

Special Feature

“Indifference to Sexual Love”?:
Representations of South Korean
Working-class Women’s Sexuality in
Recent Life Writing

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“Yi Oksun?”
 “Yes.”
 “Best of luck! How old are you?”
 “Nineteen.”
 “In the springtime of your youth!”
 “Who isn’t?”
 “Well, yours is over.”
 “Do you have a brother?”
 “Yes, I have two brothers.”
 Yay! A cheer erupts.
 “They’re not married?”
 “That’s right.”¹

The 1970s and early 1980s occupy a very special place in the history of the South Korean women’s labor movement. While the entire population was mobilized for export-driven industrialization and a modernization project initiated and propelled by the government, women workers in important areas of Korean industry organized an exceptionally spirited labor movement. Most people who lived through the 1970s and 1980s will likely still remember the notorious “dung incident,” or the “nude demonstration” at Dong-il Textiles, or the sit-in organized by the YH Trading’s women workers at the headquarters of the opposition party, as well as the pivotal role it played in the democracy movement. Women workers involved in the labor movement during this period at factories such as Dong-il Textiles, Wopung Textiles, Haitai Confectionary, and the YH Trading Company waged courageous fights against their employers whose brutal and cruel oppression was backed by the especially harsh authoritarian Yusin regime. Although an unusual level of feistiness characterized this phase of the women’s labor movement, it is also commonly observed that this movement led by female workers relinquished its leadership of the labor movement in favor of more combative male worker unionists towards the mid-1980s, a period in which South Korea’s authoritarian system began to weaken.

At approximately the same time the women’s labor movement was absorbed into a growing union movement, scholars began studying it in order to understand

1. This scene in Yi Oksun’s memoir that follows Oksun’s introduction to her dorm-mates at Wopung Textiles depicts how a greeting to Oksun by mostly teenage dorm-mates immediately turns into a lighthearted joke about their potential mates. See Yi Oksun 1990:43-44.

this rather singular phenomenon, partially intrigued by the sharp contrast between the movement's spectacular surge and its rather sudden stabilization. Interestingly, as Ruth Barraclough has already pointed out, many of this generation of Korean workers were also writers who often painstakingly recorded their experiences and were able to publish what they wrote (Barraclough 2005:290). Notably, more female workers wrote than their male counterparts, although male workers wrote and published substantially as well. By the mid-1980s, book-length memoirs by women workers, including Song Hyosun's *Seoul-ro ganeun gil*, Seok Jeongnam's *Gongjang-ui bulbit*, and Jang Namsu's *Ppaeatgin ilteo*, as well as a now canonical memoir by a male worker, Yu Dong-u's *Eoneu dolmaeng-i-ui oechim*, were already published. If we add to this group of writings such collections of essays and diaries by both male and female workers as *Bibaram sok-e pieonan kkot*, *Urideul gajin geot birok jeogodo*, and *Nodonghyeonjang-ui jinsil*, also published during the same period, we have clearly a very lively literary scene created by both female and male workers and their publishers. Meanwhile, in academia, scholars during this period began eagerly embracing this sort of non-conventional material in their research, in an attempt to break out of the traditional mold of scientist as a value-neutral and objective observer and to bridge the gap between theory and practice, or between science and real life. For the past two decades, a new generation of scholars including Chung Hyun Back, Yi Jeonghui, Jeon Hyejin, Kim Won, Ruth Barraclough and Jang Migyeong have been taking advantage of the presence of the above-mentioned life-writing texts in order to illuminate various aspects of working-class women's lives and attitudes throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Partially motivated by the desire to illuminate the reason why the women workers' movement dropped from notice in the 1980s, Chung Hyun Back's seminal study published in 1985 claimed that there was a meaningful delay in development in the attitude of this group of working-class women towards their personal lives. According to Chung, women workers show remarkably conservative attitudes towards personal and family matters and relationships, despite their progressive political consciousness (Chung 1985:131-34 and 136-39). Later researchers, however, challenged this claim by Chung, and illuminated aspects in the attitude of this generation of working-class women towards personal matters that were buried under many layers of surrounding discourse. As a result, Yi Jeonghui, Jeon Hyejin, Kim Won, Ruth Barraclough and Jang Migyeong persuasively argued for complexity in the attitudes of this group of working-class women towards their bodies, sexuality, families, and work, beyond and beneath what seems apparent

