

# Sonju

*A novel*

*by* Wondra Chang

**MADVILLE**  
P U B L I S H I N G

Lake Dallas, Texas

Copyright © 2021 by Wondra Chang  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

This is a work of fiction. The characters, their names, lives, and the place called Maari are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher. Actual places, historical figures, and events are mentioned and described as part of the historical background. Those figures and events are depicted with the characters' opinions the way they would have understood them.

Requests for permission to reprint material from this work should be sent to:

Permissions  
Madville Publishing  
P.O. Box 358  
Lake Dallas, TX 75065

Author Photograph: Bobby McKinney  
Cover Design: Jacqueline Davis  
Cover Art: stock photo by Raker, licensed through Shutterstock.com

ISBN: 978-1-948692-58-8 paperback, 978-1-948692-59-5 ebook  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020941276

# Part One

## Seoul, 1946

At the sight of the two tall Americans in military uniforms walking ahead of her toward the Korean Central Administration Building, Sonju's heart beat a little faster. A month after America dropped atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one of her Japanese classmates in high school came to her house to say goodbye and they had cried together. That was well over a year ago. Sonju took another glance at the broad backs of the Americans before she turned left to cross the cobblestoned boulevard. She tightened her grip on the thinking-stone in her gloved hand and hurried, swallowing the dry November air that scraped her throat, puffing white smoke with each breath. The eighth house from the corner, a newly whitewashed traditional house, Misu had told her. After a fourth knock, the varnished wooden gate opened halfway and a young maid's cocked head appeared.

"I'm your mistress's friend," Sonju said.

The maid opened the gate to let her in, and Sonju marched into the courtyard and on toward the living quarters. The maid dashed by Sonju, craned her neck toward the living room and announced in an urgent tone, "You have a visitor, Ma'am."

Misu opened the frosted glass door and her face lit up like the first flower in spring. "Ah, it's you." She hooked her arm into Sonju's and walked toward a room, her long satin dress whispering with each step she took. In Misu's marriage room, everything was new and shiny—freshly varnished paper floor, a double wardrobe against one wall, next to it neatly stacked floor pillows, and on another wall, three works of blue-and-white porcelain pottery displayed on a low credenza. One of them cradled Misu's thinking-stone like a prized jewel. Sonju smiled and touched the stone in her pocket. Kungu, Misu, and Sonju each had picked a small flat stone at a church garden when they were still in elementary school and called them "thinking-stones."

Sonju took off her coat and gloves. As she lowered herself to a floor pillow, she glanced at the embroidered flowers on Misu's pink skirt, then briefly dropped her gaze to her own grey wool dirndl skirt. "You're glowing, Misu. Marriage suits you well."

Misu's small cherry lips turned up and her thin eyes twinkled. She quit smiling and studied Sonju's face. "Something's wrong. Tell me."

After a slow sip of hot roasted barley tea, Sonju said, "This morning, my mother announced that my sister is promised in marriage. The wedding is in April. She said her daughters will not marry out of order." She ran her fingers over the pillow's piping until it turned a corner. "I'm not ready yet."

"When will you be ready? You're almost twenty."

"You're keeping track of my years too?" Sonju winced inwardly at her own shrill voice and this time said in a softer tone, "I want to marry Kungu." Then she asked, "What do I do?"

Misu's brows jumped up. "Marry Kungu?" She sighed as if weary, and said, "We should have stopped seeing him when we started middle school. There is a good reason why boys and girls are separated at that age."

Sonju wanted to say something just as condescending, but said, "But we didn't. The three of us swore lifelong friendship on the thinking-stones. I told you I wasn't going to quit my friendship with Kungu just because I reached the age of twelve."

"We were lucky we didn't get caught with him. But marriage?" Misu shook her head. "Surely, you have better sense."

Better sense? Sonju took a long breath and said to herself, patience, patience. "I also told you if you had been born into a family like his, I would still be your best friend."

Sonju watched Misu chew on her lower lip for a while and said, "Misu, it's my life to live, not my mother's, not anyone else's. The choice should be mine. Unlike our parents, we received a modern education, not that staid Confucian philosophy. For years, we talked about living a modern life."

"You and Kungu did."

