

Soo-dan Lee, a Korean survivor abandoned in China

“Where did your mother and father go...? Let's live together now.”

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Soo-dan Lee was born in 1922 in Sugcheon-gun during Joseon Dynasty under the Japanese colonialism. She was conscripted to Acheng, Simenz (石門子) in China in 1940 at the age of 19 (according to Korean age system) for 5 years and was left there after the war.

When the season of cold wind arrives, thoughts of those victims from Joseon (old name for Korea) who are left in China glimmer in my eyes. I wonder if they doing okay, how are they dealing with the bitter cold of winter; are they eating well? Winter season is tough for many, but it is even more so for the survivors in the remote areas of China. Since 2001, I have been searching for the victims of the “comfort station” system from the colonial Joseon who had been left in China where various units of the Imperial Japanese Army were based, such as Yanbian, Wuhan, Beijing, Shanghai and other places. These women should have returned to their homeland at the end of the war, but they had to survive on their own, after being abandoned in the foreign terrain, lost their mother tongue during the long and arduous struggle to survive, and adopted whatever nationality that suited their needs, whether it be Chinese, North Korean, or without any nationality at all.

First discovery of Soo-dan Lee was at a Russian border area in Dongning County, Mudanjiang City, Heilongjiang Province (黑龍江省牡丹江市東寧縣). It was one of the remotest areas in China that required a flight from Seoul to Yanji, and then, three days of bus ride on an unpaved road from Hunchun. At the time, Imperial Japan's Kwangtung Army was based there to confront the Russians. When the war ended, the Japanese imperial army abandoned the victimized women and ran away. When I first discovered Soo-dan Lee, there were at least 4 sexual slavery survivors lived scattered in the surrounding towns near the Simenz (石門子) “comfort station.”

“The one who took me was an informant for Japan. They were wearing military uniforms and a sword... They gave me money and cloths...” In 1940, at the age of 19, Lee left Sugcheon-gun, Pyeongannam-do and came to Acheng (near Harbin) with three other women of similar ages. She followed the recruiter, believing that she would be cooking, making cloths, and doing other house chores. She gave the advance payment of 480 Won to her mother to help with poor family circumstance.

“Acheng “comfort station” was owned by a Japanese married couple. They called me Hidomi. I received 8 to 10 soldiers per day.” “The owners took 60% of the ticket price, and the women received the remaining 40%. Each month, they converted it to cash for us.”

The place she was taken to wasn't an ordinary working place, but a brothel-style “comfort station.” The “comfort station” owners even took most her 40% portion for the cost for clothing and cosmetics. And the money the women were given was not the actual Chinese currency that could be used, but the military scripts used by the Japanese military in the occupied territories.

“I spent 2 years like that and the was sold to Simenz. I was at Suzuran (鈴蘭) in Simenz.” The Simenz “comfort station” she was sold to was located near the Russian border, which was

farther than Dongning. There were many underground strongholds in the mountain area, and it was an important strategic location that housed 3 military divisions in the Simenz area alone. Out of the 4 “comfort stations” that were set up, 2 of them housed Japanese “comfort women”, and the other 2 housed Korean women.

For Soo-dan Lee, the only thing that changed was the owners of the “comfort station” when she was transferred Simenz from Acheng – the brutal fate she faced was just the same. The soldiers came in the morning, and the officers came in the afternoon. Higher officers came later to spend the night. The schedule to use the “comfort station” was strictly divided by the military ranks so they wouldn’t be mixed and the rates were different as well: it was 1 yen for the soldiers, 1.5 yen for the staff sergeant, and 2 yen for the higher ranking officers.

“I became ill. I got sicker so I was taken to a big hospital in Dongning and received treatments for a venereal disease. I thought I was going to die... I was at the hospital for 10 days. They put a sign on my door to prohibit the soldiers’ entry.”

Military doctor examined the women for venereal diseases once a week, Lee contracted one and spent 10 days at a big hospital in downtown Dongning. After she came back to the “comfort station” after the treatment, they put up a venereal disease sign on her door that she wouldn’t receive soldiers for two months. Lee was required to pay back all medical expenses and the loss of business for the two months she was sick.

“Although I live at a living facility for seniors, I am stress-free because I have no family. At least I feel comfortable in my mind.” She confides her secret for staying younger to me. “Sometimes I spend holidays at my sister-in-law’s who is a younger sister of my deceased husband.”

