The labour and literature of Korean factory girls

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Declaration

I hereby declare that to the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously written or published by another person except where appropriate acknowledgment is made, and that the thesis contains no material accepted for any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution.

[Signature]

Ruth Barraclough
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Abstract

This thesis argues that the labour of Korean working class women has been of central importance to Korea’s industrial development during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) and in South Korea’s state-led industrialisation, while the women themselves have occupied marginal positions in public culture, in political movements, and in literature. I examine two periods in Korean history – the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the late 1970s and early 1980s – when factory girls for a few brief years gained the attention of their society through their involvement in militant industrial action and their ventures into literature.
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Note on Korean Names

Throughout this dissertation Korean names are given in the order customary in Korea: the family name is followed by the given name. For Korean authors writing in English the English custom of given name followed by family name will hold. The McCune Reischauer system has been used to romanise Korean words and names, except where people have done their own romanisation, such as Syngman Rhee and Cho Wha Soon. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
Introduction

This thesis is a history of the cultural moment when Korean working-class women began to write. It spans two periods in modern Korean history – the 1920s and early 30s and the 1970s and early 80s - the darkest days of industrialisation when Korean factory girls laboured long shifts in an oppressive and injurious environment for small wages. In these conditions working women’s capacity to write seems all but stifled by everyday labour. That they did address their society in letters and literature, through newspapers and publishing houses, is a feature of the radical movements that in these two different eras joined art and politics to produce tales of the lives of factory girls.

While South Korea's development from war devastated client state to industrialised power has been theorised as a model for poor nations all over the world, Korea's development experience has rarely been fashioned in anything but political-economic language. In this thesis I turn to literature and the figure of the factory girl for accounts of the social world in Korea's industrial revolution. I examine literature by factory women for its portrayal of self and society in a time of great economic, social and sexual upheaval. In so doing I seek to redeem the writings of working class women from obscurity, and examine the world they attempted to transform through literary endeavour. A central dialectic that runs through this thesis is for
asserting the study of the literature of proletarian women against the "language of bourgeois political economy" that threatens to smother it.¹

Some may question my use of the term ‘factory girls’ to connote a collection of individuals whose maturity ranged from childhood to middle age. They might point out the high proportion of married females who sought factory work in the colonial period, an era when as Lee Hyo-chae has shown early marriage was the custom and 72 percent of females over the age of 15 were married.² They might also note the incongruity of an infantilising term for those engaged in arduous labour, and point out the paternalistic overtones of this address. In reply I assert that it is precisely because of its “bitterness to modern ears” that I use the antiquated English term.³ The term ‘factory girl’ draws attention to the very contradictions that working-class women seemed to embody, labouring in factories where so many lost their youth.

Proletarian Literature and Labour Literature

In Korea, ‘proletarian literature’ has had two heydays – the first in literary circles in the 1920s and 1930s, the second as part of a dissident labour movement in 1970s and 80s South Korea.⁴ Proletarian literature is but one

¹ The term is Terry Eagleton’s from *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, 1995, p.8.
³ The term belongs to Mary Douglas. Her sentence from the chapter ‘Institutions Remember and Forget’ is worth quoting in full: “In the intervening years, some slogans have become risible, some words have become empty, and others too full, holding too much cruelty or bitterness to modern ears.” 1986, p.69.
⁴ A note on terminology: The works of literature from the colonial period that addressed the lives of working-class people I shall distinguish by calling ‘proletarian literature’, the term used to describe it at the time. The second type of writing, by working-class people themselves, that emerged in the 1970s and 80s I shall call ‘labour literature’.
field of left wing or 'tendency' literature (kyŏnhyang munhak) that in Korea encompassed such areas as nationalist fiction, peasant literature, and historical fiction. Within left wing literature proletarian literature is distinguished by its emphasis on working class life and its still controversial place in South Korea's history and literary canon. To those unfamiliar with the stories of proletarian literature, it may appear to be a completely utilitarian genre, whose climax is expressed through a political program to the exclusion of romance and other genre elements. But I would argue that proletarian literature uniquely captures the dramatic nature of rapid industrialisation in intimate, subtle portraits of working people's lives and loves. The proletarian literature project shows us that the class structures that go unnoticed or are taken for granted by some writers, are for others the very material upon which their stories are drawn. As Raymond Williams notes of the 'industrial novel', an alternative term for proletarian literature:

[Thus] industrial work and its characteristic places and communities, are not just a new background: a new 'setting' for a story. In the true industrial novel they are seen as formative... The privileged distancing of another kind of fiction, where people can 'live simply as human beings', beyond the pressures and interruptions and accidents of society, are in another world or more specifically in another class. Here in the world of the industrial novel... work is pressing and formative, and the most general social relations are directly experienced within the most personal.5

Proletarian literature was envisioned by its earliest exponents in colonial Korea as a revolution in both form and content, claiming literature and other cultural forms for working class characters and stories, to depict a reality
powerful enough to eclipse rising bourgeois notions of beauty and art. In Korea proletarian literature had first appeared in magazines and newspapers from the mid-1920s, at a time when workers literature was popular in Japan, the Soviet Union, America and Europe. Central to early formative debates on the nature of ‘modern’ Korean literature in the 1920s and 30s, proletarian literature from this period would find a new readership when radical presses in South Korea republished it in the late 1980s.

In labour literature (*nodong munhak*) from the 1980s, life, art, and class mingled in a literary movement that emerged just as the growing self-confidence of the working class in South Korea was making itself felt. They are books that straddled classes, and inspired a generation of university students, the *hakch’ul*, to abandon their studies and enter factories. More than that, labour literature became part of the labour movement’s strategic mobilisation of culture, part of a more general enlisting of songs, poetry and plays into the service of the labour movement’s worldview. But if the labour movement provided the necessary institutional support for this cultural enfranchisement, the authors’ own sources of inspiration were diverse and individual.

This thesis connects these two distinct periods in Korean history to examine the changing portrayal of factory girls in literature and to chart the rise of

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5 Raymond Williams, 1983, pp. 221-222. Raymond Williams was describing novels like Jack Jones’ *Black Parade* (1935) and Gwyn Thomas *All Things Betray Thee* (1949).
working class women authors. As a genealogy of working class women's literature, this study is also an attempt to recover some of the lost voices of the Korean industrialisation experience. From the colonial period only fragments of published writing by working class women survived, because so many were illiterate, or afraid of retribution, or simply “silenced by ordinary labour.”6 Yet the concerns of working class women in the 1920s and 30s would be taken up by authors of the proletarian literature movement, whose heroines are a valuable source on the lives and aspirations of factory girls, and of those who sought to emancipate them through literature. By the 1970s and 80s literature by female factory workers had become more plentiful, both because of increasing literacy, and a flourishing dissident literary market that in the 1980s thrived on the popularity of ‘labour literature’. In the second part of the thesis I concentrate on the three most famous works of labour literature by factory girls, who would critique their society in intimate tales of the class divide.

_Cultural Materialism_

In this thesis I examine proletarian/labour literature by and about factory girls at a time when working class women appeared to be almost completely invisible in wider public debates on economic development and political change. To draw the vital connections between the author's voice and the society in which they wrote I borrow the insights of cultural materialism, a

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6 Michael Denning uses this phrase to describe the disappearance of promising proletarian writers in America as the 1930s progressed in _The Cultural Front_, 1997, p. 228.
way of thinking that instructs us to analyse literature in society, or in the words of Raymond Williams, to: “recognise literature as a specialising social and historical category”.\textsuperscript{7} To study literature as “simultaneously artistic form and social location” is to study it as a cultural formation, a ‘literary institution’ made up of authors, readers, literary movements, and publishers, the circumstances that brought them together, and the text itself.

