die alone. You think that my children would let you be? That is how he would threaten me. *Ahhew*, I cannot even speak. Just the suffering I experienced there. *Ahhew*, it was ridiculous. But the cause of it all was because I had

no children of my own. So now, when people say they do not want children, I find them pathetic. In my mind, the reason why children are necessary, why siblings are necessary, and why parents are necessary is that if you do not have your family and relatives, no matter how much you try to be strong, you have no power without their protection. People say that friends are great. But friends are friends; they are not your family.”

“So, I lived like that for a while. I thought to myself, if I had a child to raise, that man would not dare come around anymore. Thinking this, I found a child to raise.”

Meeting My Son

Father God, thank you. You gave an ignoramus like me a son.

“I must have been about thirty then.”

“If some misfortune were to happen to someone in the neighborhood, my hand would always go out to that person. I had no qualms about helping. [One day, a friend] said, ‘Right now, at Samcheong Hospital, a woman with no place to go gave birth to a baby, but the doctor won’t cut the umbilical cord. Someone has to go as a sponsor so that it can be cut. Shouldn’t we help?’ So, we went to cut the umbilical cord, taking a blanket with us. The mother was lying down, just staring at the wall. When we told her to eat, she ate none of the seaweed soup, but she ate a whole bowl of rice with soy sauce. So, we all knew, the people did, that she was going to give up her child. She was going to abandon him.”

“[My friends] came to me and said, ‘If you do not take that baby and raise him, then you will become this house’s ghost forever. Just take that baby and raise him, then the man you were [living with] won’t ever bother you again.’ They said if I took the baby and raised him, the man wouldn’t come around. That too was tempting. So, I took the baby.”

“But even though the man never bought [me] a pair of socks, he bought the child toy guns and a stroller too. He did this and that for the baby. So, when I had to register the baby’s name on a family register, I thought I would ask the man to put this son on his family register. So, the man did it. Under his family name. So-and-so Hwang. Since his last name was Hwang.”

“I wanted to sell my house and leave Bucheon. Just take the child I was raising and go. But since I desired to have financial security, I tried my hand at the moneylending business. I did moneylending and dollar trading. Whenever I was ready to leave, the money I invested here was due to come in soon or the

money I invested there was ready to be collected. After doing this and that, time just passed, and I was still in Bucheon. So, I ended up not even running away. I lived like this or that all the time, until I guaranteed the [wrong] debt. It made me lose my whole fortune, and I fell into debt. So now [Hwang], thinking that there was nothing to pick off me anymore, he tried to take all of what was left and sold the house we had been living in. But he could not really sell the house. I would not just give him the deed to the house. So, he could not get the whole payment. He could only get the down payment.”

“My friends advised me, ‘Hey, just give Hwang a little money and resolve your relationship cleanly. Even in the beginning, when you did not have money, he came around looking for you, so do you think that he will leave you alone now? If he hears that you have sold the house, he will not just leave you alone. Give [Hwang] a little [money] and stay here. Even if you get screwed over, it is better to get screwed over by someone you know.’ So, I sold the house. I bet I am the only woman in Korea to have lived as a mistress then had to give the man alimony to end the relationship.”

“After paying back all the debts I owed, my hands were empty. From then on, I sat in a stall on the street; since I did not even have a store, I sat in a street stall and sold even cooked silkworm pupae. I boiled and sold ears of corn. I boiled and sold eggs. (Getting teary eyed) As I said, I even sold fried pupae. There was not a thing I did not try just to send that child to school. I myself was not educated, but I could not let someone else’s child that I took go uneducated. To get him an education, I could not spend [money] on clothes for me, even if it was as cheap as ten thousand won.⁷ I took hand-me-downs from friends. I took and wore the clothes that my friends gave me that they used to wear. But the fact that I have been able to survive so far is because God, our God who loves us, has blessed me.”

“Not only did I send [my son] to seminary, but I also sent him to graduate school. So, now he goes around being a pastor. Whenever I paid for his tuition, I was so delighted. I was so happy.”

“When I was alone in my room with no one around, I prayed, ‘Father God, thank you. You gave an ignoramus like me a son. And what blessing is this that I was able to send him to graduate school?’ I just thanked Him. Alone in my room. That seems like just the day before yesterday.”

⁷ Ten thousand won in 2004 is worth approximately \$10.00 today.

Secret Revealed

Then, my daughter-in-law caught my words and said, ‘Mother, what is it that you are saying?’

“I was watching TV when they had a program on talking about, you know, the [compensation for the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*] and whether it was too small or not. I think it was around the time when this was a big issue. When such an uncomfortable topic came on, I said, ‘While the real people who should receive that money are staying silent, feeling ashamed and unable to lift up their heads, people who do not know what they are talking about are going on like that.’ Then, my daughter-in-law caught my words and said, ‘Mother, what is it that you are saying?’”

