

## Ex-Girlfriend Refuses to Testify in Murder Case

By KATHERINE E. FINKELSTEIN

A woman who the police said incriminated her boyfriend in a slashing murder that may have been inspired by her jealous rage refused to testify yesterday at his trial, invoking the Fifth Amendment repeatedly.

The woman, Claudia Seong, appeared before Judge Harold B. Beeler of State Supreme Court in Manhattan, without the presence of the jury that is hearing the case against her former boyfriend, Edmund Ko.

In a hushed tone, Ms. Seong — described by both sides in opening arguments as obsessive and violently jealous — said 37 times to a defense lawyer and a prosecutor questioning her, "I plead the Fifth Amendment," which holds that people cannot be forced to incriminate themselves in court testimony.

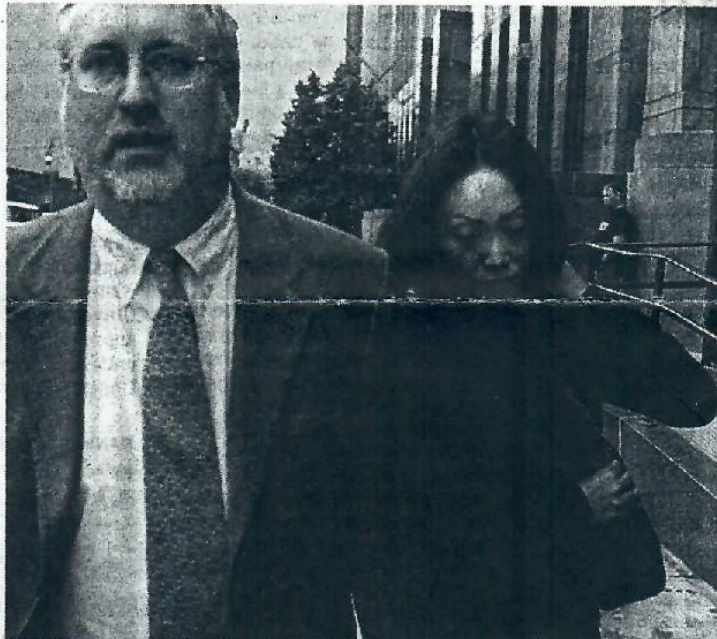
The defense has contended that Mr. Ko is innocent and that Ms. Seong and an accomplice killed Hye-seung Lynda Hong, a law student at Columbia University who had dated Mr. Ko.

Dressed in a severe suit and high heels, Ms. Seong did not change her tone, even when Mr. Ko's lawyer, Jack Litman, asked her, "Did you falsely incriminate Edmund Ko to the police to shift the blame away from yourself in the murder of Lynda Hong?"

"I plead the Fifth Amendment," she responded. Her only testimony was her name and age, 33, despite being peppered with questions about her relationship with Mr. Ko and her role in Ms. Hong's murder.

Ms. Seong's relationship with Mr. Ko, a man eight years her junior who was said by both sides in the case to be in her thrall, is central to the trial. Ms. Seong was investigated by a grand jury in Ms. Hong's murder, and is also facing charges of severely slashing another of Mr. Ko's ex-girlfriends, four months before Ms. Hong was found in March 1998 at her apartment on West 113th Street with her throat slashed.

Both sides have agreed in court on several points regarding Ms. Seong, among them: that she enlisted a young man, Jae Young Shin, to warn Mr. Ko's former girlfriends to stay away from him and to look away if they saw him on the street; and that the night before the murder, she grew enraged when she learned that Ms. Hong had responded to the ultimatum by saying that Mr. Ko had only dated prostitutes since the couple broke up two years earlier.



Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Claudia Seong, the former girlfriend of the man on trial in the murder of a Columbia student, and her defense lawyer, Arthur "Scott" L. Porter, Jr.

**A woman said to be central to a killing invokes the Fifth 37 times on the stand.**

Prosecutors contend that Mr. Ko then murdered Ms. Hong to show his devotion to Ms. Seong, while the defense argues that Ms. Seong carried out the attack with the aid of Mr. Shin, who has since fled to South Korea, a country from which he cannot be extradited.

Last Friday, Ann Prunty, an assistant district attorney, took the unusual step of discrediting evidence — a knife on which blood said to belong to Ms. Hong found in the New Jersey apartment of Mr. Ko's parents — that she previously had argued proved Mr. Ko's guilt.

After learning from the defense that Mr. Ko was locked out of the apartment at the time of the murder and could not have placed the weapon there, Ms. Prunty called a police laboratory technician testify that his own sloppy work may have led to inaccurate blood-test results.

The day began in Judge Beeler's

courtroom with a tense exchange as Mr. Litman argued to have Ms. Seong plead the Fifth Amendment before the jury, and Ms. Prunty argued to exclude the jury.

Ms. Prunty won, and Ms. Seong entered the courtroom flanked by two lawyers. Ms. Seong, who once lived with with Mr. Ko and had hoped to marry him at the time of the murder, never looked at him.

Mr. Litman then asked a series of questions, including whether she was jealous of Mr. Ko and whether she killed Ms. Hong. In response to all these questions, Ms. Seong invoked her right against self-incrimination.

Ms. Seong was then asked a series of questions by the prosecutor, which she also refused to answer. Although she said in an earlier police statement that after the murder Mr. Ko had confessed to her, she took the Fifth Amendment when Ms. Prunty asked, "Did Edmund Ko tell you that he murdered Ms. Hong?"

Before Mr. Litman's cross-examination, Judge Beeler insisted that he ask Ms. Seong whether she told the police that the bloody clothes found in a plastic bag in Ms. Hong's apartment belonged to Mr. Ko.

In fact, she had, according to a police statement. But yesterday, Ms. Seong did not answer the question.