

# Bridge of education and understanding

*Hun Qiao discusses comfort women and Japanese history book controversy*

The Hun Qiao concert, a memorial concert for the victims of World War II in Asia, which premiered last May in St. Paul, was premised on the idea that a “soul bridge” made of healing music and thoughts could ease the way to a better place for souls of victims who died prematurely or in torment. The concert, consisting of all-commissioned works, and sponsored by the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota, will tour in other cities and other countries in the near future.

The last note of music at the premiere concert was not the last word on commemorating the fall of World War II in Asia, however. The Hun Qiao committee, consisting of Pearl Bergad, Weiming Lu and Young Nam Kim, artistic director of the Chamber Music Society, and others, jointly planned a free symposium to educate about the issues of World War II in Asia. The symposium was co-sponsored by the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

The event was held October 19 at the Hubert H. Humphrey Center at the University of Minnesota’s West Bank campus in Minneapolis. The one-day symposium consisted of four sessions in addition to a keynote speech by Ivy Lee, entitled *Probing the Issues of Reconciliation*. Lee is a professor from California State University, who works with the Global Alliance to Preserve the History of World War II in Asia. She stressed the responsibilities of the international community, which must “provide the appropriate conditions so that reconciliation can take place.”

Feminist and scholar Bonnie Oh, a professor at Georgetown University, (*whose author profile appears in this issue, page 43*) and documentary filmmaker activist Dai Sil Kim Gibson both addressed the issues of justice for comfort women, the survivors of Japan’s military sexual slavery system which was in place before and during World War II. Oh pointed out certain similarities and connections between Holocaust-related and comfort women-related

issues. “The comfort women movement has patterned itself, consciously or unconsciously, after the Holocaust activists,” Oh asserted. The motto “Never again!” adopted by the former comfort women and by other World War II Asian groups is much like the “Never forget!” of the Holocaust activists. The two groups have set about similar activities, including reconstructing lost records, honoring and memorializing the victims, pressuring the perpetrator nations to prosecute war criminals in courts of law and, and lobbying perpetrator nations for apology and reparations.

There are also some important differences in the work of the two groups, she pointed out. Holocaust atrocities were followed immediately after the war by the Nuremberg Trials and subsequent prosecutions, which set up an atmosphere in which legal actions have been possible. No similar situation existed with regard to Japan,” Oh explained. “the burden of documenting and indicting has fallen, much belatedly, upon the shoulders of activists, academics and artists, nearly half a century later.”

There are theories of why the comfort women came forward and told their stories beginning in 1991, after more than 45 years of silence, Oh said. There was a growth and maturity in Western feminist thought that made discussion about gender discrimination issues possible in Asia, Oh suggested. Changing politics of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s enhanced the position of the comfort women and other World War II victim survivors. Changes included the end of the Cold War, and the end of two dictatorships in Asia, in Korea and the Philippines, around 1987. The death of Emperor Hirohito, in 1987 who was considered untouchable, although he was the prime suspect as a war criminal, also opened some doors that had previously been closed, she said.

Economic changes, notably the decline of the Japanese economy, made it less risky for victim countries, some of which relied on Japan for economic aid, to speak out. The rise of China as a viable and emerg-



Dai Sil Kim Gibson and Bonnie Oh at Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, Minneapolis.

STEPHEN WUNROW

ing economic power also gave the Chinese more confidence in speaking out about war atrocities.

Court cases have not fared very well, particularly since the Bush administration took over, Oh said, pointing to the major setback October 4 in which a U.S. District Judge dismissed a lawsuit against Japan brought by 15 Asian former comfort women. The suit was filed under the Alien Tort Claims Act, which allows foreign nationals to sue in U.S. court for crimes committed in violation of international law. “The judge did not deny there were atrocities on a mass scale, but thought the case belonged in the diplomatic arena,” she said.

Referring to the collection of essays *Legacies of the Comfort Women*, which she co-edited with Margaret Stetz, Oh said that the two editors found legacies the women can leave humanity, “We did so by assigning values to these old, sick, poor women. . . . To affirm their value now is a deliberate act with broad political implications.”

Dai-Sil Kim Gibson, who produced and directed the documentary film *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women*, and has written a companion book of oral histories by the same name, has become best known for her success in personalizing and individualizing the experiences of the various comfort women.

Kim Gibson said she has come to a point where she considers herself a mere “errand woman” in the campaign of the comfort women. “I used to say I wanted to give voice to the voiceless,” she said. “And it took me a long time to

change that, but I say now that I am not the one who is giving a voice to the voiceless, but these women are the ones who have given me a voice . . . whatever voice I have come from them.”

Kim Gibson said the comfort women movement, which is so big in Asia “is not learned from Western feminism, but Western feminism has to learn from Asian women, and from these women, who I call grandmas.” The movement is unique, pioneering, standing in the forefront of any other women’s movement, she said.

Much contemporaneous documentation of the comfort women was deliberately destroyed to hide the evidence of the sexual slavery system, so the recently-told stories of the survivors themselves will probably be the best evidence for the historical record. Kim Gibson has made the preservation of these stories her first priority. “I went around parts of China, Japan, and South Korea interviewing these women, and I think without these women’s testimonies, the current status of comfort women would not exist. Actually, activists, artists, scholars - they are not the ones who broke the silence and brought this movement to where it is. It is these women who did those things. Without those women, the movement would not be there.”

*The Search for Truth in Japanese Textbooks* was the subject of a panel discussion moderated by Yue-him Tam, a professor from Macalester College, and discussed by Mark Selden, professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton and Yoshiko

Nozaki, professor at Massey University, New Zealand.

The issue of “textbook nationalism” a term seldom heard in the U.S. has become a controversial issue in Asia, particularly since spring of 2001 when the Japanese government authorized publication of a history textbook for the junior high school level, which was labeled “neo-nationalist” in an international scholar’s appeal filed by Nozaki, Selden and Richard Minear on a website of Critical Asian Studies (<http://csf.colorado.edu/bcas/campaign/textbk1.htm>) The textbook was approved, and the Ministry of Education left the adoption of the text up to the local education boards.

Calls by activists for changes in the way the war and war crimes were described in the text were changed in only a minor way, and all changes demanded by comfort women activists were ignored, according to Byong Moon Kim, a St. Paul activist for the former comfort women.

Nozaki said history textbooks in the 1980s came to include more references to Japanese atrocities, but then disappeared in the ‘90s due to the influence of right-wing nationalists in Japan. “They succeeded in removing key terms from the book, including “acts of aggression” and “colonialism” from this version, she said. Nozaki predicted that there have been local, national and international forces keeping the right-wing influences at bay in the recent past, but predicted a shift to the right starting in 2002.

Selden said textbooks in Japan and in other nations are vehicles with which nations portray their past and future. The U.S. and Japan have been quite comparable on this score, Selden asserted. Both nations have used their textbooks for this purpose.

The textbook controversy proceeds from a broader controversy in Japanese society about “how to remember and commemorate the era of Japanese colonialism and war, including issues of war crimes and atrocities”, as well as how such crimes were dealt with by the Tokyo Tribunal, he said. ●