

Impact Statement

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The Story of the Golden Plum Flower, 2024.

Digital art.

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Unsung Hero: Kim Hak-Sun

As a student learning about the importance of history, I believe it is crucial to recognize the achievements of historical figures and the changes they brought about. Therefore, I started the ARTEFFECT project with the conviction that it is imperative to revisit and commemorate the lives and achievements of unsung heroes. We have the power to give great value to this endeavor. In pursuing this conviction, I compiled a list of names of many hidden heroes and documented their achievements. While reviewing the list, I came across Kim Hak-Sun, a former comfort woman, whose story immediately captivated my interest. Kim Hak-Sun bravely spoke out against the silence surrounding the issue of comfort women, who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese military during World War II. Before coming to the United States, I lived in Korea and was deeply moved to anger and sadness upon learning about the plight of comfort women. Young women were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military for various purposes. These women endured years of abuse and human rights violations in a brutal and barbaric chapter of history. Their lives as comfort women were characterized by a complete loss of human dignity. Violence and rape were commonplace, and many wished for nothing but death, having lost all will to live. This shocking reality remained largely unacknowledged even after Korea gained independence from Japan, largely due to the deception of the Japanese government and the conservative attitudes towards women's chastity prevalent in Korea at the time. Additionally, the Japanese government attempted to erase records of comfort women and exerted social pressure to maintain silence on the issue. In such circumstances, Kim Hak-sun refused to remain silent. She bravely testified about her experiences, breaking the silence and bearing witness to the atrocities she endured. Her courage in speaking out, not only for herself but also for her fellow victims and for the sake of the future, in a situation where everyone else turned a blind eye and concealed the past, is commendable. The achievements and courage of Kim Hak-sun are truly inspiring. She bravely broke the silence surrounding the comfort women issue and actively testified about her experiences, leading to historically significant changes. Her story serves as a reminder to us of the importance of history and human dignity. I am grateful for her courage in preserving the truth of distorted history through her testimony.

Following Kim Hak-Sun's testimony, other surviving comfort women also found the courage to speak out. Kim Hak-Sun's noble spirit has indeed reshaped the course of post-war Korea.

Inspired by her pure spirit, I was moved to transcend the cowardice of remaining silent when others choose to close their eyes and ears, and to approach history with the proper and beautiful attitude of preventing past atrocities from recurring. While further researching the issue of comfort women, I discovered an animated film produced in Korea based on real individuals. Watching the animation, I realized the fundamental reasons why it is necessary to portray unsung heroes like Kim Hak-Sun through art. Towards the end of the video, there is a clear depiction of the public's lack of knowledge or misunderstanding regarding comfort women. While some surviving victims felt discouraged by this portrayal, they also found courage knowing that there are people who listen to and acknowledge Kim Hak-Sun's story. When someone brings up lesser-known, hidden histories and people listen to them, history is preserved, and people feel a sense of responsibility towards it. It was Kim Hak-Sun's testimony and the testimony of other victims inspired by her courage that brought the issue of wartime sexual violence to global attention, ultimately laying the foundation for a global commitment to combating sexual violence.

The primary goal was to introduce Kim Hak-Sun as a hero to the audience. Firstly, the dark depiction of the rising sun flag on the right symbolizes the dark side of war, with Kim Hak-Sun, one of the comfort women, positioned in the center of the rising sun. The lines extending from the rising sun represent the arms of the Japanese military, symbolizing the hardships imposed on her. This depicts life as a comfort woman. Therefore, although the flowers representing the girl's dreams, such as the golden plum blossoms, are broken, they are not completely shattered, indicating that Kim Hak-Sun's survival as a comfort woman and her future have not been entirely erased. The reason for depicting such scenes is to illustrate the painful facts and the course of heart-wrenching history. The sunset-illuminated sky in the center symbolizes her advanced age, coexisting with the sky and her childhood self, indicating that the memories of suffering still linger in her heart. The scars created by the cruelty of comfort women cannot be erased, depicted by flowers and clothes burnt in flames. The flowers surrounding her are magnolias, symbolizing "noble spirit." Many magnolias represent the precious and courageous testimonies of other victims she has inspired. The bright blue sky symbolizes the bright future she has created through her testimony. Kim Hak-Sun holds a golden plum blossom in her hand. Although she is no longer a girl, holding the flower symbolizes her remembering her girlhood and hoping that the dreams of other girls will not be trampled upon. The reason she is looking at her side is that she is testifying about her past while looking at not just one person, but many people in the audience. To indicate Kim Hak-Sun's contribution to establishing the global foundation of wartime sexual violence laws, bright colors were used for her, and clear, shining eyes were drawn. By using light and darkness in the painting to depict the lives of Kim Hak-Sun and other victims succinctly, the overall depiction portrays their testimonies as highly noble.

My school is creating an Unsung Heroes exhibit where people will see my painting and remember Kim Hak-Sun as a survivor of comfort women who bravely testified, and I hope they remember it for a long time.