

# Testimony

Jeum-Yup Kong  
Born in Korea, 1920–2016



Jeum-Yup Kong celebrating her 94th birthday  
August 14, 2014

*“I thought I was going to a silk factory.”*

Jeum-Yup Gong was born in Haenam in South Jeolla province of South Korea. She was born to such a poverty-stricken family that she received no marriage offer other than to be a second wife to a man with no children. Jeum-Yup firmly rejected such an arrangement and her family eventually relented. In 1935, a few men in suits and neckties visited her family, offering Jeum-Yup a job at a silk factory in Japan. They told her family that she would make a lot of money and be comfortable. With enough money, they said, she could send money to her family to buy a piece of farmland even. Jeum-Yup was scared and reluctant to go to a foreign country away from family, but her father yelled at her, saying, “A lot of girls are going to learn skills and make money. How long are you going to stay home?” Jeum-Yup decided to go to the silk factory. She was sixteen.

After accepting what she thought was a high-paying job offer, Jeum-Yup was taken to a bar in Pyongyang in Northern Korea, not a silk factory in Japan. At the bar, Jeum-Yup saw that girls were taken by men to different places. Not wanting to have any part of this, Jeum-Yup asked the bar owner to take her far away from there. She didn’t know she’d be taken to a “comfort station” in China. On her first day at the “comfort station,” Jeum-Yup was gang-raped by seven soldiers. On Sundays, when soldiers were off duty, she

was raped by more than twenty soldiers. In despair, she tried to take her own life but failed.

From the 1930s to the end of World War II in 1945, the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces established and operated a military sexual slavery system for Japanese soldiers in the territories they occupied. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls from throughout Asia were forced into Japanese military sexual slavery.

After Korea was liberated, and after nearly a decade of being raped, Jeum-Yup returned home to South Korea and married a man twenty years her senior who worked as a tenant farmer. They had a son together, Jeong-Bok Park, but around the time he turned three, Jeum-Yup’s husband passed away. She endured extreme poverty while raising her son.

In 2002, with the encouragement of her son, who said “Mom, it wasn’t your fault,” Jeum-Yup reached out to the Korean Council and broke her silence.

On her ninety-fourth birthday on August 14, 2014, she said she no longer resents her father, who had originally yelled at her to go to a silk factory in Japan. She said, “He didn’t know [that it was a lie].”

Jeum-Yup never found peace with her history, even as she took her last breath. Jeong-Bok said, “My mom couldn’t close her eyes because she didn’t get a sincere apology from the Japanese government, something she repeated over and over. She must have been worried about me, too.”

Jeong-Bok added, “She is my mom. Nothing else matters.”

**Photo Credit:** Jeong A Lee

**Sources:** Lee, Jeong A. “[이순간] ‘위안부 피해’ 공점업 할머니 꽃상여 나가던 날,” *The Hankyoreh*, May 12, 2016.

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