

LESSON 9

Special Readings

Interviews with Koreans illuminate the past.

- A Leader Speaks Out on the “Comfort Women” Issue
- An Artist Revives *Maedup*
- A Teenager Recalls Life During the Korean War
- A Women’s Rights Leader Reflects on the Movement
- A Matriach Views Her Family

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Special Reading I

A Leader Speaks Out on the “Comfort Women” Issue

The following are excerpts from a 1996 interview with Lee Hyo-jae, a retired professor from Ewha Womans University that took place in Seoul, South Korea.

Perhaps the reason I became involved in the issue of “Comfort Women” is that I might have been forced to become one had I been less lucky. I was a teenager during World War II and the Japanese Occupation. My father was a Protestant minister and he was heavily suspected by the Japanese government. They were trying to force the Shinto religion upon congregations and my father was resisting. Because of my “suspect” background, I was not eligible to go to the Japanese women’s colleges and there was no real university for women in Korea at that time. Ewha University for women had been changed by the Japanese into a vocational school. So there I was — a young woman seemingly eligible for the sorts of jobs recruited by the Japanese government under its Mobilization Act.

Although the jobs were advertised as factory work, my family was suspicious. There were rumors of women taken to be prostitutes for the Japanese army. To protect me, my mother wanted to arrange a quick marriage. But I resisted, hoping that someday, somehow, I would be able to go to college. I finally found a job as a clerk in the city hall and, therefore, was safe from Japanese recruitment. But other women had not been so fortunate. After the defeat of Japan, I did get a chance to go to college, even getting a degree from an American university. I came back to Korea to teach at Ewha University, now the largest college for women in the world. After my retirement from teaching, I thought I would read, write and take things more easily.

Instead, I got involved in the “Comfort Women” issue. It wasn’t until the late 1970’s that this issue became widely known. A woman from Okinawa was the first to tell about it. Then later, women in Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines began to come forward. It took so much courage for them to do so. In the 1960’s and 70’s, student activists were concerned with governmental change, but in the 1980’s they, too, were more aware of issues of torture, sexual abuse and worker exploitation. Therefore, the cause of the “Comfort Women” began to be taken up by both traditional women’s groups and student leaders.

My stand on this issue is that mere monetary compensation, like the voluntary contributions from Japanese citizens proposed by their prime minister, is not enough. It was the Japanese government that committed these wrongs. Prostitution had been used by the emperor of Japan as a “gift of comfort” to reward his soldiers. What is needed is a public apology, recognition of the emperor’s involvement and a government payment to these women who suffered rape, venereal disease and degradation. Until Japan accepts this responsibility, we will continue to fight.

- How did some Korean women avoid being taken as “comfort women”?
- How did the issue of the “comfort women” become better known?
- What do you think would be a fair and just resolution to this issue? Explain your answer.

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Special Reading 2 An Artist Revives *Maedup*

The following are excerpts from an interview with Kim Hee-jin, who was officially designated as an, “Intangible cultural property,” —her skills in the traditional art of maedup [Korean macrame] were recognized as a valuable national treasure.

During the Japanese occupation, Korean arts and culture were suppressed. One of these arts which dated back perhaps to the period of the Three Kingdoms, was *maedup*. In this art you take beautiful raw silk threads and make designs with cords, knots and tassels. During the Choson Kingdom, *maedup* was very popular, particularly for the ties on Korean traditional dress. But during the Japanese occupation, Japanese art and dress were encouraged and no support was given to artists doing Korean crafts. The old apprentice teaching system broke down and by the end of World War II, there was only one master of the art of *maedup* left. He had no students.

I decided to take up this art. My hands always loved anything to do with art. But I grew up in a traditional family during the Korean War. There was no possibility of a female in our family going to art school. Much of the time I was busy carrying water, taking care of younger children and helping the family to survive. But I learned from my mother how to sew and I even made the school uniforms for my younger sister. As I grew older, though, I knew I wanted to do more serious art. When I learned that the art of Korean *maedup* was dying out, it seemed to me — this I can do.

Our family had suffered during the Japanese occupation. My father worked hard to build up a trucking firm, but suddenly, one day, the Japanese took it over. He had to start all over again to support us. Perhaps it was this sense of my family’s past that — in my own way — I wanted to continue a part of Korean culture that the Japanese occupation had almost discontinued.