“I cried a lot. [My son] said, (voice cracking) ‘The fact that you have lived to this day, even after all that you had suffered, is a miracle.’ While saying this, he cried a lot with me. Before, no matter that I had had a hard life while raising him, he had not really tried to be good to me. But after he found out about this, he tried to be good. My son, the pastor, came into my room to clean it. And after we ate, my son, the pastor, did the dishes.”

“The welfare center said that they would send a volunteer to assist me. But while I still have some power to move, I do not think it is good to bother others. So, I do not take them up on their offer and just do things on my own.”

Wish

My one wish is to hear an apology, a sincere and true apology, even if it is just one word.

“Now, I would be okay, but then suddenly I would be surprised by pain as though a bee had just stung me. And I would be throbbing.”

“It is like that in my legs, my arms, and here too. Sometimes, I get dizzy in the head, and my head starts to ache and throb. I cannot even begin to tell you. It hurts so much. But nobody sees me as a patient. Only the doctor sees me as a patient, and he says to be careful.”

“Now, I have everything that the doctors say is bad. I have high cholesterol. My sugar level is nearly three hundred. I think it is around two hundred and seventy-nine. And I have osteoporosis. It is no wonder I have osteoporosis since, when I was young, they took out my whole [womb].”

“So, the entire uterus that a woman should have had already been taken out of me before I turned thirty. (Indicating her stomach) As far as major surgeries go, I have had three.”⁸

“(Pointing to surgical scars, one by one) This is a scar from a gallstone operation, and this other one is a scar from an abdominal adhesion. This scar is from cholestasis. They had to take the gallbladder out completely. I think this was done when I was in my mid-forties.”

“Even though there is not any part of me that is healthy, (smiling) it is God’s grace. To others, I do not look like a patient.”

“At that time, I was not mature enough, so I thought, ‘My family was too poor. It is not that something was wrong with my country or with anything else. I suffered because we do not have anything.’ But in reality, this was not true. Imagine that you have nothing. What parent was going to sell their daughter to a place like that?”

“At the time, I was so immature and did not know anything, so I even thought, ‘If only I had been born into a rich family, this would not have happened to me.’ But now that I am older, I think that there are people among us Koreans who would abuse their families and do immoral things just for some money. That is why there are people who collaborated with the Japanese government to drag young girls to that God-forsaken place and cause us so much suffering. That is what I think. (Sighs.)”

“It is true. The homeland must exist. People without a nation are not alive. They are dead.”

“Now there is not much life left in me, so now, if only I could be released of my *han* (deep resentment) before I die. My one wish is to hear an apology, a sincere and true apology, even if it is just one word.”

“*Aheego*, really. Most have already gone this way or that. And those who are left are those that do not have much time left. Even if it is only one ten thousandth, or one thousandth of it. They say that one word of an apology pays a thousand *nyang* (a unit of old Korean coinage). They should apologize. Wouldn’t it be so great if they could say, ‘You have become like this because of us, but please be comforted in your hearts, even if it is just a little.’”

“[My other wish] is that the memorial hall will be built quickly as a result of us Koreans using our strength, really, and as the end result of all the efforts that the Korean Council has made. That would be good. This is because people who have children can have their names live on through their children when

⁸ Gil Won-ok showed surgery scars from her ovary cyst, abdominal adhesion, and cholestasis surgeries.

they die. But people like me come into this world, and all we do is suffer, and then just disappear. We have no given or family names that will live on. But since the memorial hall will be erected, our names will remain, even if they are names of shame. *Ahhew*, I wish that our great God will move the hearts of many people so that the memorial hall can be built quickly so that our names can be left behind. I have this thought.”

“There is no way that our names will live on. Do we have a family? Do we have children?”

“There is only me in this world. So, that is why it would be good if the memorial hall is built soon. Because there is only me. Since there is only me, when I die, there will be nothing left.”

“It is too, too sad for me to just take my last name with me when I go. So, just let the memorial hall be built so that I can leave my name behind.”

Interviewer’s Commentary: The Story of Gil Won-ok at the End of Many Twists and Turns

Choi Kija

At the end of many twists and turns, the story of Gil Won-ok has been added to this book. In May 2002, when the research team was first put together, the taking of the oral statement from Gil Won-ok also started at the same time. We first set up the team, and then we studied issues pertaining to the problems of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* and discussed interview tips and the principles of the transcription of interview recordings. After this, we scattered all over the country to listen to the stories of the *comfort girls-women*, and then we gathered together again back in Seoul to discuss the progress of the oral work of which each of us had taken charge. That is how the team operated. During the earliest stage of the oral work, the team member who interviewed Gil Won-ok told us that she had twice been to and had twice come back from comfort facilities. We were greatly shocked at this and became extremely curious as to her past life. However, in the process of reading and discussing her transcribed interviews together, we judged that the memories of Gil Won-ok were so poor as to mute our shock that she had gone to and come back from comfort facilities twice.