In his book \textit{The Cultural Front}, historian Michael Denning does this for American proletarian literature in the 1920s and 30s. In the chapter ‘The Literary Class War’, Denning astutely warns that “attempts to define ‘proletarian literature’ as a genre all fail because they treat genres as abstract and ahistorical ideal types; they forget that genres are literary institutions that have grown out of particular social formations and must be understood not as a class of objects but as the products of those formations.”\textsuperscript{8} Following the example of Raymond Williams and Michael Denning, this study will look at the books, and the society and history that made them, balancing text and context, and comparing the authors’ intentions with the real impact the books would have on their society of readers.\textsuperscript{9}

The authors of proletarian literature from the 1920s to the 1990s wrote about themes that would become emblematic of the labour movement - their journey to Seoul from the provinces, induction into factory life, their

\textsuperscript{7} Raymond Williams, 1977, p.54
\textsuperscript{8} Michael Denning, 1997, p.202
\textsuperscript{9} Raymond Williams, 1989, p.172.
encounters with left-wing ideas, and their fight for a representative union at their workplace. But they would also frame their work as a challenge both to literature and to society, writing books that foreshadowed a new kind of world where workers would be the central protagonists. If in Korea it was a collective project, it has also been an international one, something this thesis will exemplify as I continually draw from the work of scholars of proletarian literature in America, Wales, Japan, England and France.

Literature Review

In South Korea, labour history has been an important area for feminist historians since the 1970s and 1980s. When Yi Sông-hŭi wrote “the women’s movement began again in the labour movement of the 1970s”\(^\text{10}\), she was acknowledging the tangled history of women’s organisations in South Korea and the important role that women’s labour disputes in the 1970s would play in challenging the elite nature and priorities of Korea’s women’s organisations since 1945.\(^\text{11}\) The women’s labour movement in the 1970s would ignite a radical feminism that was deeply felt in intellectual circles also. The impact of the working-class women’s movement that campaigned for rights specific to their gender – protesting the firing of married women workers, of women who had become pregnant, and defending their women

\(^{10}\) Yi Sông-hŭi, 1999, p.397.

\(^{11}\) For an account of women’s organisations in South Korea after the end of Japanese colonialism in 1945, their split into left and right wing camps where they were overshadowed by male political organisations, and the triumph of conservative women’s organisations under the patronage of the United States’ military occupation government see Mun Kyŏng-ran, 1989.
union leaders – was reproduced in the early feminists’ interest in and commitment to labour history.

Lee Hyo chae’s analysis of the circumstances of young women in factories in the colonial period, ‘Ilcheha-ui Yŏsŏng Nodong Munje’ [The Situation of Women Workers in the Colonial Period], opened up the field when it was published in 1978, and introduced the lives and struggles of colonial era factory girls to a society where many of the same brutal practices applied in the factory districts of Seoul.

When Chŏng Hyŏn-baek published her article ‘Yŏsŏng Nodongja-ui Ëisik kwa Nodong Sekye: Nodongja Suki Punsŏkŭl Chunsimûro’ [Women Workers’ Consciousness and the World of Work: Analysing Workers’ Writings], in the first volume of the feminist journal Yŏsŏng [Women] in 1985, her work stood alongside a bourgeoning labour movement as she examined society through the writings of working-class women.

Labour history scholars were responding both to the growing strength of labour unions as the 1980s progressed, and the sense of urgency that the besieged, often illegal unions were experiencing. Commonly, labour historians in the 1980s and early 1990s dedicated their books and articles to the “democratic union movement” (minju nojo undong), thereby tying the aspirations of contemporary workers and unionists to the struggles of the
colonial era labour movement. These South Korea historians and literary critics, whose work I refer to in this thesis, and who had themselves lived through late industrialisation, would look back to the earlier industrial experience to “reconstruct a broken genealogy” of the struggles of working class people. My own thesis seeks to connect these two periods more systematically, to discover why working class women, when they are heard at all, are heard most in these years.

My analysis of the cultural and political resources of working-class women in Korea is supplemented by the insights of historians of women in other industrialising societies, particularly Japan and England. Japan is an important point of comparison for Korea because many of the features of Japan’s industrialisation were re-created in Korea, as Japanese capitalists expanded into the colony in the 1920s and 30s. In her study of Japanese factory girls in the Meiji era, E. Patricia Tsurumi discusses many themes that would resonate in the lives of Korean factory girls thirty years later, notably how they acted as a bridge between rural households and the industrial economy, and how the combination of custom and profit situated them in menial, low-paid and dangerous working conditions.

In her book on factory girls in Victorian literature, Patricia Johnson has examined the tensions between gender and class that factory girls embodied.
in industrialising England. She shows how working-class women were a problem for the ‘industrial novelists’: Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli, because in Victorian ideology labouring women are neither truly ‘feminine’ nor authentic ‘workers’. I argue that these ideals of ‘domestic woman’ and ‘masculine worker’ were played out in Korea also, and that working-class women exploded these distinctions when they asserted themselves as workers in strikes and union campaigns, and represented themselves as working-class heroines in their writings.

**Redeeming factory girl literature**

This thesis is an attempt to redeem the writings of and about Korean working-class women from obscurity. To re-read the literature of factory girls is to grapple with its shifting dialectics. It is a literature of sacrifice – in its pages we read both the sacrifices for democracy (the beatings in industrial disputes, night classes in the long-winded labour law, and the dedicated creation of workplace unions); and the sacrifices for capitalism (the long shifts and miserly pay in the colonial spinning and weaving factories and later in the textile and electronics factories). Yet it is also a literature whose authors have a powerful grasp of these contradictions. Throughout this thesis we shall see the protagonists and sometimes their authors struggle to attain the promise of a radical modernity – a reorganised world they can inhabit not as factory girls but free of the constraints of a class society. As Korean radical moderns these characters and their creators share a revolutionary project with socialist writers in other parts of the world and in other eras. Their
contribution to Korea’s own version of modern life, their voices that interrupt the break-neck speed of late industrialisation to point out the wounds it has inflicted, can be compared to the candour of the first modernists in Europe and Russia, captured in the words of Marshall Berman:

This voice resonates at once with self-discovery and self-mockery, with self-delight and self-doubt. It is a voice that knows pain and dread, but believes in its power to come through. Grave danger is everywhere, and may strike at any moment, but not even the deepest wounds can stop the flow and overflow of its energy. It is ironic and contradictory, polyphonic and dialectical, denouncing modern life in the name of values that modernity itself has created, hoping – often against hope – that the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds of the modern men and women of today.14

To re-read Korean proletarian literature is to return to the isolation of the colonial period, when women laboured in giant fortress factories barred to intruders, and to the austerity of the 1970s and the contradictions of the 1980s. It is to revisit the enormous influence of a radical Christianity and Marxism, and the moral dimensions that dissent took in the women's labour movement. Above all, to re-read these books is to acknowledge the harrowing course of capitalist development, an exercise in retrospection that rapid late industrialisation does not equip us for. The culture of the catch-up economy, the maxim of the late developer is modernisation without a backward glance. And in the case of South Korea, when a backward glance must take in the

wounds of war, division, and colonialism, reticence has often been preferred. 15

Taken together, working-class women’s industrial and narrative strategies were an effort to recast the development experience in terms that acknowledged their central role. They went to the streets to demand higher wages at the same time that they wrote stories about the humiliations of female poverty. To write your own version of slum life in the factory districts while rejecting low wages and degrading conditions and all the determinism of poverty was to believe in the possibility of another society, and their capacity to create it.

15 Not until a new generation of historians began writing ‘people’s history’ (minjungsa) in the 1970s and 80s was there opportunity for readers to reflect on Korea’s twentieth century history, and even then it needed the conviction of an exonerating Marxist narrative to bear the terrible backward gaze. It has taken much longer for light-hearted cultural histories of the twentieth century to make it into bookshops, such as the three volume ‘How Did We Live Over the Last 100 Years?’ edited by the Hankguk Yoksa Yonguhoe and published over 1998 and 1999.
Part One
Tales of Seduction
the 1920s and 1930s

In the years of Korea’s colonisation by Japan, 1910 to 1945, Korean women labouring in the cotton spinning factories and other key light manufacturing industries helped generate the colony’s industrial revolution, making up to 81 percent of the workforce in the textile industry.¹ In the politics and literature of the colonial period, however, Korean working-class women are much harder to locate.