in some of their own writings. Recent studies by these scholars made it clear that the female worker's body was a space in which the ideologies of authorities such as government, employers, and parents on one hand, and the ideologies of workers themselves on the other, often clashed in a fierce contention. According to Jeon, if many female workers seemed to hold onto the ideology of femininity, it is not simply because they bought into patriarchal ideology, but also because they were fighting the way their body had to turn itself into a part of the gender-negating machine (Jeon Hyejin 2003:28-49). Jeon argues, therefore, that their pursuit of femininity has an aspect of resistance rather than simple surrender to the dominant ideology (Jeon 2003:63-72). Yi and Kim also argue that, if female workers appeared to be indifferent to their own sexuality, it is not necessarily because they were in fact indifferent to it or because they simply suppressed it, but rather because some of their sexual activities happened outside the boundaries allowed and approved by the authorities and their ideology (Yi Jeonghui 2003:168; Kim Won 2003:741). Regarding sexuality, Jang also maintains that, although women workers' sexuality was ruthlessly controlled and disciplined by "the state and capital," their socially marginalized status also allowed them to enjoy relative freedom from "the ideology of virginity," and to sometimes practice more experimental forms of marriage than their middle-class counterparts (Jang Migyeong 2006:103-104).

Although I largely agree with the various points summarized in the above paragraph, in this paper I would like to examine the attitudes of the 1970s and 1980s female workers towards sexuality in general by focusing on the life-writing texts written by workers themselves – both women and men. While reviewing previous studies on this subject, I was struck by the fact that most scholars seem to agree that either this group of female workers/writers expressed a significant level of conservatism towards their own sexuality or they were at best indifferent to sexuality in their own writings. Yi argues, for example, that "while patriarchal ideology is deeply inscribed in the body of women represented in workers' memoirs, sexuality is eradicated from it," and Kim makes fundamentally the same argument in his book (Yi Jeonghui 2003:157; Kim Won 2003:738). Both scholars argue that female workers were not indifferent to sexuality in actuality, but rather that sexuality is submerged in the workers' own writings (Yi Jeonghui 2003:168; Kim Won 2003:741). In the case of Jeon and Jang, they opted out of using memoirs and other materials authored directly by the workers, and instead base their arguments primarily on oral histories they gathered through in-depth interviews. The studies based on these interviews no doubt contribute greatly to explaining some of the

complexity found in the attitudes towards sexuality among the 1970s working-class women. Is it true, however, that female workers/writers expressed the dominant conservative attitudes or indeed indifference towards sexuality in their own writings, despite a much more complex reality which, as scholars argue, includes sometimes the opposite of conservatism? If our answer to this question were in the affirmative, what would be the reason(s) for this apparent discrepancy, or the unreliability of the female workers/writers with regard to sexuality? If our answer to this same question were in the negative, how can we explain this misperception by scholars?

There is no simple or readily available answer to these questions. To a certain extent, I also believe that some texts by female workers discuss matters related to sexuality with significantly less frequency than others. I do not find, though, this lack of openness “almost strange,”² as sexuality itself, let alone sexuality outside officially allowed boundaries, remained largely a taboo subject during the 1970s and 1980s when most canonical memoirs and other forms of life-writing texts were written and published (Hanguk Seong Pongnyeok Sangdamso 1999:11-15). Given this set of circumstances, it would indeed be “strange” if working-class women/writers in the 1970s more openly and directly discussed sexuality in their writings. In addition, many former union leaders wrote memoirs motivated to some degree by their desire to directly or indirectly advance the cause of their movement, and more or less strictly followed the narrative structure of a fight between good and evil: the good being the oppressed laborers and the evil being the oppressive employers and other authorities.³ In this line of narrative, working-class women’s sexuality, with its potential for controversy among mainstream readers of their memoirs would not have been helpful. Indeed it might have been downright harmful. More importantly, however, I find that some of these life-writing texts in fact exhibit much more open and progressive attitudes towards sexuality than scholars have so far perceived. If they appeared otherwise to researchers, I would argue that it could have more to do with automatic assumptions researchers might have applied to the examination of the texts at issue than with the inherent content of the texts themselves. Most researchers, for example, seem to focus their analyses more on lengthy memoirs by union leaders than shorter pieces by rank-and-file workers. With that in mind, this paper is an attempt to rethink and further cultivate a more complex way to read and interpret life-writing texts by working-class authors.