It was a mistake to come. Crushed, Sonju tried again.

“Kungu and I understand each other. There are things we want to do. We will be equal partners in marriage having equal voice. How can I give him up?”

Misu’s head moved side to side. “Your parents will never approve.”

Sonju had resisted her mother’s push for marriage for almost two years already. “One more year is all I need,” she said. “By that time Kungu will have graduated and secured employment. We can get married then. Even if I have to elope.” It wasn’t as though she hadn’t thought about leaving home for a year, but where would she go? How would she support herself?

Misu said, “You *can’t* elope. What would that do to your family?”

Sonju wanted to argue what not marrying Kungu would do to *her*, but said, “I came here to see if you can help me come up with an idea to dissuade my mother.” She rose to leave. Sonju had no choice now but to plead with her mother.

Early the next morning, Sonju knelt on the floor across from her mother in her traditional Korean clothes with her hair pulled in a tight knot held at the nape with a lavender jade hairpin. She looked at her impeccably dressed mother and marveled at how alike they looked with big features on square faces, yet so different in their temperaments and outlooks.

Her mother was studying a ledger at her low table sitting tall, mouth firmly closed, her gaze straight on the ledger, and not stirring. Sonju’s heart thumped at the thought of what she was about to ask this steely, disciplined woman who was so contained that not a drop of blood would rise on her skin at the prick of a needle.

When she was five, Sonju discovered that not all mothers were like hers. She had gone to Misu’s house and saw Misu’s mother combing her daughter’s hair, all the while talking in a soft, tender voice. After she was done, she cupped Misu’s face and smiled. Back at home, a comb in her hand, Sonju had asked

her mother to comb her hair. Her mother stared at the comb, then at her with a look of scorn. That was the moment her five-year-old heart crumbled. She lowered her head and retreated to her room like a scolded dog. She decided then not to ever need her mother. Now she had to plead with this same mother to wait one more year.

“Forgive me, Mother. I need to tell you something.”

Her mother slowly raised her head, lifted her chin, and glanced down at Sonju.

After a quiet big breath, then again, and once more, Sonju swallowed hard and took one more deep breath. “I want to wait a year, then marry a Seoul National University student I know.” Her own voice roared in her ears. Did she say those words correctly? She took another big, quiet breath. Like an animal confronted by a predator, Sonju kept her body still and waited for her mother to pounce.

After a long silence, her mother asked, “How do you know this man?”

“I have known him since I was seven.”

“Why haven’t you told me about him?”

“Because I knew you would not approve.”

“Why would I not approve?”

“He is fatherless and poor.”

Her mother kept her eyes on her. Sonju knew what that meant. She would have to say more. Her stomach coiled with each stifled breath. “He and his mother live at his uncle’s house.” Her mother continued to stare. Sonju buckled. “His uncle is a merchant.”

“Then you know you cannot marry this man. From now on, you will not leave the house unaccompanied.”

Sonju leaned forward. “I will not be happy with anyone else. He will graduate in a year. He will be successful. You will see. Let me wait, Mother. Please.”

“Have you shamed our family?”

“No, Mother.”

Instantly, she knew she had made a mistake. “Yes” would

have forced her mother to reconsider. Her future with so much promise was now wiped out. Her body went limp and her fingers had no grip left.

Her mother slammed the ledger closed. “We are done with this conversation.”

Sonju shivered at her mother’s last words as if a slab of ice had been thrown at her. Soon the heat of seething anger surged up to her neck. I hate her, she said to herself as she retreated to her room. If only she had said yes. It could have changed her life.

Her mother began to meet with marriage brokers, and after only six days, had a prospect—an engineering student at Seoul National. “You have a viewing in four days,” her mother came into her room and told her, “His family is well established in Choongnam Province.”

“Why are you rushing so?”

“The sooner the better, the farther away the better.”

Sonju realized her mother meant to banish her. A torrent of sobs broke out. She cried into her hands, her arms pressed to her chest and writhing. The next minute, she heard her mother rise and leave the room. A whoosh of cold air rushed in and slapped her back. In spite of telling herself all those years that she didn’t need her mother, her wrenching reaction told her otherwise. She was powerless. She cried in shame until she was exhausted.

