

Testimony

Duk-Kyung Kang
Born in Korea, 1929–1997



Duk-Kyung Kang
in 1996

“I don’t want the Japanese government to think I’ve given up.”

Duk-Kyung Kang was born in Jinju in South Gyeongsang province in the southern part of Korea. When she was very young, her father died. After Duk-kyung’s mother remarried, she was brought up by her maternal grandparents, who sent her to an elementary school. Hearing that she’d learn useful skills and make money by joining the Female Volunteer Labor Corps* in Japan, she left her home at age fifteen. At first, she worked at an airplane factory in FujiKoshi, Japan. But she never had access to her earnings, which she was told were kept as “savings.” Faced with no pay, insufficient food rationing, and demanding work, she tried to escape from the factory. She failed and, as a punishment for running away, was sent to a “comfort station.” These “comfort stations” were established and operated by the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces in their occupied territories from the 1930s through the end of WWII in 1945. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls from across Asia were forced into the Japanese military sexual slavery system during these years.

After WWII, Duk-Kyung returned to South Korea and gave birth to her son in 1946 at a camp for returnees. A few months later, she went home with her newborn. Her mother disapproved of her baby. Having a son whose father was unknown and whose existence was rejected by her mother, Duk-Kyung, who was deep in poverty, sent the child to an orphanage run by a Catholic church. She visited her son every other week, if not every week. One day, the orphanage told her that her four-year-old son had died suddenly of pneumonia and that the funeral was already over. She did not see her son’s body and never believed the story. Shocked and overwhelmed with guilt and sadness over her son, she faced numerous lifelong health problems. She regretted sending her son to the orphanage for the rest of her life. Although Duk-Kyung received a few marriage proposals, she refused them all, thinking she wasn’t “good enough.” She regretted that as well.

When Duk-Kyung first saw the news about the surviving victims breaking their silence on TV, she hesitated to come forward. However, when she heard that the Japanese government was denying their testimonies, she decided to break her silence.

Her last two years are documented by Japanese journalist Toshikuni Doi, who began filming seven victims of Japanese military sexual slavery in South Korea in 1994. Duk-Kyung passed away on February 2, 1997. Doi released the film in 2015, two years after Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto commented that it was “necessary” to have a “comfort women” system before and during WWII. Doi finished his film and released it under the title *Living with Memory*.

Duk-Kyung was a talented artist who enjoyed singing and playing the harmonica. Her paintings include *Japanese Soldiers Picking Pears* and *Purity Lost Forever* (sometimes known as *Innocence Stolen* or *Purity Stolen*, 빼앗긴 순정). She became a human rights activist and gave public testimonies in Japan and to the U.N.

“We have to continue fighting!”

*During WWII, Japan established the Female Volunteer Corps, an organization that, in reality, tricked women and girls into forced labor to support Japan’s war effort.

Photo credit: Toshikuni Doi

Sources: *Living With Memory*, DVD, directed by Toshikuni Doi, (Japan: 2015).

Korea Chongshindae’s Institute and The Korean Council, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, 『강제로 끌려간 조선인 군위안부들』, (South Korea: 한울 Hanul, 1993), 1:271–284.

Mee-Hyang Yoon, *25 Years of Wednesdays*, (South Korea, 2019), 175–179.

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