We asked the team member who had interviewed Gil Won-ok to interview her more actively so that she could better recall her memories of sixty years ago. And for the third interview, I even accompanied the interviewer to support her. But, as before, Gil Won-ok could not easily pull her past memories from her mind. She just repeated these words: “If I remembered all of that, I probably

would not have lived.” To tell the story of Gil Won-ok to our readers, or to find the evidence of what was apparent but went unrecorded sixty years ago about the problems of the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, we thought that we needed a lot more information. So, we asked the team member who had interviewed Gil Won-ok to continue additional interviews and to be more careful with the recording work. However, Gil Won-ok’s memories were still too weak, and, in between the silent oral speaker and the demands of the other research members to keep drawing out the speaker’s memories, the team member who was interviewing Gil Won-ok slowly became worn out. Eventually, within about a year and a half after starting this project, the team member who interviewed Gil Won-ok gave up on putting her story in the book.

Five months after that, in late February 2004, I started to interview Gil Won-ok once again to supplement her oral statement. By February 2004, all the interview works, of course, and the editing of the versions of the stories that were to go in the book had been completed, and in the end, even the commentaries from the research teams and the summary of the arguments had been finished. The reason for our decision to supplement her interview and put her story in the book, even at this late stage, was because of the moral responsibility that all the research team members felt toward Gil Won-ok.



Gil Won-ok.

Even in June 2002, when she first started her interviews, Gil Won-ok had great anxiety because she was afraid that her secret of having been a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman* would be revealed to those around her. During the interview, she would stop talking whenever there was a sound from outside, and all her attention would be focused there. But she began to change little by little as she was in contact with the Korean Council and participated in events that the Korean Council sponsored. At first, through social gatherings like the Human Rights Workshop held on Jeju Island, she met with other Japanese military *comfort girls-women* survivors and started to open her heart. Then, gradually, she showed a more active attitude by getting up very early in the morning every week to come to Seoul from Incheon to attend the Wednesday rallies. And in August 2003, she even appeared on the Korean TV program ‘This Is Life’ on KBS. She says, “There is no happier time than when the Korean Council asks me to go somewhere.” And she no longer hesitates to reveal that she was a Japanese military *comfort girl-woman* and to meet with other *comfort girls-women* survivors. She has now become an activist who is actively fighting to resolve the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* problem.

The Japanese military *comfort girls-women* can be estimated to have numbered between eighty thousand and two hundred thousand. But only two hundred and twelve women have officially registered with the South Korean government as of April 2004. And only sixty-six women among them have testified through the five published volumes of testimony. We think that the story of a *comfort girl-woman* survivor does not just stop with acknowledging the personal experience of one woman but that it represents the voices of hundreds of thousands of *comfort girls-women* who died unnamed in other countries. Therefore, we are trying to record and historicize the stories of all *comfort girls-women* who are living, as long as they do not refuse us doing so. Gil Won-ok has a thorough understanding of the significant purpose of our project. She did not refuse to give her testimony; rather, she is waiting for this book to be published. If Gil Won-ok’s story is not published in this book, which is classified as the ‘Book of Testimonies, Vol. 6,’ someone will be offering the mike and camera again to record her story when we work on the next book, which will be the ‘Book of Testimonies, Vol. 7,’ and Gil Won-ok will again have to go through the pain of recalling the horrific memories about which she said, “If I remembered all of that, I probably would not have lived.”

We do not think that the recording of her story was entirely the responsibility of the team member who interviewed her first. Instead, all the research team members were jointly responsible for reviving the collective life stories of all the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* whose life stories are shared in the

book. All of us research team members have proceeded together in dozens of official meetings to select the person to interview, discuss her story after having met her, read transcripts, make edits, prepare interview comments, etc. By correcting each other's scripts, we have jointly completed the stories. Therefore, even if the team member who interviewed Gil Won-ok gave up on putting her story in the book, it was not right that the rest of us should also have given up on Gil Won-ok. This is because this can bury the courage of a *comfort girl-woman* survivor who has broken out of her silence with great difficulty.

Therefore, in late February 2004, after having had discussions with the other research team members, I conducted additional interviews with Gil Won-ok rather late in the game. When Gil Won-ok, who lives in Incheon, came to Seoul to participate in the Wednesday rallies, I conducted the additional interviews at the Korean Council's shelter after the rally was over. The interviews focused mainly on how she went to Manchuria, China, and what happened once she was there. Maybe it was because Gil Won-ok went to the comfort facility at the tender age of thirteen that she said, "And the owner, the grandmother, was very scary. Whenever I saw her, I was more scared than when I was shaking in fear of the soldiers." It seems she remembered her suffering with the perspective of a child as the fact that there were no adults or parents to give her guidance and control her was in itself a horror to her. Gil Won-ok's memories were so severely damaged that she was still not able to provide as much information as that with which we would have been satisfied. However, in my opinion, her information has, more or less, reached the standard that we established for publishing the book. A completed script was based on the basic framework created by the team member who initially interviewed her. Insufficient parts were filled in with additional information, and it was in this manner that the script was re-edited. Now I do not doubt but believe that her story will be recorded as a scene in history.