Taking this paradox as our starting point, Chapter One examines two areas where working-class women did leave their imprint on their times - in their industrial action, and in their published writings. While “the daughters of peasants”² learnt to operate factory machinery and accustomed themselves to dormitories and the wage system, they also began to encounter new ideas about The Economic Status of Women, and The Exploiters and the Exploited Class.³ As women learnt both the mundane and the philosophical aspects of their subjugation, they formed or joined organisations dedicated to improve their lot. In the so-called Red Decade (a term applied to American society in this period but appropriate to colonial Korea also between 1923 and 1935),

² Chōng Hyŏn-baek uses this term to describe women entering the factory economy in the 1970s and 1980s, but it is appropriate to women making the journey from rural villages to industrial centres in the colonial era also. Chōng Hyŏn-baek, 1985, p.121.
³ Both of these topics were popular talking points in this period. The second is the title of a talk given at the Chugang Christian Youth Hall on 5 December 1925. Kim Kyŏng-il, 1991, p.433.
men and women of the proletarian class protested their circumstances using modern techniques – industrial action and appeals to a reading public.

The 1920s and 1930s was a time of upheaval for many women in Korea as prostitution started to become a mass commercial business, as women took on new economic roles in modern factories, shops and offices, and as a number of yangban or aristocratic women gained public prominence for championing the rights of females. These were the years when the labour movement attained its peak following the Great Depression, and the proletarian literature movement became a leading literary avant-garde, until it foundered following the police raids of 1931 and 1934.

In Korea in the 1920s the avant-gardes of literature and politics fatefuly met in proletarian literature, and a number of socialist authors would critique their society through tales of the lives of factory girls. Published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, at a time when proletarian literature was one of the leading literary trends, these voices from the industrial revolution in Korea became part of a movement for the cultural enfranchisement of the working class, fashioning workers as the central subjects of art and politics. The dynamism and popularity of proletarian literature was related to the growing political

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4 The yangban were the dominant class of the Chosón Dynasty, an aristocracy whose influence spanned civil and military affairs of state, and who attained high office via a competitive examination system, access to which was an hereditary privilege. For a more comprehensive survey of the yangban and their institutionalisation as an elite group in the late Koryo and early Chosón period see Ki-baik Lee, A New History of Korea, Seoul: Ilchokak, 1984.

5 KAPP was officially disbanded on 21 May, 1935. Kim Yoon-shik, 1987, p.133.
strength of the labour movement into the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Although the proletarian literature avant-garde failed to be the ‘hammer that shapes the world’⁶; failed like the labour movement to persevere into the late 1930s, its novellas illuminate the hopes operative in culture and society in this period.

The proletarian literature featuring factory girls joined two grand narratives of their times – the sexual crisis and the trauma of industrialisation. In Chapter Two I shall argue that working class women in the modern factory economy of the colonial period are depicted in this literature as sexual victims of the new gendered division of labour – seduced by factory owners and supervisors. These seduction tales reproduced in fictional form the turmoil and crisis of a rapid industrialisation carried out by a coercive, imperialist state. But they also depict a particular kind of radicalism, where the personal and political intersect in tales of class, poverty and romance that would echo down Korea’s long century of a rapid and brutal industrialisation.

⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky’s words were “Art is not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it.”
Chapter One
The labours of factory girls

Such an awful difference between hearing about women’s lives and work [and actually seeing it]... They say working in the cotton spinning factories or on the telephone exchange is a high-class job for women, and moreover when I visited the girls I received the impression that their work was not too arduous. But when I went to the rice mills and the rubber factories I saw mothers carrying a child on their backs as they toiled. What is this wretched thing called work?¹

From Sin Kajong (New Family), 1935²

The first systematic program of industrialisation in Korea began during its years as a colony of Japan (1910 – 1945), and by the late 1920s young Korean women were entering factories in significant numbers. As of 1931 the three largest industries in the Korean colony – textiles, food processing and chemicals – employed large numbers of women in their plants and factories, 79 percent of the workforce in textiles was female, and women occupied 30 percent of jobs in both food processing and chemicals.³ While in 1931 factory workers employed in the new, ‘modern’ enterprises constituted only a small percentage of the population in what was largely an agricultural economy, by the end of Japan’s colonisation in 1945 Korea possessed the

¹ Women employed in the rubber factories were usually considerably older than factory girls in textile companies and silk reeling factories, often being around 30 years of age, and it was not uncommon for them to work with their baby strapped to their back. For more on this see Yi Ok-ji, 2001, p.38.
² The article is by an anonymous ‘lady journalist’ (puin kija), Sin Kajong, 1925 Vol3, No2, p.33. Quoted in Lee Hyo-jae, 1978, p.156.
“industrial infrastructure”\(^4\) from which the new nation’s own rapid, late industrialisation would be launched in the 1960s.

When young women entered the colony’s rice mills, textile factories, match factories and rubber and tobacco factories in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they had usually been recruited from farms and rural villages, where the cheapest labour was to be found. Factory girls were thus some of the first ‘moderns’ of colonial Korea, as they left village communities and families to join their fate to the vagaries of the capitalist market. Yet despite the substantial, pioneering contribution working-class women made to colonial capitalism until 1945, accounts of their lives and concerns are sparse and fragmentary. This chapter examines two arenas where Korean factory girls gained the attention, albeit fleetingly, of wide: colonial society. First through their involvement in militant and well-publicised industrial action, and second in their representation in radical journalism and their own published writings.

The insights that factory girls brought to their society were many and varied. They were some of the first to grasp how brutal ‘modernity’, in the shape of modern capitalist relations, could be. They disclosed their personal terror at the sexual coercion that appears to have been part of factory culture at many workplaces, and communicated their belief in the possibility of change through industrial action and through public enlightenment. But how little

\(^4\) This term belongs to Carter Eckert, 1996, p.37.
they wrote, how fleetingly they appeared in the pages of newspapers and magazines; and the absence of their influence in the labour movement’s organisations reveals also the poverty of their relations with social power. This chapter explores both their voice and their silence.

Socially engaged literature and working-class radicalism were two features of the 1920s and early 1930s, both a product of ‘colonial modernity’ in Korea and a critique of it. When working-class women opposed harassment, low wages and dangerous working conditions in strikes and in appeals to a reading public, they were claiming the instruments of capitalist modernity to condemn the industrial culture it had created. Their language was a mixture of the old and the new. They harked back to their “feudal, idyllic, patriarchal ties” at the same time that they claimed a new public role for themselves.

The sparse and fragmentary nature of factory girls’ writings to newspapers and magazines was an outcome of the historical “suppression of writing” of lower class females in Korea. In giving a history to these fragments, and in

5 Patricia Johnson, writing on working-class women in nineteenth century England, has said: “Both women and workers found their feudal, idyllic, patriarchal ties destroyed by [industrial capitalism], and yet this displacement, in part, produced the births of feminism and working-class radicalism.” Patricia Johnson, 2001, p.102. It should be noted that feudalism as a social system manifested itself in very different ways in Korea from how it worked in England.

6 I borrow this term from Jacques Ranciere, but where I use it to emphasise the structural origins of the making of illiteracy, Ranciere uses the term to indicate how proletarian texts can be deconstructed to reveal contradictions in the distinctions between intellectual and manual labour. See Jacques Ranciere, The Nights of Labour: The Workers Dream in Nineteenth Century France, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

7 The suppression of writing is, of course, an outcome of the economy of literacy in colonial Korea, whereby many labouring women were illiterate. Son Woon Park quotes a 1922 government survey where 59 percent of waged workers had reportedly never attended school, p.81. The figure for women alone is much higher. Song Youn-ok quotes the Korean Government General Census Report of 1930 to find that over 92 percent of Korean females were completely illiterate at this time, p.190. An inspection of the magazines published in
analysing the fragments themselves, this chapter charts the relations of working-class women to culture and to emancipatory movements in the period 1923 to 1935.

Capitalist Expansion

When Korea was opened to the international capitalist market of the late 1870s, Japanese entrepreneurs were some of the first to develop business interests in Korea, interests that would compliment Japan’s own import and export needs. The result was a rudimentary market economy both dependent on and companion to Japan’s, and by the time Japan formally colonised Korea on August 22, 1910, feudal, agricultural Korea was already taking in goods manufactured in Japan and exporting rice to feed the new factory workers of the industrialising coloniser.  