2. Both Yi Jeonghui and Kim Won called this perceived silence “almost strange.” See Yi Jeonghui 2003:166 and Kim Won 2003:738.

3. On this point, see Nam Hwasook’s article in the current issue of *The Review of Korean Studies*.

Methodologically, Chung Hyun Back combined historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches together in her paper by using various data, including historical records in a more conventional sense, survey results, and memoirs and essays. The methodology of this study was significant, as it was among the first examples of scholarly work in the field that based its main argument on life-writing texts. Later studies followed suit in using similar materials, whereby establishing it as a standard practice to draw on life-writing texts in discussions of this group of working-class women, whether the materials were diaries, essays, memoirs, or oral histories. Although this standard practice has been no doubt enriching to the ongoing academic discussion, along the way it has become clear that we need to pay more discerning attention to characteristics specific to different genres, and the gender of the author as well as other parameters while considering these highly individual and personal texts.⁴ Similar matters, for example, can be represented quite differently in a diary, which is a record of the day-to-day experiences of a rank-and-file worker and which is often not written for publication, than in a book-length memoir that is written years later by a union leader in order to promote a certain group or personal agenda. Given the patriarchal nature of the dominant ideology of sexuality at the time, there could also be significant gender differences in representing female workers' sexuality between texts written by female authors and those written by male authors. At times, it could be more helpful to look at texts written by men than by women in order to understand working-class women's behaviors and attitudes, as men could more openly discuss sexuality without risking their reputation in so doing. In the following I would like to examine working class women's sexuality through a variety of life-writing texts including diaries and essays written by both male and female authors and without automatically privileging canonical memoirs by former union leaders.

As mentioned earlier, sexuality was difficult subject matter to openly and directly discuss for more mainstream writers also in the 1970s and 1980s Korea. It was only in 1991 that the Korean Sexual Violence Relief Center, one of the first institutions to assist victims of sexual violence, was founded. Gu Seong-ae, one of the pioneers of public sex education, offered her first TV lecture series in 1998, sending a shock wave throughout the entire country. Under these circumstances, what would be remarkable is not that women workers/writers did not discuss sexuality in their writings, but that they discussed it – and in a fairly open and

4. Chung Hyun Back and Kim Won were aware of this necessity in their seminal paper and monumental book respectively. See Chung 1985:2-3 and Kim 2003:104-25.

direct manner. If we understand sexuality as “a concept that encompasses sexual desires, sexual identity and sexual practices as well as a concept that comprises all kinds of sexual feelings and relationships” (Hanguk Seong Pongnyeok Sangdamso 1999:24; Jang Migyeong 2006:73-74) rather than only sexual intercourse, then life-writing texts by women workers/writers are full of both indirect allusions and direct discussions of sexuality. In fact, they not only discuss sexuality in their texts, but also their attitudes towards sexuality are much more inventive than recent scholarship seems willing to acknowledge. According to Cho Eun and Kim Eunsil, “the sexual revolution” that the West underwent during the 1960s and 1970s produced a number of key changes in society: de-stigmatizing the open discussion of sexuality, enabling the discussion of tabooed/abnormal sexuality in mainstream discourse, enhancing the visibility of sexual minorities, and bringing pre- and extra-marital sexual relationships into a more socially and legally acceptable realm (Cho Eun et al. 2002:10). As we shall see in the following passages, if we apply similar indices in our measurement of attitudes towards sexuality expressed in life-writing texts by working-class authors, it is no exaggeration to say that those texts clearly show that working-class women in the 1970s Korea had attitudes far more progressive and “revolutionary” than mainstream middle-class norms.

