

The man with ten grandmothers

The life's work of Hei-jin su-nim

One time in the not-too-distant past, Buddhist monk Hei-jin *su-nim*, who now spends his days caring for ten elderly former comfort women in a Buddhist-sponsored communal home in Kwangju, was a young soldier in the military combat police. His unit often supervised, and sometimes subdued with force, the same kind of student demonstrations that he had participated in as a protester only a couple years earlier as a college student.

Hei-jin *su-nim*, as he is now known (*su-nim* is the respectful address for a monk), a slight man in his mid-30s, wears the traditional gray robe, symbolizing the "middle way" of Zen, and shaves his head in the traditional way. He is soft-spoken with a sunny smile and a well-developed sense of humor, a necessary skill when one lives with ten little old ladies.

Korean men do not have a choice about whether to serve in the military, he explained. It is mandatory. Like the majority of draftees, Hei-jin had no choice of his military job. His assignment to the combat police was just the luck of the draw.

It was a strange feeling to be on the other side. The job of forming a human fence at demonstrations, where police line up shoulder to shoulder with their shields, can be a boring one. Most of the time, it requires only standing and looking into the faces of the protestors. Hei-jin thought a lot. He thought about the point of view of the demonstrators on the issue they were protesting. He thought about the government's point of view. He thought about the value of human life.

When his military duty was over, he started working for the Buddhist Committee for Human Rights. His commitment to both Buddhism and human rights deepened. Eventually, he enrolled in the Chogye Order and started training to become a monk.

His struggle to make his convictions fit his lifestyle continued. The Chogye Order "is concerned with meditation, but not particularly interested in human rights issues" he said. In that sense, his order is about the same as other Buddhist orders. Social activism is not a guiding principle, although practicing mercy and equality among persons are important tenets of the faith. However, he

said, there is a small but growing movement, in the Chogye Order especially, and across other orders, of younger monks doing human rights causes. He identified with that group, and continued with his human rights work as a monk.

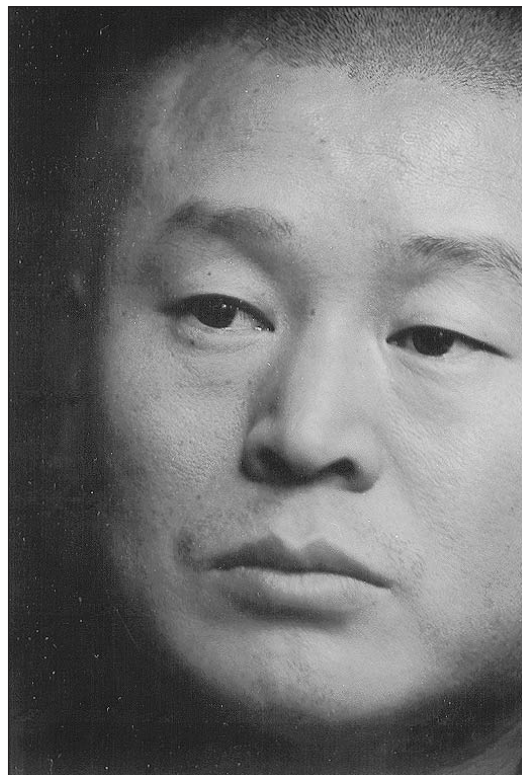
It was in 1991 that he met some people who would change the course of his life, and inspire him to take on a very challenging and rewarding human rights project and life commitment. In a very real sense, he transformed his inner struggles about what to do to a public financial and practical struggle of how to do it.

It was in 1991 when the first former comfort women came forward. He met some of them that year. As the *halmonis* (grandmothers) began to speak out, and as he spent more time with them, he discovered some disturbing things about their living situations. He knew from the beginning that most were poor, but some were in very desperate circumstances. "One *halmoni* was in a temporary shelter," he said describing a tent-like shelter made with cardboard and plastic. Another had been staying in a corner of a basement in someone's home.

Many factors contributed the depth of their poverty. Most were estranged from their families, so had no one to depend on after retirement. Most had not been well educated, since most women taken as comfort women were poor to begin with. Physical and mental health problems linked to their traumatic experiences as comfort women led to unemployment or underemployed for most of their lives.

"So, hearing their stories, I decided to take care of them. And I campaigned to raise money. And with just a six-month campaign, I raised the money and we rented a house in the Sogyodong area of Seoul." Seven residents moved into the original House of Sharing (*Nanumui Jip*) including Duc Kyung Kang, who developed wide name recognition because of her reputation both as a tireless crusader and as an artist of paintings evoking her experiences as a comfort woman. Of the original seven residents, four have died, including Kang. Seven more have come since then, so currently there are ten residents.

