



Yi Ok Seon

<http://politicsofrauma.wordpress.com/>

Born: 1927, in Busan, modern South Korea

History: Taken to China in 1942 where she served as a "comfort woman" for about 3 years

Yi Ok Seon was born in 1927 in Busan, at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula. She was born into a poor family, and even though she wanted very much to study, she couldn't go to school because of the cost, and because her father didn't think it was appropriate for a girl to study.

From when she was very young, she started looking after her younger siblings, cooking and doing the housework while her parents went out to seek odd jobs.

There was a family who said they would take her in as a foster daughter and send her to school, so she was overjoyed. However, when she went to live with them, it turned out they just wanted her to work in their restaurant. She worked hard, but kept demanding to go to school. Eventually they sold her to a tavern without her family's knowledge, where she worked hard and was treated very badly. One day, they sent her out on an errand. While on the road, two men, one Japanese and one Korean, grabbed her by the arms and threw her into a truck. There were six girls there. They ended up at a train station and were put on a train with no idea where they were going.

After a long journey, they found themselves in China. It was very cold, and they had no warm clothes. They were taken to an airstrip and forced to labour there, expanding the airstrip for the Japanese military. They were fed very little, and were beaten when they complained about the food, the cold, or the work. The area they were contained in was surrounded by an electrified wire, so they couldn't escape. One day they protested very strongly and refused to work. The soldiers told them, ok, we will send you home. They took them out of the compound, and then took them to a "comfort station."

There, they were cleaned up and given Japanese clothes, a *kimono*, wooden sandals, and split-toe socks. They told the girls they had to pay for the clothes by receiving soldiers. Most of them were very young and they didn't know anything about sex, so at first, they didn't understand what was expected of them. Then the soldiers started coming, and if they tried to stop the soldiers from raping them, they were beaten, sometimes stabbed, and raped anyway. Some days only a few soldiers came, but on weekends or holidays, dozens of soldiers stood in line in front of the door. They were given very little food, and had no time off.

The soldiers were supposed to use condoms, and they had to wash them for re-use. However, many soldiers didn't want to wear them, so many women contracted diseases. Even during their menstrual cycle they had to receive soldiers. One day, the "comfort station" gates were open and a lot of people were coming and going, so she tried to run away. She slipped out, but didn't know where she was, or where to go, and so she was caught and then tortured. They stabbed her feet with a sword to stop her from running away.

When the war ended, Yi Ok Seon found herself abandoned in China, and had to find a way to survive. At first she did odd jobs, and then she met a man, a widower with two kids, and she lived with him and raised his children. She had many medical problems from her time as a "comfort woman," and he helped her get the medical attention she needed. She was not educated and could not read, but she developed many skills and learned to be a midwife. She delivered hundreds of babies, and raised her adopted kids and grandchildren.

She stayed in China in the ethnic Korean community there for 58 years, only returning to South Korea after the year 2000, after being contacted by advocacy organizations from Korea. Her family had registered her as dead, so she had to prove who she was to reinstate her nationality. Most of her family had already passed away but sometimes she sees some of her family members. Her husband passed away before she left China.

Recently she has brought her two grandsons to Korea where they are learning Korean, but it is very difficult for Koreans who lived in China to gain access to good employment in South Korea. She is hoping her youngest grandson will become the President of South Korea. Her desire to learn has never left her, and she has learned to read and write in Korean, and now studies Japanese and English so she can tell her story to the many people she meets in her activist work.