There are certainly texts that show relatively little interest in sexuality per se. One such example is Seok Jeongnam’s *Gongjang-ui bulbit* (1984), one of the earliest and the most widely read and studied book-length memoirs by a former labor union leader. Even in this book, however, marriage is a leading matter of interest to the author and her fellow workers: subject matter which she very often reports that she and other workers discussed. Although she does not openly discuss sexuality in relation to marriage, clearly it would not mean that she is thinking of marriage as a purely asexual affair. In fact, it seems implicitly assumed in the memoir that this frequent allusion to marriage has to do with sexual energy brimming among young women workers. Seok is an avid reader of romantic poems (Seok 1984:18), she connects her friend Hongja’s frequent absences on Sunday with “bombaram (Seok 1984:19),”⁵ and her fellow union workers sing love songs together (Seok 1984:124). When we look at Jang Namsu’s *Ppaeatgin ilteo* (1984), another book-length memoir that received much scholarly attention, we find allusions to, and direct mentions

5. “Bombaram,” a word that literally means “spring breeze,” refers to a restless state of mind due to sexual energy that is looking for an outlet. This affliction is especially strong in spring, which is why it is called “spring breeze.” In Korean, “baram (breeze)” is figuratively related to a restless state of mind, often spurred by an amorous cause.

of, matters related to sexuality much more frequently. There are many descriptions of social scenes that include gentle flirtations between young men and women at every stage of her life – before she leaves her hometown, when she is imprisoned, and above all when she is working in the factory. In her hometown, young men and women, for example, socialize after gender segregated bathing in the river:

At mid-summer nights, a group of village girls and young brides would go to a river to bathe. On the riverbank, fireflies glow in the dark, lights bounce off rocks, and prankish guys giggle. Women bathe upstream in the shallow part of the river while the men bathe farther down where the water is deep. Late at night, everyone goes home except for young men and women who gather here and there and engage in animated conversation (Jang Namsu 1984:14).

This is certainly a description of a healthy social scene between young men and women, one reflective of the development of their sexuality. Jeong-bun, whom Jang meets in prison, takes every opportunity to flirt with guys (Jang Namsu 1984:75), and workers enjoy a sporting event, in which a cross-dressing man is cheerleading: “a funny uncle... is eagerly cheering in front, wearing a short skirt, stockings, and a long haired wig, and with protruding breasts perhaps from wearing a bra (Jang Namsu 1984:132-33).” These episodes allude to pre-marital as well as so-called “abnormal” sexuality in an entirely non-judgmental manner. As Barraclough has discussed in detail, the author is also keenly aware of aborted romances in this memoir, be it fictional like the ones in her favorite novels *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy and *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy, or those of actuality such as that of Unhui, her fellow prisoner, or of her own failed romance with Hyeonu (Barraclough 2005:293-308). It is true that matters related to sexuality are presented in a reserved manner in texts like *Gongjang-ui bulbit* and *Ppaeatgin ilteo*, memoirs with a focus on union activities, but it would be a gross exaggeration to say that they show positive indifference or downright conservative attitudes towards their own sexuality or that of their peers.

When we turn our attention to texts other than these canonical memoirs by former female union activists, we find fewer reservations in expressing awareness of desire and sexuality among working-class women. Personal diaries, for example, have the potential to include more descriptions of quotidian feelings about sexuality, precisely because of their private nature. In the case of published diaries, we should certainly be wary of editorial interventions and revisions. *Bibaram sok-e pieonan*