The following morning her father called her to the men’s quarters and said, “The engineering student is a good prospect for you. The marriage broker told your mother that he comes from a progressive family. You should be happy with him.”

Her father had spoken.

Back in her room, she sat leaning on the wall and stared blankly with not even a fingertip moving. Beyond her window, one bright orange persimmon hung on a leafless branch. A brown bird flew over and perched. The persimmon fell.

Sonju knew what fate waited for her. It was the same for all women once they married—submission to a husband and his



family. Submission—she was familiar with it. During fifth grade, in front of the whole class, her Japanese teacher had struck her open palms with a bamboo stick for speaking Korean instead of Japanese. Two quick strikes, sharp and hot. When she tried closing her hands, her fingers curled only halfway. She bit down on her lip and willed herself not to show tears. On the way to her seat, she saw her Korean classmates lower their eyes as she passed by. A lump came up in her throat. Back in her chair, she sat tall with steady eyes on the teacher and her chin out in defiance. Below her desk, her hand furiously rubbed the thinking-stone in her pocket, and she felt every angry nerve of the rising welts on her palms. She wanted to remember that pain. She wanted to remember that anger. That semester and going forward, she outperformed all the Japanese students in her class in every subject taught.

Disproving the Japanese superiority was easier than finding a way to defy her mother. But thinking back, she had, in fact, defied her mother for many years without her mother knowing: there was a walled church garden with a long wooden bench under a tree. She and Misu had found it one afternoon after school when they drifted away some distance from home. The place was quiet with rarely anyone passing through other than a smiling yellow-haired priest. The brick-paved ground was always swept up, and every season, different flowers bloomed and lush green plants crowded under evergreen shrubs. One day, a boy showed up. He came almost every day so the three became friends. He was one year older and helped Sonju and Misu with their homework. They played games and chatted before going home. That was the happiest part of her day.

On the day of Sonju's viewing, her mother entered her room, ignored Sonju's puffy eyes, and made her change into a traditional Korean dress. She said, "You will marry this man. His family owns extensive farmland and all the sons received university educations."

After her mother left her room, Sonju tried not to cry. She started counting instead while she paced and occasionally

tripped on her long skirt. Before she reached four thousand, her mother called for her.

Sonju entered her mother's room and sat with her heavy, puffy eyes downcast. She felt the student's mother watch her every move. The woman told her to turn her face this way and that as if to study some merchandise. Afterwards, she nodded in approval toward Sonju's mother.

Back in her room, Sonju sat in the corner farthest from the door and rocked back and forth. How would she live without Kungu in her life? All her future dreams and plans included Kungu. She closed her eyes and saw his face when he was eight and every smile and every gesture since that time. She saw his long fingers, broad forehead and generous mouth, and his eyes that conveyed his thoughts and feelings without words. She could hear his calm voice, his slow release of the first word in a sentence, and his soft laughter. She loved him so.

Her dreams and plans had started long before. One day, she saw her Japanese classmates look at an open page of a magazine and giggle. When she asked if she might look at it, one of them told her to get a copy herself and pointed to the further right. She found a cramped used bookstore three blocks away from school where a small middle-aged man greeted her in poor Japanese. She grabbed a magazine with a photograph of a gathering of American people. In the foreground was a smiling boy looking at a girl adoringly. The following page showed pictures of boys and girls dancing. They looked carefree and happy. She told herself her future could be like that.

On the sixth day after the viewing, her parents announced her marriage date, February twenty-fifth, two days before she would turn twenty. She retreated to the corner of her room and whimpered like a beaten animal. She locked herself in her room and refused to join her sister and brother at mealtime, so a maid placed a tray of food at her door.

She recalled her first awakening of love for a boy. She was

fifteen. She was with Kungu sitting on the church bench. She pointed to an article in a Japanese magazine and waited until he finished it. "Did you read the part that Americans choose their own marriage partners?" He nodded. "What an idea!" she said, grinning. "In that case, I choose you, Kungu, as my marriage partner." Then he surprised her by saying, "I choose you, Sonju, as my marriage partner." Then they looked at each other and blushed. On the way home that day, she bit down a smile hugging herself to contain her joy. As days, weeks, and months passed, her imagination soared. On one particular night, she watched the moonlight through her window and imagined herself standing in its low glow in a lush garden somewhere. Kungu moved toward her with the scent of a gentle breeze of early summer air. She went to him. There, where the white flower petals glistened like silver, he gazed into her eyes and embraced her. Every night, she visited the same images again and again, folding her arms in an embrace while imagining Kungu's arms around her.