However, the twists and turns began again when discussing the re-edited script of Gil Won-ok with my team members.⁹ When she went to a comfort facility for the second time, at the least, she went there thinking that it was a place where you sold liquor and sang songs. This is contrary to our (current) knowledge of the claim that the mobilization of *comfort girls-women* for the Japanese military was a forced mobilization of labor or sham employment. My team once again ran into the problem of just how far the category of the Japanese *comfort girls-women* would extend, a topic that was put on the cutting board at every meeting over the previous two years. We could not ignore the occasional attacks of the Japanese

⁹ The interviews with Gil Won-ok and its transcripts were the product of a collaboration with Na Juhyeon in the Master's program in History at Sungkyunkwan University and Oh Yeonju.

rightist forces that still exist, and so we were skeptical that we could put Gil Won-ok's story in the book because it could be used as ammunition for those attacks. We were in a state of confusion with a question, “Could her stories also be included in the Japanese *comfort girls-women* category?”

In fact, the confusion over the category of Japanese military *comfort girls-women* was a key issue throughout the span of our work. From where to where do the boundaries of *comfort girls-women* extend? Who made these boundaries? In our current situation where the Japanese government does not acknowledge its crimes against *comfort girls-women*, we could say that the boundaries of *comfort girls-women* were drawn by historians based on survivors' testimonies and colonial period data. The survivors who made their testimonies at the beginning and current survivors must not be different types of *comfort girls-women*. Therefore, why is it so difficult for current survivors to be included within the established *comfort girls-women* boundaries? While asking these questions and looking for their answers, we found that we had missed one thing, that is, the voices of the oral speakers. At the beginning of this work, we did not decide upon a category or frame for *comfort girls-women* and asked the oral speakers to be ‘witnesses’ who could testify to it. Our task was to give a voice to the oral speakers and make sure that their voices are heard. Gil Won-ok said, “Now that I have heard the words, I know, but back then, I did not know what *comfort girls-women* were or what *chongsindae* was. I had never heard them before. I did not know what they meant; all I know is that I was treated worse than an animal.” But when the *comfort girls-women* compensation issue was reported on TV, and the argument of whether it was too small or not was causing trouble, she said, “While the real people who should receive that money are staying silent, feeling ashamed and unable to lift up their heads, people who do not know what they are talking about are going on like that.” And she placed her own experience on the same line as the *comfort girls-women* experience that was being reported.

Gil Won-ok did not know the fact that Korean society only gives the name *comfort girl-woman* to women who were victims of the forced mobilization of labor or sham employment. Aside from describing her experience as being treated “worse than an animal,” she had no other words. Although she was ashamed of the *comfort girl-woman* experience in the face of Korean society, regardless of whether she was forced to mobilize or not, she stipulates that her “worse than an animal” experience was clearly a *comfort girl-woman* experience. She showed us that when we look at the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* issue, we should not focus on how pure a *cheonyeo* one was before becoming a ‘*comfort girl-woman*’ or how coercive the process was. What we should focus on is the problem of how much information the girls of that time

had about the nature of the comfort facility, i.e. that the comfort facility was a place where the girls and young women were thoroughly disconnected from the world and controlled, and the nature of their ‘job,’ i.e. every day they would be continuously raped by a countless number of men. Even though Gil Won-ok knew the place that she went to was a place where she would sell alcohol and sing songs, I bet no one told her that her experience would be ‘worse than that of an animal.’ In a situation where information was so completely blocked, what meaning is there in the fact that she thought the place would be somewhere she would sell alcohol and sing songs? If we do not dismantle the official discourse of ‘forced Japanese military *comfort girls-women*,’ her voice would not be heard.

We believe that her voice, her life story, has the power to break down the ‘formal discourse’ that has been formed differently from the experience of the oral speaker. Now our work has extended beyond letting the voices of *comfort girls-women* be heard to the dimension of supporting the voices of the women involved. Gil Won-ok’s voice tells us that we need to dismantle the narrow boundaries of ‘Chosun girls drafted by force for military sexual slavery’ and establish new boundaries that should include all the girls and women who had to endure the horrific experiences of being treated worse than an animal, such as constant confinement, assault, rape, etc. when all prior information of what they could expect to experience was blocked. In other words, the difference between the concepts of ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ has no meaning to the *comfort girls-women*, who had no information at the time. We thus support the voice of Gil Won-ok and have put her story in this book.