When large-scale industrialisation commenced in Korea after 1919 it was following several decades of extreme rural poverty. The agricultural economy that had served the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) so long was collapsing under the weight of a corrupt and rapacious tax system. In these years many peasant farmers unable to meet the the triple burden of a land tax, corvee labour and grain tax that local officials tried to extort from them gave up their farms. Another cause of rural impoverishment was the Japanese colonial Korea also indicates that older, nineteenth century literary structures were still in place, so that kisaeng, (women ‘entertainers’ who were traditionally educated in music and poetry) were able to bring out their own magazine, but ‘modern’ factory girls never did.

cadastral survey completed in 1918. Because the customary rights of tenant farmers were overlooked by the official survey, many small holders lost their land. Some evicted farmers become vagrants, while others migrated with their families to Manchuria or Siberia. In 1910 the Chosön dynasty collapsed amidst domestic impoverishment and national uncertainty.

In the Korean countryside swelling impoverishment had created an oversupply of farm labourers and unemployed, who drifted between the rural and urban labour markets looking for temporary work. Thus the circumstance of thousands of people seeking work in factories, mines and sea ports through recruiters in the 1920s was a direct consequence of the great poverty of the agricultural economy. From the late Choson dynasty period many peasant farmers were landless and worked on fields they leased from others, or sold their labour to bigger farms for wages. Thus those 'rural proletarians' who came to seek work in the cities were leaving the insecurity of farm labour in the provinces, where job queues were long and the wages fluctuated seasonally.

This shift in the composition of a rural proletarian class, and their migration to the cities, took place over the 1920s and 30s, and cemented in the rigours

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9 For a discussion of the significance of the year 1919 as the beginning of systematic capitalist industrialisation in colonial Korea see Carter Eckert, Ibid, chapter 2.  
10 Ibid, pp.16-17.  
11 Lee, Hoon K. 1936, p. 230. Wages paid for farm work were far below factory wages, even so work was so scarce in the 1930s that Lee reports that in the countryside there were 'always crowds of labourers waiting for jobs'. p. 229.
of the war economy of the 1940s. Industrialisation was aided by the construction of a national railway in Korea by the Japanese military railway bureau, part of a transport network so expansive that by 1945 one could travel by train ‘from Pusan to Paris’. While Korea remained a predominantly agricultural economy, capitalist growth in the cities was swift. In 1911 there had been approximately 250 factories in Korea. By 1920 there were over 2000 and in 1943 over half a million people were working in factories across Korea. But despite the large output of many of the industries, in the 1920s most factories operated on a very small scale. In 1925 the average number of employees in a factory was just 18. And a 1927 inquiry into the working conditions of factories in western Seoul includes the following description:

They may be called factories but with the exception of one or two really large establishments most of what passes for a factory is really a shack. None of them have been known to possess a lavatory.

15 Kim Dae-hwan, 1978, p. 64. In addition to internal migration from the countryside to urban centres, there was also a substantial amount of emigration for work. In Japan, where labour had to be imported from the colonies in the 1940s to make up for the wartime shortfall, Koreans were mobilised to work in mines, factories, sea ports, and in the war industries. Bruce Cumings has suggested that over one million Koreans were repatriated to South Korea from Japan between October 1945 and December 1947. Bruce Cumings, 1981, p.60.
16 Quoted in Kim Kyŏng-il, 1992, p.59
Women as well as men were making the journey to industrial towns and port cities in the 1920s to find work as servants or factory girls or prostitutes. The variety of jobs open to men was greater than those available to females and children, and adult men sought work as day labourers, as miners, porters, stevedores, construction workers, or as servants or factory hands. The prime non-agricultural industries of the 1920s and 30s that employed lower-class women were the rice mills, cotton spinning and silk weaving factories, and rubber factories. Female participation in factory work would peak in 1934 at 34 percent of all waged workers. In 1931, 71 percent of employees in the cotton-spinning industry were female, and amongst them were many girls – child workers - between the ages of twelve and fifteen.

In many sectors women made up the majority of the workforce throughout the 1920s and 1930s. As mentioned earlier, textiles was one of the leading industries in the early period of industrialisation and in 1925 women made up 72.4 percent of factory hands in the cotton spinning factories, 86.4 percent in the silk weaev factories, and 67.9 percent in the rubber industries. Yi Chông-ok reports that in addition to employing a predominantly female workforce, the silk reeling factories also employed a high number of child

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17 Lee Hyo-chae. 1980
19 Yi Ok-ji, p.35. There were important continuities with women’s work in the pre-modern period as Korean farm women, and increasingly in the nineteenth century impoverished yangban wives, took responsibility in the household economy for raising silkworms and spinning. See Yi Sun-gû, 1999, pp.206-208.
workers under the age of sixteen.\textsuperscript{20} In 1921 66.5 percent of their employees were child workers, she adds, at a time when about 20 percent of the employees at cotton spinning and weaving factories were children under sixteen.\textsuperscript{21}

The colonial period was a time of industrial growth that reshaped employment patterns. Korea's famous "farm to factory"\textsuperscript{22} proletarianisation began in the 1920s and 30s with the rural exodus to industrial centres inside Korea and the wider imperial labour market in Japan and Manchuria. But people did not always uproot willingly. The economic historian Carter Eckert has described the practice of poor farmers sending their daughters to work in factories as "an act of desperation".\textsuperscript{23} Others have recorded that when recruiters came to the villages, families hid their daughter's shoes and clothes and locked them away to stop them from going out to work in the factories.\textsuperscript{24}

As recruiters fanned out into the countryside to find young, strong females to work at the larger establishments like the Japanese-run Chosen Textile Company or the Korean Kyongsong Spinning and Weaving Company,  

\textsuperscript{20} So Hyong-sil's thesis, \textit{Research on the Women's Labour Movement in the Colonial Era}, compares industrial militancy by women workers in the rubber industry and the raw silk industry – documenting the structural conditions that impinge on the women's capacity to rebel. She finds that where women workers are able to combine and agitate collectively for higher wages in the rubber industry, workers in the silk factories were paralysed by their isolation, harsh conditions, and the industry's culture of obedience. The high number of child workers in the silk factories may also have contributed to the degree of coercion that supervisors were able to apply to factory hands.

\textsuperscript{21} Yi Jong-ok, 1990, pp. 275-276. Quoted in Yi Ok-ji, p.35.

\textsuperscript{22} The term has been used about Korea by Hagen Koo in his article 'From Farm to Factory: Proletarianization in Korea', \textit{American Sociological Review} 55 (October).

\textsuperscript{23} Eckert, p.193.

\textsuperscript{24} Sin Yong-suk, p.318.
reports were already reaching the provinces through the newly established daily newspapers of abusive and dangerous work practices.

*The Kyŏngsŏng Rubber Factory Strike: the Beginnings of Militancy*

In July 1923 women workers at the Kyŏngsŏng Rubber Factory in Seoul elected an all-female trade union and walked off the job to protest falling wages and to demand the sacking of an abusive overseer. Their strike was the first major industrial action taken by female workers in the colonial period. It made waves throughout the colony as newly established trade unions, labour clubs, youth groups and radical organisations rallied to its support, collecting solidarity money, sending telegrams, and organising lecture tours to support their cause. The strike in the field outside the factory was chronicled in the pages of the *Tonga Ilbo [East Asia Daily]*, a national daily newspaper established three years earlier:

Around 150 workers wipe the sweat pouring off them as they [stand] under the fierce midday sun, and are drenched by passing storms. Before they have time to dry their dripping hemp skirts and choksam jackets the evening dew has fallen and these 150 women [prepare to] spend the night under the boughs of acacia trees... The firm stance of the factory’s management shows no sign of yielding as they refuse to allow the women even water. Those women between the ages of twenty and thirty withstand these terrible circumstances thanks to their youth, but the older women in their forties and fifties, and the children under fifteen years of age weep and try to persevere. Finally, when they become weak they lie down in the field where the night breeze stirs the grass.