kkot (1980), a compilation of diary entries and essays by workers, comes across as a fairly authentic text that presents the lives and thoughts of rank-and-file workers without much editorial embellishment or distortion.⁶ Many entries in this text show that desire and sexuality were simply a part of everyday life for many workers despite their harsh reality of long hours and heavy labor. Choe Sunhui, a fifteen-year-old garment worker, for example, records her experience of wearing short pants to her night school and hearing a comment that the attire was “too sexy (Han 2000:52).” Choe also reports that she put a lot of thought into making a decision to give her close friend, Sunbok, *brassieres* as a Chusok (Harvest Festival) present. Sunbok responds with embarrassed “giggles (Han 2000:58),” and “she was so happy and excited that she rushed back home [to try them on] (Han 2000:58).” Kim Sukgyeong, an eighteen-year-old former garment worker and current electronics company assembly-line worker, conscious of the gaze of others, wonders about the color of her clothes: “Was it because I looked too sexy (Han 2000:257)?” After Bak Jeonghwa, an eighteen-year-old garment worker, watches the American movie *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, that includes a pre-marital sexual relationship, she writes in her diary, “When I read or watch a love story, I feel as if a stir is created in my peaceful heart. I would like to love like them (Han 2000:217).” A seventeen-year-old garment worker, Choe Sunhui, writes an entry in which her relationship with a personified sewing machine is described as if it is a young couple’s waxing and

6. One of the first compilations of this nature, *Bibaram sok-e pieonan kkot*, has a history of many vicissitudes from its production and publication in the later 1970s through its nearly immediate banning – which led to a forced retirement of its publisher and editor, Han Yun-su – to its second printing in 2000. Although the editorial intention is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the book’s authenticity, the editor’s personal sacrifice resulting from the publication of this book could add weight to his following testimony regarding his editorial intention to put together a collection of authentic life-writing texts by workers.

This book that was banned in 1980, as soon as it was published, changed the course of my life, as its publisher and editor. At the end of three months’ hiding, I had to hand Cheongnyeonsa Publishing Company over to a friend and junior alumnus and go to the countryside to live as a farmer. I have no regrets, however.

In early 1978, two college students who were teachers at a night school for laborers brought to me a collection of essays by laborers who were students at night schools in the Shillim- and Bongcheon-dong area. Resembling essays students were forced to write for a composition class, however, they did not contain their genuine life experiences. I asked the students to collect the diaries that contain their pupils’ candid life experiences and that betray their frank feelings. However, who would readily reveal their private lives to the public? Somehow, it took one and a half years to collect these diaries. It is only thanks to the devoted efforts of the student-teachers as well as the laborers’ generous sharing of their diaries that this book could see the light of day (Han 2000:5).

waning love relationship. She calls the machine “Mr. Sewing Machine,” and the troubled ups and downs of her relationship with it reads like a description of a typical boy-girl see-saw, as we can see in the following description of the beginning of her relationship with the sewing machine:

When I first hung out with Mr. Sewing Machine, I liked him so much. I whispered to him all day long, as if we were dear friends. While others were dozing off, I remained bright-eyed and developed a very intimate relationship with my dear machine. How close we used to be!
Now, I have grown so sick and tired of Mr. Sewing Machine that I have come to despise him. I am distant from him now. I cannot revive my true feelings for him so that I can have a dialogue with him (Han 2000:124).

As mentioned previously, Yi Jeonghui argues that one of the reasons for “the phenomenon of silence about sexual love in memoirs by workers (Yi Jeonghui 2003:168)” is that some female workers’ sexual activities happened outside the official boundaries allowed and approved of by the authorities and their patriarchal ideology. According to Yi, it is especially because “female workers’ sexual love took the form of *donggeo* (living together without marrying) (Yi Jeonghui 2003:168)” that they were silent about their sexuality. As shown in the example of Unhui’s story in *Ppaeatgin ilteo* above, however, women workers did not necessarily hesitate to record this “socially unacceptable form (Yi Jeonghui 2003:168)” of sexual love - and sympathetically at that. Bak Jeonghwa, an eighteen-year-old garment worker, records in one of her diary entries in *Bibaram sok-e pjeonan kkot*, “I was not ill at ease (Han 2000:214),” when an older fellow worker confessed, “Jeonghwa, I ... in fact live with someone I haven’t married (Han 2000:214).” Instead, she responds in a calm, supportive and sympathetic manner, “Wow, really! Who is it, sister (Han 2000:214)?” Upon being asked for an opinion from this fellow worker who cannot make up her mind between her recently-returned former lover, from whom she was forced to be separated due to circumstantial reasons, and her new lover who has been helping her through difficult times, she offers this advice without any sort of moral condemnation: “I told her that one shouldn’t marry because of pity and that she should break up with the current lover and go back to the previous one (Han 2000:215).” Her friend apparently does not follow her advice and ends up finding that her current lover had deceived her about his marital status. Throughout this entire episode, Bak is consistently non-judgmental and sympathetic to her friend’s

plight resulting from her sexual and amorous relationships (Yi Jeonghui 2003:168; Kim Won 2003:740).⁷