I try to continue the art of *maedup* in the old traditional ways by using plant dyes and “classical” forms like the chrysanthemum and dragonfly on knots. Today, as a “national treasure,” I am helped by the government to take students so that the art will continue.

But I also try new designs and do special embroideries. When the Pope came to Korea in 1984, I was asked to design his robe. In it, I tried to combine religious symbols of the west with classical Korean court dress. The research and design were quite a serious responsibility. I was quite relieved when the Vatican approved of it.

Though *maedup* can be very difficult and must be done precisely to be good, I think it also reflects the patience and endurance of Korean lives.

- What happened to traditional Korean arts during the Japanese occupation? Why?
- Why did Kim Hee-jin set out to revive *maedup*? How might her action be seen as a kind of resistance to Japanese rule in the past?

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Special Reading 3

A Teenager Recalls his Life During the Korean War

In a 1996 interview, Kim Hyon-jin, a successful businessman, described his experiences as a young man during Korean War.

It was June and school was out, so my friends and I were exploring around Seoul. We were in junior high school and liked to wander around and see what was going on. As we were walking toward the main part of the city, we saw a fighter plane — a North Korean Yak — flying around Namsan Mountain and we could see smoke rising. We were curious and ran to see South Korean troops piling onto city civilian buses and moving to the north quickly. We tried to see and understand what all the activity meant so that we could take our news home to our parents.

Then the fighting for Seoul started. Our family had to decide whether we would go from our home in Seoul or stay. We had already fled from North Korea and now it looked as if we would be refugees again. But my grandmother refused to go. So it was just my parents and my brothers and sisters who left. We struggled to get onto the crowded train going south. The only place for us was on top of the train, where we sat between rice sacks. The youngest children were tied to our mother so they wouldn't fall off.

Eventually, we got to Taegu, but our family was split up even further. My older brother was in the army and that meant that I had to become the “eldest brother.” This meant much more family responsibility. We lived in tin-roofed, cardboard shelters and tried to survive. My father began to buy and sell potatoes and rice and I had to help him carry sacks and sell the food. Two major problems were finding good water and food for the family. My elder sister carried the water from long distances and I would get sacks of food from the United Nations distribution center. But the sacks were heavy on my back and I struggled to get home. I think that's the reason we never were as tall as the rest of the children — all those heavy loads.

But even in the middle of refugee life, schools were started again and some of my friends from Seoul were even in those classes. Some time later, I would go into the hills north of Taegu with one of my friends to search for the bodies of his family. So many people had been shot by the retreating armies. It is very hard to remember the way the bodies looked and how we searched. So, although my life was hard in Taegu, unlike my friend, I did have some of my family there alive and safe.

We were worried about my grandmother and so as “eldest brother” (I was now 15), I was sent north to find out if she had survived. The trip north was difficult because Seoul was still a military target and trains did not run on any schedule. When a bridge was blown, I had to wait two days by the side of the tracks. There was little food and the military police wondered why I was there without family or friends.

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Finally, I found a train and arrived in Seoul at night. My friends and I had explored so much of Seoul, I was sure I could find my way. But the city had been shelled and bombed into rubble. There was so much destruction I didn't know if I could find my way the 20 miles I needed to walk. It was still dark when I came to our district and our house was still standing. But there was no sign of life. The gate was closed, but I managed to get it open and came through the yard onto the porch. Everything seemed deserted; creaking floors creaking was the only sound. Then I heard someone call out, "Who is there?" I could see my grandmother in the doorway. As you know, we Koreans do not show a great deal of emotion, even though we may feel it. When she recognized me, all she said was, "Now you have come."

- What images of the Korean War are still vivid today for Mr. Kim? Why do you think he has remembered these images for so long?
- From the stories Mr. Kim tells, what can you learn about Korean values?

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Special Reading 4

A Women's Rights Leader Reflects on the Movement

The following excerpts are from a 1996 interview with Lee Yeon-sook, the former Vice President of the National Council of Women.