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26 The title of one lecture was “From the Vanguard of the Working-Class: Choson’s Factory Girls”. Lee Hyo-chae, 1978, p.163. Lee also mentions that the women’s supporters included union groups in Japan.
The Kyŏngsŏng Rubber Factory strike marked the beginning of a long string of factory girl strikes that pitted them against their employers and the police, and brought them publicity and a new distinction in Korea's burgeoning capitalist society.

Although the strike itself was not a success for the workers as management responded by dismissing them, after the 1923 strike rubber factories became the site for some of the fiercest industrial campaigns of the colonial era. In August 1933 in Pyongyang several thousand rubber workers from different factories went on strike over reduced wages.²⁸

The action of the women at the Kyŏngsŏng Rubber Factory was significant not only for the support and publicity it gained, but also for the grievances that it brought to air. The employees had stopped work to protest discrimination in wages between male, female, and child workers; and to expose sexual harassment. These same remonstrances emerge whenever we glimpse, in newspaper reports or literature, the lives of factory women from this era. This chapter goes on to argue that the extensive sexual harassment of working class women was one manifestation of the crisis of the shift from a feudal, patriarchal society to an industrial one.²⁹

²⁷ *Tonga Ilbo*, 5.7.1923.
²⁸ Kim Kyŏng-il suggests the more conservative figure of 954, Kim Kyŏng-il, pp. 553-5.
²⁹ The term feudal (*pongkŏn*) has a contested history in Korea. As a term borrowed from the European response to capitalism and used to describe Korea’s indigenous, Confucian tradition, it was part of the vocabulary of colonial era socialists, a vocabulary they shared with socialists throughout East Asia. As such it identified the user as being part of the anti-imperialist class struggle as opposed to the anti-imperialist nationalist struggle.
The abusive treatment of workers, and female workers in particular, is just one of the features of the capitalist society cultivated by Japanese and Korean entrepreneurs that would endure to feature in South Korean industrial culture also. Another structure that was established in this period, and that persists in the South Korean economy today, is the gendered wage system.

The wage system

In colonial Korea there was no minimum wage, no suffrage, and no legislation to regulate the factory system. Japan’s own Factory Law, promulgated in 1916 after “thirty-odd years of discussion” brought the following benefits to workers:

Protective provisions of the Factory Law prevented women and children under the age of fifteen from working more than twelve hours a day, prevented them from working between the hours of 10pm and 4am, and allowed for at least two days leave per month. The minimum age for workers was set at twelve years, except in light industry, where the minimum age of workers was ten.

These provisions did not apply to Korea. When in Japan the Factory Law was revised in the 1920s and night shift for women workers was abolished, a

Socialists used “feudalism” rather than “Confucian tradition” because they were seeking to name and critique a system they saw as economic as well as cultural. For the same reason I shall use the term throughout this thesis.

30 See Chapter Three.

31 Vera Mackie, 1997, p.76.

32 Ibid. Vera Mackie makes the important point that the factory legislation concerning women workers, such as maternity provisions and night work, were framed in terms of the protection of females, not in terms of the rights of women workers.
number of large Japanese cotton spinning companies shifted their operations to Korea, where they were unencumbered by regulations.  

The wage system was tiered in colonial Korea. Japanese male workers who worked in Korea were payed the highest, and occupied the uppermost positions on the factory floor as formen and managers; Japanese women were paid on average half that of Japanese men, an amount equivalent to Korean male workers; Korean female workers were paid roughly half the wages paid to Korean men (and Japanese female workers); and Korean child workers were paid on average half the wages of Korean adult female workers. 

Although wages fluctuated throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and fell sharply after the 1929 Wall Street Crash, average wages stayed within this wage structure. The sector that reportedly paid the lowest wages to female workers was the silk-reeling industry that in 1931 paid an average of 10 sen a day to its lowest paid workers. The silk industry average in this year was 41 sen a day, and women working in textiles earned an average of 60 sen a day.

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34 Soon Won Park, p.114. Park reports that Japanese residents in Korea increased from 527,000 in 1930 to 713,000 in 1940. The presence of a considerable number of Japanese workers in the colony increased competition for jobs and pushed Korean workers into the lower, unskilled section of the labour market. Ibid, p.21.
36 Ibid.
The Female Labour Market

In the labour intensive industries of the 1920s and 1930s – the rice mills, cotton spinning and silk weaving factories, rubber factories and tobacco factories – cheap, unskilled female labour found its niche. While servant girls and farm hands exemplified the labour patterns of the ‘old economy’, lower-class females in cities encountered employment opportunities in the new fields of the factory and the ‘modern’ brothel.  

The female labour market in colonial Korea was shadowed by the growing prostitution industry, an industry that in sheer numbers dwarfed the light manufacturing sector. In 1925, 17,465 girls and women worked in factories all over the colony while that same year in Seoul alone 30,000 females were sold to labour in the red-light districts. In Japan in this period, female prostitutes never outnumbered female factory workers and weavers. In the Japanese colony of Korea, however, the numbers are reversed. The historian Song Youn-ok explains that the business of prostitution flourished in Korea for political and economic reasons - it was endorsed and patronised by the

37 Song Youn-ok has demonstrated how the Japanese colonial state ‘modernised’ the sex industry in Korea under the state-run licensed prostitution system, that regulated business activity in the ‘pleasure quarters’, in her article ‘Japanese Colonial Rule and State-Managed Prostitution: Korea’s Licensed Prostitutes’, positions 5:1, (Spring 1997), pp.171-217. Song links the expansion of the prostitution industry with the enlargement of the war in the 1930s and early 1940s, and connects the prostitution licensing system with the mobilisation of ‘comfort women’ by the army in the 1940s.


Japanese colonial government; and it was one of the few enterprises open to Korean businessmen that required little capital but made many fortunes.  

Following the application of Japan’s prostitution licensing system in 1916, the prostitution and entertainment businesses in Korea began to expand rapidly. The colonial state intervened directly into the sex market, organising businesses to relocate to South Kyōngsang province to serve Japanese immigrant fishing communities, or to the coal mines in Hokkaido to service immigrant Korean labourers being paid below subsistence wages. Song Youn-ok points out that when Japan voted at the League of Nations in 1925 to sign the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, it did not agree to apply the convention to its colonies. That the colonial government enforced the prostitution licensing system and never applied the Factory Law to Korea indicates how unfettered employers were in Korea, both Japanese and Korean. Korea’s entry into the Japanese imperial labour market through colonisation would make native Korean women available for the most degrading jobs.

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40 Song Youn-ok adds: “Prostitution was the business in which police could interfere most easily; therefore it was the business in which Japanese had the greatest expectations of being able to create a class of collaborators... The modern framework for sex management was the site where colonial exploitation, social control, and the division of the colonised populace to weaken resistance all intersected.” p.179.

41 Song Youn-ok, 1995, p. 179.

42 The Factory Law in Japan abolished night labour for females and juvenile workers in 1929, and also stipulated health insurance in the event of injuries at the workplace. Carter Eckert, 1991, p. 317, n.4.
Recruiters

The movement of women into the new social space of the factory brought them into a modern employment society at its lowest levels. Although women had been an important productive member of households for generations, labouring together with men in farming families, and working in sericulture in others, it was work that remained within the household, and kept them within the protection and control of their families. While some women in the old feudal economy had left their villages for distant jobs, usually girls sent out to service in yangban families, the scale of migration for temporary work in the 1920s and 30s was unprecedented. One report asserts that throughout the colonial period female migration from rural areas outstripped that of men.

A new breed of recruiters operated at the big provincial railway stations in Korea, buying and selling young women for factory work. The flourishing traffic in women was a direct consequence of the poverty in the Korean countryside, Song Youn-ok argues, where "the impoverishment of farmers and the dissolution of the family engendered by colonial rule forced the migration of more women from farming villages into the cities than were required by the labour market." One contemporary described the scene:

43 For an account of the work of plebeian women in the Choson Dynasty on farms and in sericulture, and the value attributed to this work in Korea’s premodern society see Yi Sun-gu, 1999, pp.203-212.
44 Chung Chin-sung, p. 98
45 Song Youn-ok, p.181.
If you went to Pusan Station there were always swarms of people selling factory girls... There were also cases of these people selling factory girls privately, and if the company’s price was right sometimes they would sell 20 or 30 girls at a time.}\(^{46}\)

Lulled by the promise of protection in factory dormitories and monthly earnings, young women and girls sometimes travelled far to remote textile factories where their dependence on the company would be absolute.