She woke from her reverie when her younger brother's high-pitched voice rang from the courtyard, "So, Mother, my sister's husband's family grows rice trees?"

Husband? Sonju sat straight up and heard her mother snort and say, "Rice doesn't come from trees. It is a grass. You have eaten rice three meals a day your whole life and you didn't know where it comes from." Sonju squeezed the thinking-stone and watched her knuckles turn white.

## Maari, 1947

As the train came to a stop, its metal wheels screeched as if they resented having to halt. Sonju steadied her headdress with one hand, and with the other, lifted her shiny ceremonial coat and dress above her shoes. She took a step down. A whiff of heat from the engine and the acrid smell of burned coal surged up and prompted her to pause and turn her head. Her mother nudged her and said, "This is a short stop."

The moment Sonju's feet touched the ground, two men in crisp traditional garb carrying a bridal palanquin on their shoulders sauntered toward her and squatted a few meters from her. On the palanquin were painted writhing dragons with their open mouths and red tongues that appeared to leap out of the swirls of red, green, blue, and gold paint. Good luck? More like menace, Sonju scoffed silently.

She saw a dozen village women in long Korean dresses close around her, and before she had a chance to take a deep breath, strong arms on each side of her steered her through the palanquin's narrow door. Seated in the cramped box, Sonju straightened her voluminous dress, and thought how incredible all this seemed. In Seoul, a rented shiny black sedan instead of a painted box would have carried a bride. It all seemed a farcical play of the old Korea, but it was happening to her in real time.

Upon a woman's signal with her raised hand, the head palanquin carrier barked, "One ... Two ..." At three, the palanquin lifted and soon rocked and tilted with each step the men took down the steep slope. Sonju pushed her toes to the floor with all her might so as not to lurch forward. She remembered to keep her head modestly dipped, her face composed, and not to look anyone in the face, not even the laughing and bouncing young village children following alongside the palanquin.

To her left, on the uneven sloping ground, Sonju spotted patches of iced snow that the sun could not reach to defeat the

winter's last stand. Nearby and far off into the distance, she could see nothing but stark, lifeless farmland. No rows of shops, no markets, no office buildings, no paved roads. Was this what her parents wanted for their daughter? Couldn't they see it was all a mistake? She remembered then that they were putting her away out of reach of Kungu. She tightened her jaw.

People's muffled voices came from the wedding procession trailing behind, and once in a while her mother's sharp Seoul accent stood out. Sonju stared at her clasped hands. A month ago, her sister accompanied her to the used bookstore, her safe place to meet Kungu since high school. She had hoped to see him and say good-bye, but after half an hour, asked the owner to pass her note to him. Even now the image of Kungu with her note in his hand caused her throat to close up.

After jolting and tilting for a while, the palanquin came to a wide dirt road below, then jostled uphill until it reached a large outer courtyard on a high plateau. At the end of the courtyard was a house with a series of papered doors and a long, narrow covered porch. As the palanquin proceeded toward the house, the wafting odor of meat, poultry, fish, vegetables, and steamed rice grew steadily stronger.

"The bride is here!" a boy yelled and darted in through the open gates of dark wood. Several people peeked out before the palanquin passed through the double gates and entered the inner courtyard. All around, people filled the courtyard like beansprouts growing in a bowl. They pushed, shoved, bobbed their heads, and talked in hushed voices in the slow dragging dialect of the central south: "A modern woman from Seoul, from yangban class, I hear."

"An aristocrat, eh?"

"I hope she's not a snooty city woman like you know who."

"Do you think she is pretty?"

"She looks pretty in an unusual sort of way, I would say. Big eyes, dark eyebrows, thick lashes."

"A straight high nose, wide mouth, and square jaw."

"You know what they say. A woman with a high nose has a difficult fate."

“Hush! This is her wedding day.”

