

Fighting for rights of women in war

Comfort women movement founder visits the Twin Cities

Chung Ok Yune, the writer of the first scholarly paper on the comfort women issue in the late '70s, the first advocate of the comfort women cause and founder of the organization that took their story to the world, visited the Twin Cities on a short speaking tour in September.

Yune, who in 1990, founded the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, is now retired from that advocacy group, and has recently founded a second advocacy organization with a broader scope, the Center for the Rights of Women in War. Her leadership of both these organizations was preceded by a long career as a professor of English literature at Ewha University.

Yune, an energetic 76-year-old, spoke at Carleton College, Hamline University, Macalester College and the University of Minnesota during her tour of the area September 16 through 20. She told the audience of mainly young college women how it was for her at age 17, a freshman at Ewha Woman's University, when the occupying Japanese government called for recruits for its volunteer corps, which claimed to be supplying young women workers to munitions factories and hospitals. Parents of Ewha students were pulling the students out of school and marrying them off, some as young as age 14, to protect them from recruitment.

Yune said she and many other students also dropped out of school after an incident in which freshmen students were gathered into a big classroom and ordered to place their thumbprints on a document. She now believes that exercise was for a district leader training site, not for the youth volunteer corps. The level of fear and suspicion among students and parents was high at that time, although there was no direct knowledge about the military sexual slavery system.

After liberation in 1945, Korean



Professor Chung Ok Yune at Hamline University, St. Paul.

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men who were mobilized for slave labor began to return from all over Asia, she said. "But I heard no word about the girls who had gone to earn money. Then, by paying attention to the whispers of the student soldiers and civilians attached to the army, I concluded that those girls had been drafted into Japanese military sexual slavery. They had been raped by soldiers who waited in queues for sex. It was a shock to me."

The shock turned into a question and the question developed inside her, she said, until finally, nearly 30 years later, she read an article by Japanese journalist Kako Senda, who wrote an article about the so-called "comfort women." "The article gave me hope that I might find some materials documenting this system, most of which were destroyed by Japan." She did research and found further evidence. She presented a paper on the comfort women system, the first-ever public accusation leveled at the Japanese government concerning these particular war crimes. A subsequent letter to the Japanese government, signed by the founders of the Korean Council, named all the government's official denials of the sexual slavery system, and labeled them as lies and cover-ups.

The first former comfort woman she met, in 1980, was Bonggi Pae, of Okinawa. The first

Korean woman to go public with her story of surviving the military sexual slavery system was Hak Soon Kim, whose bold testimony inspired many other former comfort women to go public. The grassroots movement by the comfort women started with Kim's testimony.

From wondering whatever became of her classmates, the movement of the comfort women has expanded to a global, grassroots campaign for justice that redefines the nature of war crimes, and has influenced the way the international community deals with them.

Yet the comfort women are still waiting for their demands of the Japanese government to be met. These include an official government apology, accompanied by reparations to victims and their families, a memorial to the victims, and a correction of school curriculum to teach appropriately about Japanese aggression during World War II, Kim said. There is no indication from Japan that this will happen. The comfort women advocates have placed great emphasis on the role the international community can play in pressuring Japan to face up to its past.

Yune said there is much work to be done in the U.S. on raising awareness about the significance of the comfort women's movement, and getting the U.S. government to play an active role in

this international pressure. "The U.S. government has been negative toward the survivors' demands," she said, explaining that the Bush administration had filed a brief agreeing with the Japanese government's contention that a group of former comfort women filing in U.S. District Court under the Alien Tort Claims Act should have no recourse in the U.S. courts. This contradicts the Senate resolution of a few years ago which urges the government of Japan to apologize and make reparations.

There is also a list of 16 Japanese war criminals who were identified, in part, because

of the comfort women movement, who would be denied admission across U.S. borders, Yune said. Many of these war criminals enjoy high status in Japanese society.

Yune is no respecter of nations, and recent actions have shown that it is not only Japan's actions that she considers unjust to women. Her newly-founded Center for the Rights of Women in War is taking principles developed in the comfort women's movement and applying them to similar situations perpetrated by other nations, particularly Korea and the U.S. The center is working with Korean women sexually abused by partners who are U.S. soldiers, and with Vietnamese women who had children with Korean military fathers and were then abandoned. "We think our Center should work for both Vietnamese women and Korean women around U.S. military bases, and for the children born between two countries." ●

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