The Story of Failed Interviews: The Silence of Cho Yi Seon, the Secret of Kim Dduk Bbal

Jungae Park

When I began the work of oral stories this time, I firmly made up my mind to succeed. You see, what I experienced while participating in the fourth book of testimonies three years ago has remained with me like a burden in my heart. One of the *comfort girls-women* whom I met at that time had too many words to say, whereas the other had too few. I was caught between two attitudes: one of inflating to the maximum the already known facts about the Japanese military *comfort girls-women*, and the other of dismissing it and staying close-mouthed. Ultimately, both their testimonies had to be excluded from the book. I thought that I must have just met the wrong people. And for a while, I felt discouraged by my bad luck. Then I discovered that my other friends who were successful in their interviews had met with their *comfort girls-women halmonis* more often than I had with mine, were more thoughtful about the silences and gestures of their *halmonis*, and listened to the voices of their *halmonis* more sincerely. I realized that it was not my luck that was bad, but my attitude. Because of my attitude, we were unable to put the memories that the *halmonis* fought so hard to reclaim into written stories.

I came to this work with the diligence, sincerity, and thoughtfulness that are worthy of the *comfort girls-women*. This time, I felt that I could pay back what I owed to the *halmonis* whom I had previously interviewed. I voluntarily chaired the Chungcheong team and entered the first strategic meeting. We decided that three members of the team would take one person each to proceed with the interview, and we each took another person as an assistant interviewer. I decided to meet the *comfort girl-woman* assigned to me at least three times in two months and decided to lend an ear to all her memories, gestures, and silences. ‘Listening rather than questioning’ was our motto, and we were so confident that we worried about what would happen if the interview ended too soon.

Cho Yi Seon *halmoni* (an assumed name) was living alone despite the fact that her lower body was paralyzed, and her mobility was limited. I was worried whether a sick person could respond in an interview, but the staff of the Korean Council allayed my fears by saying that she was sound of mind and spoke distinctly and well. The process of meeting her was arduous. First of all, she did not answer the phone however many times I called. Even worse, the phone of the Cheongju City government official who took care of the case of Cho Yi Seon *halmoni* was always busy, and the staff member of the Korean Council who had

recently seen her was on vacation. I was gradually being worn down by worry and anxiety. One anxiety-filled day passed into another until finally, on a day when a torrential downpour of rain was forecast, we¹ put ourselves on the express bus with nothing but a piece of paper with an address on in our hands.

The sun shone brightly. And just like that, we were able to find Cho *halmoni*'s house quite easily, erasing our previous, debilitating anxiety. She lived at the exact location that the address said, and as soon as she saw us, she welcomed us with a bright smile. She told us that, as a matter of fact, she had been worrying about contacting us because her number had been changed and asked us to give her number to the 'Seoul office.' She seemed to think of the 'Seoul office,' the Korean Council, as a key place that she needed to be in contact with, and we thought that this would have a good effect on the interview, so we were in good spirits.

As I had been informed, she was suffering from severe arthritis and was unable to use both legs and one arm. There was a thick blanket laid out on the middle of the floor, and around it were a TV, simple cooking utensils, and medicine packets – all the items used in her daily routine. As I was thinking that it was a relief to see that her facial color was still good and that she was able to move about as much as she needed, while she was talking about her recent situation, she suddenly burst into tears. She said that it was too painful to drag herself around on her hips and that the bones of her hips ached. Also, her limbs that did not fully extend, she said, made her life seem pathetic. There were a lot of people around to help, but she shared that she was very sorry and found it very difficult always asking for help.

I sighed because I did not know how else to console Cho *halmoni* other than grasping her hand and patting it. My heart was breaking for her, but as she complained that she needed a wheelchair to go to the hospital but that she could not buy it because she did not have the \$50 that it cost, all I could think was that there was nothing I could do about it. \$50 was too much money for me just to take out and give to her on the spot. So, all I could do was relay my concern for her by offering her a few fruits and diligently giving her a massage.

When I explained the purpose of our visit, she categorically rejected the interview. She said that she had already done it ten years ago when she reported that she was a *comfort girl-woman*, so why did she need to do the interview again? To her, giving testimony was a "horrible experience." It was a matter of describing "how many soldiers came in, how they took off their pants, and how they had sex," and to this end, it was a matter of recalling "those dirty"

1 My teammate for the interview was Kim Mihyeon (a lecturer at Sungkyunkwan University).

memories. Although I told her that she did not have to talk about things that she did not want to talk about, she still did not allow the interview because, for her, an oral statement was just one big “story she did not want to tell.” From time to time, she talked about the story of her childhood, the history of how she came to live at her current residence, and things of that nature. I wanted to record the stories, but as soon as I took out the tape recorder, her face noticeably hardened. To her, the tape recorder seemed to be a reminder of “a story she does not want to tell.” She said she had to go to the state agency over a decade ago and had to be interrogated twice, eight hours each time, and that was enough for her testimony.

