

# Unblossomed flowers

*House of Sharing provides love and care for survivors of Japanese sexual slavery*

After 45 minutes of negotiating Seoul's early morning rush hour traffic, the driver steered the van off the freeway and onto a local highway that turned into a narrow two-lane local road. After the din of the expressway traffic, the local road was hushed in comparison. This area, one hour southeast of Seoul, appeared to be a resort area with small hotels, restaurants and convenience stores dotting the winding roadside. From the road, a body of water, maybe a river or a lake, could be seen.

Then the van turned off onto a narrower paved road that wound through lush fields of crops and still rice paddies. Gravel crunched as the van turned into the wide driveway of The House of Sharing.

The House of Sharing complex is located in Twaechon-myun, Kwangju-kun, in Kyonggi-do Province, an hour southeast of Seoul. The complex includes two 2-story residential buildings, a Buddhist temple, an administrative building with a guest-house, and a museum. It is operated and maintained by the Chogye sect of monks.

The museum tells the story of the Japanese comfort women system, and serves as both a memorial to those women who suffered and died under the system and as a tribute to the survivors.

But most of all, The House of Sharing is a sanctuary for a select group of elderly Korean women.

In Korean culture, the reward for a long life of serving others should be peace and tranquility; the knowledge that the world is as it should be. The ideal for the elderly Korean is respect from one's children and community, and as a reward for such accomplishments, enjoyment of one's remaining days filled with relative comfort and leisure.

But for many *halmonis* (the Korean word for 'grandmothers') who came of age during World War II, there is no peace of mind and no cherished position in a family. In



(top) Soon Duk Kim stands at the grave site of *halmoni* Hak Soon Kim, the first former comfort woman to come forward in 1991, in the courtyard of the House of Sharing. (above) Soon Duk Kim weeds and tends the garden near the House of Sharing.

many instances, there is no family. Instead, these *halmonis* have only bitter, tragic memories. Tens of thousands of Korean teenage girls and young women were kidnapped or deceived by Japan and forced into service as sexual slaves at military posts throughout Japanese-occupied Asia in the 1930s and '40s. Some data estimates the numbers to be as high as 180,000.

The Japanese fed the system by kidnapping young women, or luring them with promises of jobs

and money in Japan. Many of the women came from poor families who welcomed the opportunity for their daughters to get jobs and earn money for their families.

They were hustled onto ships that first took them to Japan, then to military stations throughout Japanese-occupied Asian. While most sex slaves were Korean, the Japanese also captured teens and young women from its occupied territories in China, the Philippines, East

*Photography by Stephen Wunrow*

Timor, Malaysia, Indonesia, Okinawa, and the Pacific islands.

The Japanese Army created the sex slave system both as a service to its troops, and to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted disease. These sex slaves were euphemistically called "comfort women." The term implied that they provided "comfort," a euphemism for sex, to the Japanese troops. The military preferred to provide its own "comfort stations" rather than risk disease or security lapses by letting troops use local prostitutes or rape the women of the area occupied.

The young women were imprisoned in narrow rooms outfitted with a bed or mat and little else. They lived in squalor and constant fear. They were poorly fed. They were raped 20-30 times a day and often beaten and kicked. Camp doctors who examined the women for sexually transmitted diseases each week used this opportunity to

rape them, too. Women who were defiant, resisted or tried to escape were made examples of, sometimes killed in front of the other women.

After World War II ended, hundreds of comfort women were killed by the retreating Japanese troops, to destroy evidence that a sex slavery system existed. Of those survivors, a number managed to return to Korea. Others were abandoned in China and the other countries with no way to get back to Korea.

The war never really ended for these survivors. It took more than 50 years for them to come forward and finally tell their stories of sexual slavery — the injustice, cruelty and loss of their youth at the hands of the Japanese. Many of the women never reconciled with their families, too ashamed to tell what had happened to them. Others committed suicide, unable to live with the ensuing shame and social stigma. Some never made