[Opinion] Opening of Taipei Comfort Women Museum reunites Korean victim with former Taiwan president

The highlight of the December 10th opening day of the Ama (Taiwanese term of endearment for "halmuni" or "grandmother") Museum was the reuniting of Korean “Comfort Woman” survivor Lee Yong-soo with former President of Taiwan Ma Ying-jeou. Halmuni Lee, 89, who was kidnapped at the age of sixteen and brought to Taiwan to service kamikaze pilots at the Hsinchu air base, had last met with Mr. Ma during his tenure as Taiwan’s President. The two embraced each other as old friends. Lee stated that, despite the horrific experience of being repeatedly raped on a daily basis as a young girl, she considers Hsinchu on Taiwan as her “second hometown after Daegu, Korea.” Halmuni Lee spoke of the bittersweet irony of the fact that many of the Japanese pilots she was forced to service spent their last night with her before flying off to their suicidal deaths.

Former President Ma stated that the words “Comfort Women” were a misnomer and should only be used with quotation marks around the words. Ma said that the correct words for what halmuni Lee and other victims endured would be “military sex slaves.” He said that the “Comfort Women” issue represents an international human rights and women’s rights issue and should be recognized as such not only by the international community but by the Government of Japan as well. President Ma noted the especially harsh taboo in conservative Asian societies for women to discuss anything of a sexual nature, especially when it involves abuse. He pointed out that that was the reason that victims in Taiwan and other countries failed to come forward for almost half a century after the conclusion of the Second World War. He specifically praised the Korean “Comfort Women” victims who had the courage to come forward and publicly discuss their victimization in 1992.

Taipei Women’s Rescue Foundation (TWRF) Executive Director Kang Shu-hua noted that the December 10th date for the museum opening, the first such museum in Taiwan, was deliberately chosen as it is UN Human Rights Day. Ms. Kang described the years of effort expended by TWRF in order to locate both an appropriate site for the museum, a 90-year-old building near downtown Taipei, and to raise the necessary funds for its construction. TWRF Chairperson Shu-Ling Hwang emphasized the universality of the issue raised by the opening of the museum, violence against women in armed conflict. She noted that this is an issue that continues to be relevant in today’s world.

The “Comfort Women” victims from Taiwan, estimated by TWRF to include “about 2,000, possibly more, Taiwanese women aged 14 to 30,” included both indigenous aboriginal women from the island as well as Han Chinese. TWRF established a hotline in 1992 for survivors to call and identified 58 victims in Taiwan. Only three survive until today. One of them, “ama” Chen Lien-hua, 92, attended the museum’s official opening ceremony. The other two Taiwanese victims reportedly choose to maintain their anonymity. Taiwan’s Culture Minister Cheng Li-chun, who also attended the official ribbon-cutting ceremony, noted that “as a woman, I admire the courage of the ‘amas.’” The museum includes both
biographical information on a number of the Taiwanese victims as well as artwork prepared by them. TWRF conducted wellness workshops on a regular basis for the identified victims between 1996 and 2012. The workshop participants made use of artistic expression as a form of therapy in dealing with the post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from which they suffered as a result of extensive physical and emotional abuse.

Despite repeated denials by both official and unofficial circles in Japan, TWRF has chronicled extensive documentation verifying the “Comfort Women” military-established brothel system. A copy of a declassified official U.S. Government document, titled “Amenities in the Japanese Armed Forces,” published on November 15, 1945 “by command of General MacArthur,” was presented to TWRF as a part of the opening ceremonies. This report, widely referred to as the “MacArthur Report,” lists as its sources of information as being “captured documents and statements of Prisoners of War.” It contains specific information about the organized trafficking of both Taiwanese and Korean women to Southeast Asia: “embarked at FUSAN on 10 July 1942 in a group of 703 girls, all Korean, and some 90 Japanese men and women...They sailed on a 4000 ton passenger ship in a convoy of seven ships. Free passage tickets were provided by Army headquarters...They called at Formosa, where 22 girls bound for Singapore were taken on board, and at Singapore they transferred to another ship, arriving at Rangoon on 20 August 1942.”

International delegations attended the museum’s opening ceremony, the largest being from Japan. This delegation included Mina Watanabe, General Secretary of the Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) in Tokyo, and Eriko Ikeda, WAM’s Chair of the Board. The delegation from South Korea included Professor Heisoo Shin, Director of the “Voice of the Comfort Women project for UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register,” Shin-Kwon Ahn, Chairman of the House of Sharing (residency for “Comfort Women” victims), Jeung Seun Anyi, Representative from the Daegu Citizen Forum for Halmuni, and Kuk-Yom Han, Co-Representative of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. The American delegation consisted of Phyllis Kim, Executive Director, Korean American Forum of California and her husband, Roy Hong, Tomomi Kinukawa, Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies, University of California, Berkeley, and Dennis Halpin, Visiting Scholar, U.S.-Korea Institute, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. There was also a delegation present from mainland China, demonstrating cross-Strait solidarity on the “Comfort Women” issue and other issues related to WWII history.

Members of the Korean delegation noted the continuing efforts of Taiwan to achieve a formal settlement with Japan regarding its “Comfort Women” victims. These efforts have so far been rebuffed by Tokyo. The Korean delegates cautioned their Taiwanese counterparts, however, that the agreement reached between Seoul and Tokyo last year regarding the Korean “Comfort Women” was highly flawed and should not be used as a model for any future Taiwan-Japan “Comfort Women” agreement. Phyllis Kim of the Korean American Forum of California also criticized the Seoul-Tokyo agreement reached last year, noting that it did not include any pre-consultations with the “halmuni” victims like Lee Yong-soo who was present in Taipei for the museum opening. Ms. Kim noted that any agreement which does not include the input of the views of those who were directly victimized is obviously not acceptable.

The American delegation brought a congratulatory letter on the museum opening from U.S. Representative Mike Honda of California, the chief sponsor in 2007 of House Resolution 121 calling upon the Government of Japan to “formally acknowledge, apologize and accept historical
responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces' coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as 'comfort women.'"

The opening of the first "Comfort Women" museum in Taiwan is a continuation of over two decades of efforts by the Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation to achieve justice for the 58 identified victims on Taiwan, three of whom survive until today. The opening of the AMA Museum also demonstrates that the "Comfort Women" issue is international in nature, not merely a bilateral Korean-Japanese issue. The issue of violence against women continues to have relevancy, given sexual assaults in armed conflicts occurring today in the Middle East, Africa, Myanmar and elsewhere around the globe.

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The views presented in this column are the writer's own, and do not necessarily reflect those of The Hankyoreh.

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