Ten days later, we revisited Cho Yi Seon *halmoni* again. I wanted her to be assured by the fact that we would only listen to the story she would tell, not to interrogate her about a story we wanted to hear. The Korean Council handed over the \$50 for the wheelchair to help Cho *halmoni* and to encourage and support me. In fact, it was unfair to the other *comfort girls-women* that we did this. The *halmonis* were regularly supported by the borough office, and, when needs arose, the social movement organizations that were working on resolving the *comfort girls-women* issue prepared gifts and subsistence allowances so that they could usually benefit everyone equally.

However, my unease evaporated the moment I saw Cho *halmoni* who was beside herself with joy. She gathered her hands and repeated, “Thank you, thank you.” This act made her even seem innocent. For someone who could not walk, a wheelchair, above all else, was absolutely a thing of necessity. I decided not to think about why she had not saved up her own money for the wheelchair even though it was clearly such a necessity for her. It was common for old ladies to be stingy about spending money on themselves.

I took advantage of the joyous atmosphere and carefully suggested an interview again. I gently and repeatedly persuaded her that I would just listen and would not force her. At last, she nodded, and in that instance, I felt like a dark cloud had dissipated from within my mind. But it did not immediately turn out all right. She carelessly skipped through much of the period of her childhood, the process of the mobilization of the *comfort girls-women*, and the livelihood at the comfort stations. And when I tried to ask her more specific questions, she would scold me for not understanding her correctly. She kept presenting me with tangled threads, and I had no idea as to how I would untangle them all.

On my way back home, I felt a pang of guilt because I did not think that I had kept my promise not to force a story from her. Why did I ask so many questions when I had promised to do an interview of listening? But while listening to the recording file, I began thinking that my sense of guilt might be a little

unjustified. My questions asking ‘how,’ ‘why,’ and ‘who’ seemed appropriate. There were no other charges that could be brought against me except for the pure purpose of drawing out more words to fill in the gaps more abundantly from the statements she had already made. Cho *halmoni* wanted me to fill in the unclear parts with what was commonly and previously known about *comfort girls-women*, but for me, that would be distorting her unique story.

When I visited her for a third time, she was more stubborn than ever and kept her mouth shut. Instead, she anxiously repeated, “What do I do if I were boycotted because I misspoke?” Her worry was that if she made a slip of the tongue, even what little amount of support payment she receives now might be cut off. And to her, a slip of the tongue meant revealing an experience that deviated from the already known story about *comfort girls-women*.

Cho Yi Seon *halmoni* seemed to have a lot of things that she wished to be provided with. She needed a pair of down trousers for winter use, enough rice to eat and store, and meat with which to cook soup. Does not the fact that she has so many things that she wants to have mean that she has a great attachment to life? Although I felt happy about this, it was also true that I felt burdened by her demands because it was beyond my ability to provide for her.

I turned to Professor Kim Myeong Hye for help. I thought that her experience and expertise, the authority of the professor, might break her silence. At first, it seemed like I was right. The intimate approach of the middle-aged lady professor appeared to relax the *halmoni*’s vigilance better than I, the young woman who could not understand her, had attempted. However, she quickly noticed that the conversation with the professor was becoming more and more intimate, and at that moment, the friendly atmosphere that seemed to have begun to emerge soon disappeared.

She became nervous over the most trivial of questions that the professor tossed at her in a seemingly nonchalant manner, and if the talk seemed to go even the slightest bit into deeper territory, she quickly showed her irritation. The frequency was much less, but her hectoring, which intimidated me, was also hurled toward the professor. After such an action, she would give a smile and express a word of gratitude in an attempt to dispel the awkward atmosphere. Anxious lest a slip of the tongue might threaten the continuance of the financial support that she had been receiving for more than a decade from the government, she was at a loss as to how to act.

I was really curious. For Cho Yi Seon *halmoni*, where did the standard of what she could say and what she could not say come from? All this time, what did she see and what did she hear to compile the pieces of evidence of her judgment? People look at the *comfort girls-women halmoni* and guess her past. Because of the speculation that she would have been a *cheonyeo*, that she

would have been dragged off against her will by the Japanese military, and that she would have been subjected to constant sexual assault under confinement, people offer up to her tears of consolation and warm embraces. The prototype was made when the issue of *comfort girls-women* was first raised more than a decade ago, and people do not want to talk about other possibilities. No, we might even think that a woman with another experience is not a *comfort girl-woman* that we have already accepted.

Is the strict yardstick that frames what *comfort girls-women* are supposed to be forcing them to make a certain choice endlessly? The price for the wrong choice is too cruel for Cho Yi Seon *halmoni* to accept. Because she was acknowledged as a *comfort girl-woman*, she had been able to escape the poverty that had plagued her life. But, at any time, all of a sudden, she could lose that economic support. To the *halmoni* who is counting only on her qualifications as a *comfort girl-woman*, the issue of being judged as a *comfort girl-woman* is a matter of livelihood. Thus, I think she felt the necessity of raising this wall of silence after having finished her ‘interrogation’ safely more than ten years ago.