As soon as the palanquin stopped in the middle of the courtyard, two women in matching blue silk dresses broke out of the crowd and helped Sonju descend. Sonju raised her shaky hands in the formal bridal pose—her right hand over her left, palms down, her right thumb barely touching her forehead. After the three of them took their shoes off, the two women guided her to the anteroom where more people stood waiting. The crowd parted as Sonju and the two women proceeded to the middle of a large living room. She couldn't see much except the tips of her embroidered wedding slippers below her long red satin skirt. The women positioned Sonju at the front of the wedding table, and one of them told her to lower her hands to her waist. Her eyes still lowered, she found herself standing next to the groom in front of the roomful of old people in traditional clothing. They were sitting in a row, cross-legged and watching.

A booming voice rose from the opposite side of the groom, “The wedding ceremony will commence. The bride will bow twice to the groom and the groom once to the bride.”

She lowered herself to the floor in a formal bow, and as she rose, took a quick glimpse of the groom in a deep purple ceremonial robe and a black headdress. He was boyish-looking, clean and well-shaven with a short nose and a pointed chin. He was stocky and not much taller than she was. He was a stranger.

As instructed by the voice, she and the groom stood side-by-side and bowed to his parents, to her parents, and to other relatives in the first row. Next, the voice had the two women come forward. “Now, the bride will bow to her first sister-in-law, the widow of the eldest son. And then to her second sister-in-law, the wife of the oldest surviving son of Second House.”

As she knelt to bow, Sonju glanced at her first sister-in-law whose sallow face seemed to have never been acquainted with a smile. She was a thin, tall woman in her mid-thirties with her hair done in a married woman's style—a sleekly combed head with a tight bun at the nape of her neck. All the village women Sonju had glimpsed so far were wearing their hair in the same

severe way other than her second sister-in-law who had chin-length bobbed hair.

When the bowing was over, Sonju became a member of the Moon family. From this moment on, in this village, she would be called Her Husband's Wife, Daughter-in-Law, Sister-in-Law, and eventually, Her Child's Mother, but never Yu Sonju. She had become merely a person related to someone else with no identity of her own.

Her eyes were ready to moisten when she sensed movements around her. People were getting up and sitting back down. Tables were set and food was brought in. Plates and bowls were placed in front of each person at the table. Chopsticks clicked and spoons clanged. A few women urged her to eat, but being the bride, Sonju was mostly left alone. Lulled by the jumbled voices and laughter together with ripening odors of people, food, and alcohol, her thoughts drifted to how her life would be different than she had planned and how she would be kept out of all the happenings in Seoul.

Some hours must have passed because the daylight began to wane. There were exchanges of parting words and bowing heads when Sonju's parents rose to leave. Sonju stood in the anteroom and watched as her mother glanced at her, then while turning, touched her hair pin. Her mother soon passed by the garden and disappeared through the double gates. Sonju thought this was how her parents planned to discard her, like an unwanted baggage dropped at the foot of people she had never met. The indignity of it! Her anger superseded any feelings of fear, pain, or sorrow of separation.

She bit her lower lip hard and returned to her seat in the room where the guests were talking among themselves. She lowered her gaze to the valleys and mountains of the shiny satin folds of her ample skirt and thought of the easy days of play and friendships with Misu and Kungu. During her middle school, she once asked Kungu if he had ever lied to his mother. He replied, "No, she tells me to have the courage to be always truthful and to be guided by my conscience, then

one day I would know that I lived a good life.” Gazing at the boy who would not lie, Sonju had made a promise to herself not to lie again. She wanted to be worthy of his friendship. And here she was. Her marriage was a hoax. She would have to lie if asked why she married into this family, much below her class and a distance away from Seoul. She became angry at her mother again for putting her in a situation where she would have to lie.

A tap on her shoulder startled her. Sonju hadn't noticed that dusk had settled and the room was emptying out.

“You must be exhausted.” Second Sister smiled and helped Sonju stand. Sonju followed Second Sister and was led to a room where under a low light from a bulb hanging from the ceiling lay a white cotton *yo* mattress on the floor. A folded, deep red silk blanket covered the lower half of it, and two pillows lay side by side at the head of the *yo*. Sonju turned her head away from the bedding to the opposite end of the long room where, against the wall, sat a large wardrobe and two identical wedding chests that her mother had sent a week before.