But the female labour market was a duplicitous one. Newspapers carried tales of girls lured by recruiters then sold to faraway taverns or brothels, sometimes as far away as Japan.\(^{47}\) Song Youn-ok reports that the majority of women sold by recruiters were sold to become prostitutes, not factory girls, and relates that “of the five thousand women per year sold to destinations outside of Korea in the mid-1920s, it was said that 80 percent, or four thousand, had no sexual experience and did not know that their destination was the prostitution business.”\(^{48}\)

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\(^{46}\) Quoted in Kang Yi-su, 1992, p.141.
\(^{47}\) See Kang Yi-su, p.143. In her thesis the social historian Kang Yi-su interviewed women who worked in the cotton spinning industry in the 1930s about recruitment practices. She reports that “[M]ost factory employees remember the recruiters as ‘unscrupulous people’ (chili anjoun saram). Aside from indulging in outright lies in the course of engaging employees, it soon came to light that recruiters were involved in such socially abhorrent behaviour as sexually assaulting factory women, or with the bait of finding them legitimate work in factories luring them to work in taverns or brothels.” Kang Yi-su cites articles in the Tonga Ilbo in 1926 and 1927 reporting on such cases (see p.143, n.37).

\(^{48}\) Patricia Tsurumi records how in Japan in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) recruiters used “sweet words” to entice rural families to sell their daughters to brothels, spinning tales about the girls’ luxurious future that no urban dweller who knew anything about the lives of prostitutes would give credence to. Tsurumi, 1990, p.182.
The factories too had their own culture of abuse and submission that feature in proletarian literature by or about women.\textsuperscript{49} Furthermore, in many cases there were good reasons for women to feel the need to flee their homes in the countryside. Song Youn-ok reports that within the recruitment network some people peddled information on which young wives were in violent marriages or in financial distress, and thus might be lured away by a recruiter.\textsuperscript{50}

The prostitution industry was not only an alternative employment avenue for factory girls, it also influenced wider social anxieties about lower-class women going out to work as isolated, ‘unprotected’ females. Korean factory girls discovered that the sexual exploitation of women also infected the factories, where sexual harassment and violence against women was often rampant and unchecked.

But other developments were also occurring that would impact on Korea’s colonial society. The first modern, mass circulation newspapers began in the 1920s to enquire into the conditions in mines and factories in the colony. It is to their findings that we now turn.

\textsuperscript{49} Indeed the reputation of factory work established in this period was so abysmal that the Park Chung Hee government spent considerable time and money on a publicity drive in the early 1960s to improve the received impression that factories were ‘evil caves’. See Part Two of this thesis for a discussion of this process.

\textsuperscript{50} Song Youn-ok, p.181.
Radical Journalism in the Cultural Period (1920-1931)

This period in Korean history is significant to historians of working-class women not only because of the importance of female labour to the industrialisation project, nor for the many incidences of factory girl strikes, but also because these were the years when writers and journalists turned a new, critical attention to their own society, and newspapers and magazines began to include accounts of the lower-classes. This important cultural shift took place in the years of Governor-General Saito’s ‘cultural period’ and its aftermath. Named the cultural period for the remarkable flowering of national cultural production in literature, music, film and art, and the important political role that culture assumed in this period – both as a repository of “Koreaness” and for articulating political positions when other more conventional political forums were closed - it lasted until the early 1930s when the Japanese army started expanding into China and colonial rule moved onto a war-footing. 51

Following the March First Independence demonstrations in 1919, and the savage retaliation of the colonial police, Japan altered its tactics in the colony, replacing a repressive police state with a more conciliatory, and effective, governing style. 52 In fact, the atmosphere in Korea in the 1920s and early 1930s in many ways mirrored that in Japan itself, where, according to Robert

51 This is not to suggest that writing went uncensored in this period. Rather, in the context of stringent censorship and intermittent arrests, writers navigated the literary terrain with skill and sensitivity, and wrote fiction, poetry and essays in an atmosphere of heightened political awareness, or what J.M. Coetzee calls “over-reading”. J.M. Coetzee, 1996, p.112.
Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee: “Japanese authorities tended to make a distinction between the right to engage in radical political action and the right to speak or write in a radical style.”53 As radical journalism in Korea thrived, and a proletarian literature movement emerged – stimulated by political and literary developments in Japan, Russia, and other parts of the world – the literary world began to engage with the concerns of a new class of waged workers, including factory girls.

Colonial Korea’s two major dailies, the Tonga Ilbo and the Choson Ilbo were attentive to the growing labour movement throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. Established in 1920 when the government relaxed its restrictions on Korean language newspapers and magazines54, these two papers would play a vital role in providing an arena for public debate around some of the major issues of the time. Due to restrictions in the political realm – the absence of a parliament, of political parties or political representation, of any formal, public way of engaging with or influencing the colonial government, newspaper writing took on a significant role in these years for the communication of ideas and as a medium to attempt to mobilise segments of the population.

The historian Michael Robinson has shown how eclectic the two papers were in the years of Governor-General Saito’s cultural policy. Established by

52 Michael Robinson details the changes in Japan’s governing elite that also led to this change in tactics in Korea. See Eckert, et.al., 1991, pp.276-285.
businessmen of "moderate political views," the sentiments expressed in their pages covered the political spectrum from editorials that reproduced the owners' bourgeois nationalism to serialised proletarian literature. They published the outcomes of wildcat strikes, recorded the confederation meetings of mushrooming trade union organisations and listed the demands of striking workers in major and minor disputes up and down the country.  

The history of the formation of these newspapers is also a history of the formation of a modern reading public in colonial Korea. Readers in the 1920s and early 1930s were treated to a constellation of different publications, or "social missionaries", in Marshall Pihl's words. In the fictional serial Diary of a Young Socialist, the author communicates excitement about ideas sweeping the colony, while at the same time satirising the 'radical chic' of young socialist intellectuals:

The day after tomorrow is the evening lecture. I'm the speaker, and I still haven't given a single thought to what I'm going to talk about, what'll I do? And the subject is awfully grand 'The Liberation Movement and the Economic Status of Women'. I have to talk on that and I haven't a clue, what will I do? What can I say to the audience? They come expecting a lot of learning from these lectures. But I don't know the first thing... I'm as

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55 Michael Robinson, 114.
56 See Kim Kyông-il's appendix to Ilcheha Nodong Undongsa [A History of the Labour Movement in the Colonial Era], pp.521-567. Indeed these two newspapers were far more assiduous in covering labour disputes in the 1920s and 1930s than they would be in the 1970s.
57 This is how Marshall Pihl labels the magazines that sprang up in colonial Korea between 1910 and 1945. "Their aim, never commercial, was nearly always to further the social mission of the backers," he writes. Although magazines did become increasingly commercial into the 1930s as their readership expanded with increasing literacy, and once radical ideas, such as the modern, liberated "New Woman" were transformed into a consumer item, nevertheless this description does hold for many magazines published before the mid 1930s.
good as a proletariat [*musancha*], as uneducated as though I never went to school. What’ll I do? All those people – should I draw them a wistful picture? Ah! Ignorance is misery.\(^{58}\)

Yet despite the surfeit of words addressing social problems in the colony, whether it be articles examining the role of a burgeoning class of industrial workers, or essays on the "women question", the concerns of lower class females were not often broached. There are a number of important exceptions to this, however, and articles by journalists who visited factories to report on the working conditions of the young women is one of them.\(^{59}\)

It is in the radical journalism that directly addressed the problems of female factory workers that the distance between ‘labour’ and ‘literature’, the chasm between blue-collar women and their educated well-wishers is most clearly delineated. Journalists wrote, it seems, not so much to bridge the distance between women labouring in factories and commentators working at typewriters, but to make the former into objects of pity, to rouse readers’ indignation to act on their behalf.