In the end, I gave up on Cho Yi Seon *halmoni*, and in the fall of 2002, I met Kim Dduk Bbal *halmoni* (an assumed name). But the staff of the Korean Council warned me that this person would not be easy either. More than anything else, she was worried that her family would find out about her past. Her husband, who had accidentally discovered her secret, left her and started a family elsewhere. Not knowing the reason for this, her in-laws sympathized with her and embraced her, and because of this, she lives in guilt. Now that her husband has passed away, no one in the family knows her secret.

First and foremost, I wanted to be friends with Kim Dduk Bbal *halmoni*. I thought that if she believed that I was not a threat to keeping her secret, she would tell me her story. The human rights camp for the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* survivors was being held on Jeju Island, and I decided to participate in it without hesitation once I heard that she would be there. I did not think I would necessarily obtain an interview. What was important was just to socialize with her and gain her trust.

I first met Kim Dduk Bbal *halmoni* in the airport bathroom on Jeju Island. She was vigorous and beautiful. And despite her shy appearance, I found her to be very sociable. She seemed to fit in easily with other *comfort girls-women* whom she met for the first time. I approached her warmly several times, and she gladly made me her partner. It was a welcome shock to me as I had imagined a secretive woman shrouded in anxiety. I had a good feeling about the potential interview when I saw her boasting about her singing and dancing skills, which were quite good.

It was at the Botanical Garden at Yeomiji that Kim *halmoni* unexpectedly started talking. As soon as the co-representative of the Korean Council, Kim Yun Ok, introduced herself to the *halmoni*, the *halmoni* launched into her story. The fact that both of them were from North Korea also seemed to stimulate her memories. Not having been at all prepared for the interview, I could not help being flustered, and when I finally brought my digital recorder, she had already finished talking. Would Kim *halmoni*, who does not like to speak about her story, open her mouth again? I was left to ruminate on my feelings of trouble and regret.

But it was surprisingly easy to hear her story again. As soon as she entered the room assigned to her and me, she again started saying, “I was . . . ” and launched into her story once again as she had done during the day. I did not even have to make any effort to pull her story out of her. During the evening meal, a staff member of the Korean Council introduced me to her, saying that this person is a person who would make a book by recounting her story and that she should believe in me and tell me her story if I should visit her. It seemed that my identity gave her a sense of obligation to speak. I took a chance and pulled out a tape recorder from deep inside my bag, and I was allowed to record with it without any refusal.

Kim Dduk Bbal *halmoni*'s experiences fit into the so-called typical Japanese military *comfort girls-women* case. When she was nineteen years old, she went to meet her friend one evening and was kidnapped, and after that, she was kept captive for five years in a comfort station in Manchuria. After the liberation, she went through near-death experiences before she finally returned home. But because of her shame, she repeatedly told the lie that she had been working at someone's house. Although she deceived everyone and even got married, her husband eventually guessed her secret and left her. I heard that after that, she relied on a foster child and she lived looking after her husband's children, whom he had had with another woman.

She was very eloquent and related the stories in fairly straightforward language as if she had told them many times before. Although she added at the end of each story that her experience was shameful, I could detect neither great anger nor great shame in her cool tone. However, the pain and the sorrow that permeated her voice was unmistakable, and even in the midst of calmly telling her story, all of a sudden, tears would stream down her face. The sudden change of emotions reached the point where I felt startled and embarrassed.

Kim *halmoni* still seemed to have a great deal of attachment to her husband who left when the song titled ‘the Song of Dong Suk’ by Mun Juran was very popular. It felt still more tragic that the lyrics of the song, which are about a woman desperately missing a person who left her, reflect so aptly what

happened to her. She had an ironclad belief that it was a sin to have deceived her husband, and although she “deserved to be beaten,” because her husband did not do so, she considered him a good person, she said. If she had born a child, she thought, her husband would not have left. Perhaps it was because of this thought that she looked to be so attached to her foster son. Her story continued with a boast about how well her foster son and his wife took care of her. Their presence seemed to be a great boon in her life.

Her story went on for more than three hours without any blockage or much of my own involvement. It had not ended even when I fell asleep. I was greatly moved by her genuine and abundant story. If I could have stayed with her another night, I would have been able to fill in the gaps in her story, but unfortunately, I had to return to Seoul the next day. Although I was supposed to be there for two nights and three days, I spent only one night and two days and had to come back. I really hated to leave. Because she told me her secrets all night long, I thought I had become very close to her. I did not doubt it and believed that she and I shared a special intimacy.