We can also see a range of romantic and sexual relationships in entries in *Bibaram sok-e pionan kkot* which are not just examples of simple curiosity on one hand and the “socially unacceptable form” of *donggeo* on the other. Jang Anna, a nineteen-year-old garment worker, for example, reflects on her feelings of attraction to a night school teacher: “Today’s class is social studies. Perhaps because I like the subject, I even like the teacher. It can’t be that I like him one-on-one. That cannot be (Han 2000:178).” A little later she also records how she develops closer relationships with her male fellow workers: “These days I talk and joke around with men in the factory. Just a while ago, I thought others talking with them must have been exceptionally bored to do that. These days, however, I somehow would like to talk with them (Han 2000:188).”⁸ Bak Jeonghwa, the above-mentioned garment worker, records the fact that a group of her friends “often stayed up all night, dancing and singing with guy friends (Han 2000:73),” and that each girl and guy became “partners (Han 2000:73).” She also discusses her friends who became hostesses at a bar – and therefore most likely prostitutes as well – and declares that she neither endorses nor blames her friends’ actions: “I don’t think ill of them. I cannot hate them, either. I don’t want, though, to praise and endorse them (Han 2000:74).” O Wonhui, an eighteen-year-old weaver, records a whole spectrum of relationships with boys. She establishes “a sibling relationship (Han 2000:79)” with Seung-ryeol, receives a fountain pen as a gift from another man identified only as “A” (Han 2000:84), and becomes disappointed because her anonymous boyfriend, whom she liked and therefore wanted to introduce to her mother, did not show up as promised (Han 2000:88-89). Clearly, all three men are her potential and real love interests, and the level of her love interest is reflected in the way she either states fully, partially or entirely obfuscates the name of the man.

Male workers’ texts also offer insights into female workers’ active interests in, and pursuit of, romance and sex. As expected from the patriarchal nature of societal attitudes towards sexuality, male workers, in general, appear to express their interest in and desire for love and sexual relationships somewhat more freely than female workers. Given the social structure and atmosphere, it is likely that their dates are mostly working-class women. Go Yeong-saeng, a twenty-year-old day laborer, for

7. Yi and Kim treat this episode as if it was exceptional, but it seems to me that it is more typical than exceptional of life-writing texts.

8. Kim Won also took notice of this passage in a similar context. Cf. Kim Won 2003:740.

example, confesses in *Bibaram sok-e pieonan kkot*: “To speak frankly, I would like to date a lot of women and live together with a pretty woman without marrying (Han 2000:152).” His diary entries show that he vigorously acted on his wish, as they record quite a few instances of his dates with different women, respectively called Yeongsun, Huisuk, and a nickname “Doeji (Pig).” In these entries, he certainly does not come across as a thoughtless or ruthless predator, but a sincere and earnest young man, actively searching for pleasure and love. In fact, examples of a similar nature abound in other diaries and essays by male workers, suggesting the existence of an active and diverse courtship and love life between working-class men and women. Yi Dal-hyeok, a male worker fired from Korea Fujica, for example, describes in a short memoir his excited anticipation of, and disappointment after, a meeting with a woman arranged by a fellow worker (Yi Dalhyeok 1985:31-32). The following verse inserted in his short memoir captures his exuberant excitement, which he felt while awaiting his first date:

Doing a slapdash job now at this moment,
 Why does the time go so boringly slowly today?
 Hey, you, Time!
 Hurry up, be gone!
 I am going for a date!
 What will she look like?
 She won't have two noses, will she?
 Perhaps trim and slender?
 No, perhaps
 She might be a cow.
 Finally the work is over.
 Ah, I'm so happy
 That I can jump and run wild with joy. (Yi Dalhyeok 1985:32)

On another note, Mun Seong-yeol, a male worker in a bookbindery, describes in detail his experience of a love affair *initiated* by a fellow female worker in his short memoir in another collection of essays and memoirs by workers (Yi Taeho 1986). This relationship begins with her proposal “to become friends (Yi Taeho 1986:228)” and goes through many phases of courtship including a love relationship and an eventual break-up, again initiated by the girlfriend (Yi Taeho 1986:229).