The attention given to describing the minutiae of factory conditions, and the ‘sensuous detail’ of poverty indicate how foreign, even exotic, the lives of

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\(^{59}\) Other exceptions include theoretical works, such as the piece that appeared in the feminist magazine *Kunu* and argues in the abstract for the importance of working-class women to any movement for radical change in colonial society. See Chang-rin, ‘Nodong Puin-úi Chojikhwarul’, *Kunu*, 1929, pp. 33-34.
factory girls were to readers and subscribers.° Reports who wrote about factory conditions, such as the ‘lady journalist’ (puin kija) whose description opens this chapter, would do much to form the image of the factory girl as helpless and exploited, the lonely prey of colonial capitalism and subject to all of its abuses. Graphic depictions of working conditions, such as the one below, dotted newspapers throughout the colony. This description is of a cotton spinning factory in Pusan, and is taken from the Chosôn Chungang Ilbo of July 1936:

Female workers, usually between the ages of 15 or 16 and 20, and most of them recruited from their villages in the provinces, work in this dark, dingy factory under the threatening surveillance of an overseer. The young women drink in warm air while the temperature sits near 100 degrees, their bodies throbbing, working until their bones crumble. They earn a maximum of 15 to 16 chôn a day and work in this environment for 6 or 7 years, enduring arduous training so that they can eventually be qualified to receive 40 to 50 chôn a day. They live in what passes for a ‘dormitory’, 10 girls crammed into a room. The guard constantly moves them to make sure he can spy on them properly, and their freedom is extremely restricted. The workday is long, the food is indescribable, and these women’s nutrition situation and health is extremely weak. Their pallor is like that of a patient at the end of a long illness, their bodies are emaciated and cases of fainting are frequent in the factory. [The factory] has rules and offending against these rules, even slightly, brings down immediate punishment by caning. That is the state of things.

Reports like this did much to tarnish the reputation of factories in the colony.

Labour historian Kim Kyŏng-il quotes an article in the Chosôn Chungang Ilbo:

Sheila Smith has written about the Victorian novelists who in the 1840s and 1850s turned their attention to “the poor”, whose alien lives they described in great detail to the higher classes to whom they had always been invisible. She calls this “the novelists’ sensuous reaction to the poor”, as writers like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote the physical detail of the lives and habits of “the poor”, whom they described almost as though they inhabited a foreign country. Sheila Smith, 1980, pp. 23-44.

° Chosôn Chungang Ilbo, 2.7.1936. Other reports on working conditions in the factories include an article on the conditions of child workers, Tonga Ilbo, 25.6.1927, and extensive
Ilbo that appeared five months after this description and which reported: “It has become commonplace for families to presume the worst of factories.”

Where journalists were shocked and repelled by the circumstances of factory girls, and could envisage them only as sacrificial victims, working-class women in their writings displayed a more ambivalent analysis of their situation. Labouring in a ‘modern’ economy for a ‘feudal’ family structure, working-class women would uncover some of the contradictions that lay at the heart of colonial capitalist society.

*Factory Girls*

Labour historian Yi Ok-ji traces the first appearance of the term yokong or factory girl to newspaper accounts of two strikes in 1919, one at a rice mill in Pusan and the other in a rice polishing factory in Inch’on. The market for female labour that developed in colonial capitalism was heralded by the recruitment advertisements as a new opportunity for women to earn their own wage. But in reality many women were converging on towns and industrial areas, not to seek their own economic independence or their own liberation,

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62 Quoted in Kim Kyong-il, p.61.

63 Many writers in the colonial period critiqued what they described as Korea’s ‘feudal family structure’ and saw young people, particularly females, as victims of a doctrine of filial piety that made them the ‘property’ of their parents. For more on this see Yung-Hee Lee, 1999. It should also be added that the pay of female factory workers was not sufficient to make them independent of their families.

64 Yi Ok-ji, p.38. Yi Ok-ji directs readers to a more detailed account of these strikes in Hanguk Noch'ong's *Han'guk Nodong Chohap Undongsa*, 1979, pp. 23-27.
but on behalf of destitute families. It is only by appreciating the force of this obligation that we can explain why women were propelled to seek work, and why they endured such awful conditions. In the midst of the social crisis and upheaval of industrialisation, working women turned to a new medium of the modern era - the daily mass circulation newspapers - to address their society and express their grievances. The ubiquitous presence of sexual harassment in the factories was a major theme.

In November 1929 the Tonga Ilbo published the following letter under the heading ‘A Factory Girl’s Complaint’ (Ônu Yêkong-üi Hasoyôn). The author gave her name as Yi Sông-ryong:

I was three and my brother was seven when we lost our father and our mother went to work in a mill. I graduated from Normal School at 15 and my brother, who had also graduated from Normal School and was working as a factory hand at a tailors, was 20 when he fell ill and died, leaving me to follow the same route and become a factory girl in a tobacco company. That was the spring I turned 17. My wages were 10 sen a day but during the three weeks of apprenticeship I earned 6 sen a day, so in a month I earned about 30 sen. But if you wanted to flirt with the supervisor or the foreman you could earn double that a day, while if you rubbed someone up the wrong way you’d be swallowing abuse the whole time and suffering all manner of indignities. Those girls only earned 20 sen.

As must have happened to many others, the death of a father spelt ruin for this family, who fell a class and entered factories to support themselves and each other. In Yi Sông-ryong’s account we glimpse the management style in a

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66 Yi Sông-ryong’s wages are appallingly low. Soon Won Park reports that the industry that paid some of the lowest wages to female workers was the silk-reeling companies that in 1931 paid 10 sen a day to its lowest paid workers. Soon Won Park, p.118.
tobacco factory where female workers are employed both to work hard and to appeal to their male supervisors. She goes on:

To me the factory was like a lion’s lair, and going to work was as hateful as being a cow going off to the slaughterhouse. There was never a day when the male workers ceased waylaying us in their heavy hunger for sex. But that wasn’t the only thing. Every day when we clocked off the guards frisked us one by one as if we were criminals.

Readers, do not be shocked. I was a seventeen year-old girl and that brutish supervisor would run his hands over my breasts until he reached the lower part of my body. How mortified I was. A seventeen year old girl forced to submit her body to this brutish handling. For 30 sen in wages I held back tears of blood and passed three long years of endless seasons.

Yi Sông-ryong writes openly of sexual assault in her workplace, and accuses factory supervisors as well as working-class male colleagues of harassment and intimidation. At a time when there was no word for sexual harassment, when it was not legally an offence, Yi Sông-ryong spells out in language that no reader can mistake, the treatment that working-class women were subjected to in the factories. She also reveals how factory girls literally could not afford not to be complicit with the culture of abuse in the factories. When one’s monthly wages depended on, amongst other things, a subjective criterion of ‘good behaviour’ and obedience, who could be independent of the overseer’s favour? She goes on:

67 The term “sexual harassment” (song huirong) first appeared in public parlance in South Korea in the early 1990s, and sexual harassment only became an offence in 1999. I am grateful to Yi Eun-sang for this information.
68 There were many vaguely defined ‘infringements’ that workers could be punished for in the factory systems in both Japan and colonial Korea at this time, and an overseer was able to exert considerable power over workers using the threat of a fine, of overtime, of physical punishment or of sacking. Patricia Tsurumi details a list of transgressions that were punishable by fines in a cotton spinning factory in Japan. The list included such vague imputations as “improper behaviour”, “bad conduct stemming from laziness”, and “obscene behaviour”, p.151. Carter Eckert also details the bonus system that allowed workers to be
At the beginning of the autumn I turned 19 I was overjoyed to hear that “If you go to X textile factory in Pusan the apprenticeship period is 3 months and discounting the food expenses you go: 15 yen, and after three months you can earn an average of 50 yen,” and for some reason I became awfully happy…Readers, do not be surprised. Once I arrived in Pusan I couldn’t see for tears. The food they said was for eating was foreign rice69 and tofu stew and the workday was twelve hours long. The work was two shifts, day and night. And even in the heat of summer with the temperature hitting 90 degrees the doors to the factory had to be kept shut. The reason they gave for this was that the air coming in would snap the threads. It was normal for the supervisor to be some kind of a bastard. If you couldn’t show a comely face then, like in the tobacco factory, you got a terrible time. We saw the thirty sen they promised to give us for our apprenticeship... After plunging ten fingers into boiling water [day after day] my hands lost their beauty and many times I stroked them weeping. Readers, whether we received 30 sen or one yen, would this pittance make much difference to one family? It would be nothing… Readers, take this one factory girl’s complaint to your hearts, and believing that through your efforts we may one day listen to a happier tale, I lay down my pen.70