The two decades before this one [1990's] were the "sit still" years as far as women's rights go. But now more and more women's groups have come together and made a strong National Council of Women. We are putting more and more pressure on the political parties to have at least 10 percent of the party designates be women. With more than one party now, we can play parties against each other to gain support. Our council has a task force pushing for ten major issues, including day care, after-school activities, environmental clean-up, media images and consumer issues as well as fairer family law. This generation of Korean women leaders can be especially tough on pushing for issues because they themselves have often gone through a great deal. During the Korean War, many had to be breadwinners or were the first generation to work outside the home or receive a university education. They have seen vast changes in Korea.

Yet even more is needed to bring about real equality. Let me give you an example. This winter, in examining student scores for admission to academic high schools, we found out that the level for girls was 30 percent higher than for boys. Boys only need 117 points to get into elite schools, while girls need 138 points. Therefore, over 10,000 girls did not get an equal chance for academic education. When we learned of these statistics, we really went to work.

We made calls to all the women's groups in the council. Some of us with television experience called stations and told them to get ready to film mass demonstrations. Several mothers of students and students themselves were so angry that they proposed to go on hunger strikes. It was clear that women were organized and would not stop while this injustice continued.

Korean President Kim Young Sam really did not have much choice. He ordered the schools to accept all the girls who would have been admitted had they been boys. In the future, he promised that there will be no discrimination between the scores of girls and boys.

This victory does not mean that all issues in education have been resolved. There is still much to be done to gain full employment rights for these young women when they graduate. But what this protest did show is that we are no longer in the "sit still" decades.

- Describe at least two changes in the women's right movement in Korea since the "sit still" years.
- Why is equal access to education such an important issue for women?

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Special Reading 5

A Matriarch Views Her Family

The following are excerpts from a New Year's Day interview with Park Pil-soon, a grandmother in a traditional family near Andong, South Korea. A matriarch is usually the oldest woman in a family who has respect and power because of her age and status as a family leader.

I was married into a *yangban* [upper class] family, though at the time I didn't know the family had been noted for its scholarship. One family member was a noted scholar of the Choson Kingdom. His books and papers were stored here. My family was from the east coast where slavery had disappeared. But another surprise was that slavery still existed in Hahoe [her husband's village] and the family had some slaves.

My marriage was not a very comforting one. My husband followed the *yangban* tradition of being away from the village and enjoying himself in town. In a month, he might be gone 29 of the 30 days. I remember one time when he sent word that he was coming with friends. I cooked all week and tried to make everything great and comfortable. But he left the next morning anyway. Though my eldest daughter was born in May, he didn't come home that year until October to see her. I had to become an independent woman and I came not to mind that my husband's frequent absences.

I began to work more and more with the land. My Buddhist religion helped me — it was the mountains that understood me. I organized the planting of fruit trees, raised chickens and cows. Sometimes my husband would come home in debt and I would have to give him the money I had earned.

There were some hard times during the Japanese occupation and the Korean War. The Japanese, however, respected scholarship and left our house and the library untouched. During the Korean War, as North Koreans invaded, my husband was away. So I put some books and rice on my head and took the children to escape. But we only got as far as the river because the bridges had been destroyed. I came back to the house, only to find North Korean troops there. But I made a kind of arrangement with them. I would do their cooking if they would leave the library and the house alone. In that way, we managed to save the books. But the Korean War did change many customs. Before the war, for example, when I went to see my relatives, I covered my face. After the war, we no longer followed that custom.

Through all the ups and downs, I managed to keep our family house intact. On New Year's Day, four generations come to pay their respects at the traditional family shrine. I even got the government to build a new library where our ancestors' scholarly books can be stored safely and people can come to study them.

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In many ways, this is the best time in my life — the window in my room looks out at the pine tree I planted 40 years ago. See how lovely it is in the snow and sunlight! My children are doing well and one of my granddaughters has been accepted to go to Ewha Womans University. My children's marriages were all arranged, but two of my grandchildren's were "arranged" only after numerous meetings with prospective partners. The grandchildren — that is my favorite time.

Another good time was my 60th birthday. By that time, my husband was dead and widows, in Korean tradition, are seen as too sad to celebrate such an occasion. So they don't usually have a party. But my family decided that I deserved such a birthday celebration anyway. What a grand occasion it was!

- Describe the matriarch's marriage. How did she adapt to married life?
- What are the matriarch's fondest memories?
- What religious and cultural values are reflected in Mrs. Park's actions and views?