The above examples from diary entries, essays and short memoirs by mostly

rank-and-file workers, both female and male, clearly show that working-class women not only kept alive their interest in sex and their own sexuality despite harsh living and working conditions, but also that, together with male workers, they were quite open to recording and discussing it in writing. Also noteworthy from the above examples is the fact that most of them are not judgmental about those women whom the mainstream society would consider “fallen,” i.e. those who fall victim to seductive traps of pleasure and security or who simply choose to defy conservative societal norms and live with a lover without getting married. We can also find many examples of working-class women taking the initiative in their love life in their writings. Kwon Kyeong-sun, a thirty-year-old garment worker, describes in her short memoir that she is the one who took the initiative in developing her relationship with her future husband:

On an especially bright spring day, I made up my mind to send him a letter and wrote one, the gist of which was “I would like to be helpful to you, who always look lonely.” A few days later, I received a reply from him, in which he proposed to meet at the bench under the wisteria behind the cathedral. I was so happy that my heart was pounding hard (Kim Bokdong 1985:27).

Kwon also reports that she married him, “resolutely defying my family’s stubborn objections (Kim Bokdong 1985:27).” Chu Song-rye, a former Dong-il Textiles worker, also describes in her memoirs how she proposed living together with the man who later became her husband, a college student-turned-activist: “I proposed to him: ‘how about living together?’... It is through my decision that the two of us ... began living together without worrying about the consequences [of living together without marrying]” (Chu Songrye et al. 2001:82-83).

Chu’s example also questions the validity of an argument by Yi Jeong-hui that female workers held back their “feelings of sexual love” towards students and upper-class men (Yi Jeonghui 2003:166-67). It is certainly possible that Chu, a union leader, was an exception rather than the rule, but the following quote from a diary entry by Choe Sunhui, one that was cited by Yi as an example of working-class women’s suppression of their possible “feelings of sexual love” towards college students, actually seems to suggest otherwise.

Anyway, what was strange was that they seated us [me and my friend] next to two men in a coffee shop. Today’s partners, they said? ... They are college students? ...

What was our telephone number and which school did we go to? – their questions were too far from my reality. I didn't know why, but I felt frustrated by the fact that I was having a conversation with them. I tried to excuse myself and leave, but they tried to have me stay. I decidedly left, after promising to meet them later. I felt depressed. Why did I have to leave? Just because I work at a factory, I did not want to talk with them and I was afraid. *That was my mistake. But for knowledge, I could be equal to them as a human being.* (Han 2000:47; Italics added)

Choe decided, at the spur of the moment, not to entertain the possibility of any relationship with a college student, but she also thinks that this decision was a “mistake,” and she tells herself that she, as a human being, is equal to the students. Returning to Chu's memoir, it also shows examples of a rather flexible and innovative attitude towards love and sexuality, in that, after her first husband's death, she marries another man who proposes to her and whom she likes but is not convinced that she loves him, in hopes to grow to love him over time. Chu is flexible in her understanding of the range of love, and she is brave in acknowledging it. In a similar vein, Yi Ok-sun's memoir, *Na ije juin doe-eo*, shows that women workers did not consider marriage as the only avenue by which they might enjoy love and sexual pleasure. They may have been worried about how to “hold back and manage sexual desire (Yi Ok-sun 1990: 99)” if they decide not to marry, but that worry certainly did not intimidate Yi into marriage or her group members into giving up considering the option altogether. Pak Seong-hui, a former worker and a union leader at Sumida Electric, chooses to live with her boyfriend after a “donggeo ceremony,” a courageous and innovative choice, certainly one that does not fit into conventional middle-class societal standards (Bak Minna 2004:261).