About fifteen days later, I visited Kim *halmoni*'s house with a light heart. I visited to give her a picture that we took together on Jeju Island, to say hello, and to finish the interview. As I received her big welcome, I made up my mind that I would come to see her on New Year's Day, national holidays, and her birthday. It seemed that there would be no significant problems in filling up the missing pieces of the interview and publishing it in the book.

I was eating a meal that she prepared for me when suddenly the *halmoni*'s younger sister and acquaintances burst in for a visit. At that moment, she began to be noticeably tense. I introduced myself as a student who just happened to meet her on Jeju Island and who had taken a picture with her. I was calm, but she still seemed nervous. To dispel the awkwardness in the air, I said that when I saw the North Korean cheering squad that visited the Asian games, I was reminded of Kim *halmoni*. I thought that if I talked about their hometown, even her younger sister would happily join in. However, she looked as if she had ants in her pants. Because of me, she seemed to worry about whether her secrets would come out.

As I hurried out, I heard the sigh of relief that Kim *halmoni* let out behind me. Then I realized that we, Kim *halmoni* and I, were not as far ahead as I had imagined in our relationship. To the woman who had lived for over fifty years feeling uneasy, I was still a stranger whom she could not trust. How could she have been so open on Jeju Island? Could it have been because, in the place where only the people related to *comfort girls-women* were gathered, she did not have to hide her secrets and so she could relax, and not because she believed in me? One thing is clear: her serene routines are guarded by secrets that

dangerously surround her, and that wall of secrets is what she has built up throughout her life.

After that, I had to try very hard to revisit her. I made phone calls two or three times a week, and every chance I had, I showed my intention to visit her. But each time she refused, making various excuses: she was sick, she had to go to her sister's house, or her daughter-in-law was coming. I tried promising to safeguard her secret, but it was useless. In truth, the only things that I could do to keep her secret were to invent an assumed name for her, not to use specific place names, and not to post her picture, things of that nature. I thought that this was enough, but for her, it was not enough at all.

I tried to persuade her over time, but things just got worse. The more I called her, the more her irritation grew, and it did register with me how uncomfortable she was becoming just at the sound of my voice. At last, she exploded in a plea to let her live in peace because it was all just an annoyance to her now. My realization that I had tormented her did not just stop at my feeling a little depressed. It took me to the thought that maybe I, who was nearby and relentlessly badgering her to do the interview, might be a source of more pain in her life than the Japanese government, which was far away and avoiding responsibility.

I no longer had the courage to call her. I made a request to a staff member at the Korean Council to obtain permission in my place from Kim *halmoni* for me so that I could make some use at least of the oral narrative that I had heard on Jeju Island. The staff member persuaded her, who listened only half-heartedly, and gained her permission to put her story into the report of the Ministry of Gender Equality. So, in this book, the editorial work of Kim Dduk-bbal *halmoni*'s story is inevitably missing. Kim Dduk Bbal is an assumed name that the *halmoni* tossed at us with an annoyed air. It is said that a person uses more tense sounds when her or his heart is desolate, and so I did not feel good peeking into her heart through this tell-tale assumed name.

She said she was embarrassed because she had “come in contact with a lot of men.” And she was afraid that that fact would hinder the future of her child and nephew. And she did not say it aloud, but it seemed to me she was worried that she would lose her place in her family if her secret of having been a *comfort girl-woman* came out into the open. It is not clear whether her family would change their attitude toward her if they knew about her past, but I guess what is more important in this case is that she believed this to be so. This belief was strengthened by her husband running away, and it is responsible for gradually wearing down her mind and spirit as well as elevating her anxiety. In the meantime, she has stamped on herself the label of a “criminal who sinned.” She had probably come to this judgment by seeing, hearing, and feeling the attitude of

Korean society toward the women who had “come in contact with a lot of men.” I did not want to give up on the original version of Kim *halmoni*’s story. This is because I thought that, by sharing her anxiety and suffering, I would be able to reflect on the question, “What part of Korean society today is the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* issue trying to address?” In the end, the double standard that exists in Korean society between women’s and men’s sexuality still adds to the suffering in the lives of *comfort girls-women* today.

The interview eventually failed. There was a part of this project that overwhelmed me, and my determination and efforts alone were not enough. I wanted to see the *comfort girls-women* problem through the lives of the *comfort girls-women halmonis* themselves. But Cho Yi Seon *halmoni* was constantly anxious as she sculpted the pieces of her life in the mold of the *comfort girls-women* issue as it is defined by Korean society. And Kim Dduk Bbal *halmoni* was afraid that she would be rejected by her family and neighbors because of her “embarrassing” past. Although I failed in these works, I believe that the stories of these two women’s lives should be told someday. And at that time, when Korean society comes to see the issue of *comfort girls-women* through these *halmonis*’ lives, it will be when Korean society takes a hard look at its double standards when it comes to sexuality.

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