Second Sister assisted her in removing the headdress and the robe, and when Sonju thanked her, her voice, not having spoken all day, was stuck somewhere in the back of her mouth and sounded like someone else's. Then she hesitated, swallowed, and looking at Second Sister, asked, “What now?”

After a quick glance at Sonju, Second Sister said with a smile, “Your husband will be in shortly.” She pointed at a floor pillow. “You can wait here.”

Sonju slowly sank onto a pillow next to the red blanket. All the marriage talks, yet her mother had never told her what to expect on the wedding night. Glancing at the *yo* then at Second Sister, she asked again with a slight quiver in her voice, “What now?”

Second Sister's brows jumped up for a split second, then came a delayed smile. “According to the custom, on the first night, your husband will undress you. You will bleed, a sign that you are a virgin and the marriage was consummated.”

Why would she bleed? She just had her menses two weeks



ago. Did the wedding in this village involve a ritual of cutting? Her breathing quickened. Before Sonju had a chance to ask, Second Sister said, "I laid an extra sheet on the *yo* for you. You want to save the stained sheet. Mother-in-Law may ask about it." She held Sonju's hand for a moment. "Your hands are shaking. I would stay here as long as you need me to but I think your husband is waiting." She turned and walked to the door.

Sonju dug her fingernails into her palms to stop the shaking and breathed in, held the breath, breathed out. Second Sister rested her hands on the doorknob, lingered, then left the room after a backward glance.

Shortly after, there was the sound of a man clearing his throat at the door. In his light blue baggy pants tied at the ankles, the groom walked in without the robe and the headdress he wore earlier. On his deep blue vest over the light blue shirt hung four amber buttons, which swung and caught the light from the lightbulb every time he moved. He took off his vest and gave her an awkward smile before he turned off the light. He sat on the *yo* and pulled her toward him. His grip was strong, and for a second, she was frightened. He proceeded to loosen the sashes of her bridal blouse and skirt and then another layer of blouse and skirt. She was left with only her underclothes. While he was doing the same with his clothes, Sonju turned clutching her underclothes. He laid her down, then stumbled in the dark to tug off the sash of her remaining clothes. She recoiled from his touch and clasped her clothes to her chest.

He whispered, "Here, move this way." He drew her to his chest, his hand roving on her underclothes again.

She pushed his hand away. "Please, don't."

"This is what married people do," he said. "Just ... stay still."

He undid the sash of her undershirt and pushed it up. She pulled it down. His breath hot and humid as he shuffled and untangled both of their clothes, then pushed her underskirt up to her waist and pulled her underpants off. She drew her knees up, but he pushed them down. He then got on top of her, fumbled, and opened her thighs with his hand. His flesh touched

hers. She felt pressure, and a sharp pain. She swallowed a quick gulp of air as her hands grabbed the *yo*.

He rocked, grunted, rocked, grunted on and on, then moaned and stopped moving. Finally, he rolled off of her. A thick liquid flowed on her thighs and on the sheet. So much blood. He must have broken her inside. And the smell of the man lying so close to her, a smell so bitter and unfamiliar—she couldn't stand it. She wiped herself with the sheet and moved to the edge of the *yo*, and with haste put her pants back on. She turned on her side away from him and wept quietly because she hadn't been able to stop him, because she couldn't stop her mother.

They were silent for half an hour or more. Neither of them moved. Then his hand gripped her shoulder and turned her body flat on the *yo*. He got on top of her again. She lay passively with her body tense and her hands in fists. The pressure came. "It hurts!" she sprang up, screaming between her teeth.

She sat and sensed him move closer with his extended hand. She moved away, straightened her underclothes, and tied the sashes in several knots. She waited until he stopped stirring before she lay back at the edge of the *yo* with her back to her husband, feeling throbbing pain between her legs. She closed her eyes, saw Kungu under the moonlight in the garden and smelled his scent that always evoked the warm early summer air. Her husband started to snore. She felt his presence at her arm's length and wondered if she lacked a moral bearing for thinking of another man while lying with her husband. But what else did she have now that was still hers alone?