Conclusion

In this paper, I did not intend to fully cover the breadth and depth of female workers' lively and dynamic attitudes towards their own bodies, as well as love and sexuality. Instead, I attempted to understand them through writings by the workers themselves, as I believe that they are a much more telling resource than has been appreciated so far. In order to achieve this goal, I have tried to shift our focus from more canonical texts written at the early stage of life writing by former female union

leaders, to diaries, essays, and short memoirs by female and male workers who represent a broader spectrum of participation in the labor movement. Over the course of the past three decades, writings of this nature have become progressively more available and this increased information certainly contributes to our improved understanding. I would like to emphasize, however, that this is essentially a matter of perspective rather than how many texts are available, as most texts I examined came out during the early to mid-1980s, including *Bibaram sok-e pieonan kkot*, one of the earliest texts of this nature. I would like to conclude my argument by again pointing out that, by broadening and balancing the scope of texts, I was able to illuminate that the 1970s and 1980s working-class women maintained a considerable level of interest in sexuality, and that they were active, courageous, resourceful and innovative in following this interest. Regarding this progressive aspect, I also would like to reflect on an argument by other scholars that *donggeo* was the relatively easier path for working-class women than for their middle class counterparts because it was for them a measure to economize their cost of living (“Saenggyehyeong donggeo”) (Yi Jeonghui 2003:168; Jang Migyeong 2006:104). Jang, especially, claims:

This kind of *donggeo* practice is very different from today’s concept that considers it for its emotional aspect, or from the point of view of sexual freedom, or as an experimental form of marriage. Whereas middle- and upper-class women were under the condition in which it was difficult to consider *donggeo* under the protection and surveillance of their parents and relatives, *donggeo* was a relatively easy choice for women workers (Jang Migyeong 2006:104).

There is certainly some truth to this claim that it might have been easier for young women, distant from their hometown and family, to live with a lover without marrying, especially when it meant economizing their living expenses. It is also true, however, that this relative “ease” did not mean that *donggeo* for working-class women was an entirely risk-free step. If they simply had to economize on their living expenses, they could have chosen to live with their friends or roommates rather than living with their boyfriends. In order to live with a boyfriend, they consciously made a choice that was not fully endorsed by their peers and neighbors, as well as their parents and relatives. It seems only reasonable to assume that the working-class men and women would have brought the same desire and determination to “be a

human being” into the area of sexuality as to their work, as shown in an essay by an anonymous male worker at a metal factory:

I need time to enjoy literature and art, and watch a movie, like a human being. I want to cry out: Let me live like a human being. Like a real human being, neither a machine, nor an animal held by the collar. Ah, I want to be a human being, too (Yi Taeho 1986:182).

Working-class women showed progressive attitudes towards sexuality and acted bravely in practicing their beliefs out of a deep yearning to be fully human in their experience of pleasure.

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Abstract

Discourse on sexuality in Korea has, until very recently, been dominated by a rigid patriarchal morality with female chastity at its core. Scholars have pointed out that the same kind of patriarchal and conservative attitudes that suppressed the representation of sexuality can be found in counter-cultural discourse by subalterns such as those in the memoirs and diaries of 1970s and 1980s working-class men and women. In this essay, I argue that such generalizations fail to do justice to the open, progressive, and creative attitudes towards sexuality that existed, and were represented, in life-writing⁹ texts by Korean laborers. I analyze working-class women's open and progressive attitudes towards sexuality through an examination of life writing by Korean laborers written and published from the 1970s onward. In my examination, I pay particular attention to the possible differences in attitudes that may be due to the author's gender or position in the labor movement as well as to the author's choice of genre.

Keywords: sexuality, women, life writing, labor movement, representation

9. “Life writing” is a term that came into currency in the 1980s to designate categorically all writings of biographical and autobiographical nature. For its definition, see, for example, Meg Jensen and Jane Jordan Ed. (2009), pp. xxvii.