After the group began living together,



Hei-jin su-nim

er, Hei-jin noticed other needs. He described how one *halmoni* had asked him repeatedly to look up and dial phone numbers for her, claiming that they were too small to see. After he wrote some names and phone numbers in large print for her, she still asked him to dial the number. Eventually, it occurred to him that many of *halmonis* were illiterate. None had learned how to read Korean during the occupation because the Japanese forbade speaking and writing in Korean.

In 1993, he solicited volunteer reading tutors through newspapers and radio ads. He found several volunteers, including Kyoung Shin Lee, an artist, who started teaching the women to draw and paint as a hobby, a project that eventually developed into a productive art therapy program. They produced some artwork depicting the comfort women's experiences. This artwork, along with some of Kyoung Shin Lee's work, has toured Asia and came to several large U.S. cities during the summer of 2000. In summer 2001, Hei-jin hopes to bring the exhibits to some smaller metropolitan areas, including the Twin Cities.

The *halmonis* also need a great deal of listening, he said. Hei-jin listened to their stories a lot, over and over again. It burdened him, he said. It was much more than a one-person job. He felt that others should listen to their stories too.

Out of his experiences, funny and sad, Hei Jin wrote a book of his day-to-day life with the *halmonis*. His purpose for writing the book was to engage the interest of the public in helping the former comfort women. He wrote about how he keeps their spirits up, and about the kinds of things they shared when they first opened up to him. He asked readers not to have preconceived ideas about what they are like as people.

His hope is that, through the book, people's attitudes will be changed. (So far, this book is available only in Korean)

Hei-jin said the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal has been a good experience overall, for the *halmonis*. Because the residents of the House of Sharing are the *de facto* representatives of the former comfort women of Korea, they attend a lot of meetings and are frequently bored with them. "At this particular thing, they have stayed very focused. They feel this Tribunal is really speaking for them, he said. "A guilty verdict," he continued (speaking before the actual guilty verdict was read on December 12) "would really vindicate their position and give them some hope."

In 1998, the House of Sharing moved to its present location in Kwangju. The Historical Museum of Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military, which was also developed by Hei-Jin, with help from numerous volunteers, is located at the same site. The two buildings were paid for through the Chogye Order and private funders. The museum contains documentary evidence of the comfort women system, photos and artwork. It also houses the exhibit of the former comfort women's artwork.

Hei-jin is concerned about the historical legacy of the sexual slavery system, since the *halmonis* are all

elderly, and since the Japanese government has yet to apologize and compensate the victims. "It may not be me, but someone has to carry this on."

In the meantime, Hei-jin concerns himself with providing for the *halmonis* daily needs - food, clothing, medical and dental care, as well as for their spiritual and mental health. He also helps them to carry on their work as activists. They are a visible group whose photos appear often, flowing hanboks blowing in the wind, arms raised, holding signs that read "Apologize and Compensate." A weekly Wednesday demonstration at the Japanese embassy in Seoul, which started in 1992 is still ongoing, possibly the longest running weekly demonstration in history.

Life with ten little old ladies has its funny moments. Hei-jin became the subject of an ongoing joke last summer while traveling in the U.S. with one of the residents, Soon Duc Kim, during the art exhibit tour. Kim mistakenly sent all his underwear home with a shipment of some gifts they had received. He only noticed it after the box was long gone, when he got out of the shower and there was no clean underwear to be found. Temporarily, he borrowed Kim's underwear as an emergency measure. The mischievous Kim told quite a few people of her serious packing error, which was a source of amusement for a succession of hosts. While Kim continued to get nice gifts from hosts in every city, Hei-jin got underwear in all colors and styles. By the time Hei-jin, Kim and the exhibit made it across the U.S. continent, his underwear collection was again complete.

At some point, Hei-jin's life will have to change from guardian, caretaker and friend of the former comfort woman to historian and keeper of memories. This will be a difficult transition for Hei-jin, whose work on behalf of these women, and his relationship with them, has been his life's work for nearly ten years. He good-naturedly complains "But I have to live with the *halmonis* because I don't have any other place to go!" But it is also apparent there's no other place he wants to be.

Asked if he will continue on at the House of Sharing until the last *halmoni* is gone, Hei-jin says simply "Yes. I promise." ●