After the war ended, Soo-dan Lee married a man who belongs to Han tribe from a town near the comfort station, Daduchuan (大肚川). Probably due to the scars from the past, she could not bear her own child. Her life became tougher because her husband grew more violent, but she tried hard to stay married because she was scared of being left alone in a foreign land. Despite difficult environment, she lived a diligent and active life, even serving as the president of town’s women’s group. Since mid-1980, after her husband passed away, she could not live alone and came to live in the living facility for the elderly where she lived until she died.

“Even now if I hear Korean being spoken randomly, my hearts perk up.”
I heard from Mr. Um her painful story. “I feel ashamed. My heart aches for having lost the Joseon language... I want to speak it, but I don’t know how to. I can’t do it even if I want it so much.”

Throughout the time when she was telling me her story in Chinese, she was embarrassed to have forgotten Joseon(Korean) language. She was tormented even more because it was the first time someone from her homeland, Joseon, has come and attentively listened to the full extent of her painful story. During the conversation, she constantly rolls cigar leaves on long pieces of newspaper, and lights it with much effort, but repeatedly fails to keep the flame from fizzling. The smoke rising across her face seems to represent the lifelong grief of her.

I went back to Dongning to meet with Soo-dan Lee two years later, in 2014. She was thinner and weaker two years ago, but now she seems to have fully recovered and healthier, with better

color on her skin and puffer face. Two years ago, I wondered if it was going to be my final meeting with her, but now I am sitting on her bed, across from her. Rather dimly lighted room around the bed is full of baby pictures pasted on surrounding walls and she is bracing a baby doll with no hair, as we converse.

‘Grandma, do you recognize me?’ She nods but without words. Fortunately, she has a memory of me. Her eyes wonder around the room. Due to worsening schizophrenia, she can’t focus on objects anymore. On the second day, she doesn’t recognize me. She doesn’t even remember my visit on the previous day. She must want to say something, but even her adopted son can’t understand her constant mumbling.

“Where did your mom and dad go...? Now you can live with me.”

She is speaking to the doll as if it is a real baby. The victims who had been abandoned in China, including Soo-dan Lee, found husbands as their second wives or a concubine, but 8 or 9 out of 10 failed to have their own children, perhaps due to the sufferings from the “comfort stations.” She is nursing her pain of not having her own child with the doll and the baby photos on the wall. The head of the facility gave her the doll as a new year’s gift. The doll’s full set of hair is all gone due to shedding from constant pulling one strand at a time, leaving none in the end.

‘Arirang, Arariyo, You’ll have sore feet less than 10 miles away.’ ‘Doragi, doragi, white balloon flower root...’ The people who travelled with me sing her favorite songs and dance for her, but she doesn’t respond.

Between the winter of 2016 and the spring of 2017, I heard that Soo-dan Lee’s condition has deteriorated so much that she can’t even sit on her bed. Hurriedly, I prepare to visit her again with the supplies she might need, such as diapers for grown-ups and paddings. With 4 other team members of the Juju Project, we head for Dongning, China with 4 boxes of supplies for her. Having heard that we were coming, she is wearing a red sweater and waiting for us. She still mumbles incomprehensible words repeatedly. The adopted son informs us that she is no longer able to communicate with anyone verbally. She no longer recognizes me. She doesn’t respond no matter what we say to her.

Two and a half months after we came back to Korea, I was having dinner when I received a phone call from Mr. Kwan-bin Um that Soo-dan Lee passed away. I was scheduled to go to Japan the next day and Sung-chan Hwang to home in China; but we purchased the last two flight tickets to Yanji right away, to be by her side as she begins her lonely journey. When we arrived the funeral home in Dongning after the sunset, only Soo-dan Lee’s mortuary was lit in the surrounding darkness. Her adopted son was sitting there with the baby doll in his arm. 3 consuls from the South Korean consulate in Shenyang came during the day to prepare the funeral. Surrounding her coffin were flower arrangements from many of whom Soo-dan Lee didn’t know. The names of President Park Geunhye, South Korean Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Gender Equality and Family, and many others that we don’t come across in normal times were written on the flower arrangements that were closely squeezed next to each other around her coffin. There were so many of them that the space was tight for the director of the senior facility, her adopted son, and her deceased husband’s family members to carried on their duties in hosting the funeral.

It was in 2001 when I met Soo-dan Lee for the first time and I’ve been continuously coming here to record and support the victims. My only wish for her is her journey isn’t too lonely.

She was born as Soo-dan Lee, a citizen of Joseon in 1922, was forced to serve as a sex slave under a Japanese given name 'Hidomi,' and her life ended at 3 pm on May 17th 2016 as a Chinese national, with a Chinese name Fungyun Lee (리평원李凤云).