Virginia Woolf’s comment upon reading Florence Nightingale’s thinly veiled autobiography that it was “not like writing, more like screaming” seems appropriate to this slice of autobiography also.71 Two months after this epistle was printed the 2,207 workers of the Pusan All-Korea Cotton Spinning Factory (Chosôn Pangjik Kongjiang) walked out on strike to protest a plan to reduce their wages. Amongst their grievances were the poor quality of factory food, the penalty system, discrimination against Korean workers,

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69 Presumably long-grain rice imported cheaply from South Asia. The detail given to describing dinners was a feature of writing by factory girls, and displays the preoccupations of the hungry. It also appears in the ‘labour literature’ from the 1970s and 1980s that shall be discussed in Part Two of this thesis. The paltriness of the workers remuneration can also be gauged by the food they were given – the common practice being that the cost of meals distributed to factory girls was deducted from their wages, thus the poorest paid could only afford the cheapest meals.


and the treatment of women workers. Thus the sentiments in Yi Sông-ryong’s letter found alternate expression in the demands of the strikers.

One of the strike demands – that factory girls should not be prevented from leaving the factory grounds - indicated the degree of control that factory management tried to exert over women workers. While male factory hands had some freedom of movement, factory girls were issued a ticket upon which their entries and departures were recorded, an indication that managers felt they could control women completely.

Whether Yi Sông-ryong be a “real” factory girl or a figment of an editor’s imagination, her appeal is voiced in the language of serfdom, and her plea is for a charitable justice. Here we see the dominant power of pre-capitalist relations, as people caught up in the first horrors of industrialisation hark back to their feudal alliances for deliverance. Yi Sông-ryong is asking to be rescued from the trap of poverty, foul working conditions, and sexual harassment that she intimates is the life of factory girls. In her search for a rescuer, a patron, she calls upon the readers of newspapers for aid, not her sister workers. Nevertheless, Yi Sông-ryong’s important innovation is in the mode of her appeal – she uses the modern mass media to address a whole nation of readers and in so doing is one of the first to claim the public sphere for the concerns of factory girls.

72 Kim Kyŏng-il, p.559-560.
74 That ambivalence is echoed in the factory girl’s poem reproduced below.
It is impossible to verify Yi Sŏng-ryong's story and even her identity, but the substance and tone of her article resound throughout the literature and journalism of the 1920s and 30s. Whoever she was, she relates a working life that highlights the strains particular to the experience of factory girls. Sexual harassment, isolation, migration, and the desire to voice her concerns to a large audience punctuate Yi Sŏng-ryong’s depiction of her transformation into a waged worker in the modern tobacco and cotton-spinning factories in the 1920s.

One of the most fearful aspects of Yi Sŏng-ryong’s circumstances was the isolation that factory girls experienced in a wage system that did not allow them independence. Carter Eckert goes into considerable detail to estimate the average monthly wage of a young woman working at the Kyongbang Spinning and Weaving Company in 1930, and the figure he reaches is “beggarly low” at roughly 15 yen per month. Given that many girls entered factories because their families could not support them, and could not afford a dowry, the amounts that factory girls earned kept them firmly within the ‘working poor’. Far from giving them independence, or entrée into the new world of consumer capitalism, the wage structure reminded factory girls that their best chance of survival lay in marriage.

Indeed the wage system at big factories like the Kyŏngbang Cotton Spinning...Factory shows a minute knowledge of the narrow needs of young working
women, in particular their need to save money for themselves and often their families too, while supporting themselves away from home. They paid for their lodging and their meals at the factory, as well as their clothes and amusements out of their small salaries. The wage system in Korea that discriminated against females and children was loosely based on the notion of a ‘family wage’, whereby a working-class male was paid at a higher rate to enable him to keep his family at home. The resultant wage discrimination against women and children forced into the factory economy underlines how delusive this policy was.

As we have seen, women workers in factories all over the colony mounted industrial campaigns to change their lives and working conditions in the 1920s and 1930s. Blue-collar Korean women shared with Korean working-class men low wages, poor working conditions, and ethnic discrimination. But women in the factories faced an added hardship that men did not directly experience, and one that has already been touched on in Yi Sŏng-ryong’s letter - severe sexual harassment. The crisis in gender and class ideologies compelled by Japan’s modernization process closed in on young women entering the new social space of the factory, and have haunted working-class women in one form or another down the century. But before launching into an examination of sexual violence in the factories, I would like

75 Eckert, pp.197-199.
76 Lee Hyo-chae, pp.131-132.
to give some background to how the traumas of modernisation and industrialisation were reproduced in people's changing social relationships.

**Sexual Crisis**

The feminist labour historian Anna Clark has described plebeian culture in the early years of Britain's industrial revolution as being afflicted by a 'sexual crisis' – as changes in the sexual division of labour upset older sexual and gender ideologies. She describes this sexual crisis as an "enormous, disturbing upheaval in gender relations [that] accompanied the transformation of the masses of working people – the artisans, small shopkeepers, labourers, laundresses, needlewomen, servants, and sailors of the eighteenth century – into a working-class of wage earners."77 Anna Clark uses the term sexual crisis to describe both a shift in the gender division of labour, and accompanying social and moral changes. She observes that "many women became enmeshed in the shifting moralities of early nineteenth century working-class culture as middle-class notions of respectability overtook an older sexual freedom."78

In Korea too industrialisation would forever change the old sexual divisions of labour. The expansion of capitalist industry that took off under Japanese colonialism would eventually supplant the feudal economy of Chosôn society where the father governed the labour activity of his wife and children.

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78 Ibid.
And like the industrial revolution in England, in Korea capitalist industry brought greatest change to those who threw their lot in with the factory economy or the mines, the class who had to survive by the new industries.

It was working-class women who would become the focus of the conflicting gender and class ideologies that reverberated through the transition from land-based, village-centred feudal society to an industrial one. As men seemed to lose their economic control of their family, female family members took on new economic roles that brought them into the public sphere of incipient capitalism – factories, shops, brothels, offices, schools, and etc. The prospect of female economic independence, an independence that anticipated a new social autonomy also, shook Korea’s patriarchal society.

But the sexual crisis was not a simple struggle between feudal and modern gender ideologies. Rather, colonial modernity and capitalist industrialisation were adding new layers of complexity to the lives of men and women. While it opened up new ways of exploiting young women, capitalist modernity gave them a new public role also. Yet these developments were fraught with contradictions.

In her history of Japanese working-class women, Elyssa Faison has demonstrated how wage earning females “served as a focal point for the tension inhering in classed understandings of female gender throughout the
early twentieth century.” Faison argues that Japanese company employers used traditional notions of ‘womanhood’ as primarily ‘domestic’ and ‘maternal’ to construct female employment as temporary (and low-paid), and shows how employers cast themselves as surrogate parents to placate the workers’ real parents, and to better police their workforce. In colonial Korea also, working women found that they embodied all the things that, traditionally, a woman should not be – labouring in factories far from home, losing their beauty in the pursuit of money, exposed to all the menace of public employment, as well as being poor and without protection. Their only virtue was that they were often working on behalf of others, their family. Factory girls thus trod a precarious path through the industrial revolution in Korea, and personified its contradictions – whether as the ‘victims’ of a factory system that required all their strength and perseverance, or as ‘corrupted’ by the modern capitalist market that exposed them to its worst abuses.

Sin Yong-suk writes how from the 1920s the Japanese colonial administration preached and enforced irreconcilable policies on women’s activity in the public and private spheres in Korea. They enforced the ideology of domesticity, “good wife, wise mother” (hyōngmo yangch‘ô), as a powerful social model for women to conform to, while at the same time implementing a range of policies that regulated and enhanced women’s

79 Elyssa Faison, 2001, p.5.
80 Ibid, pp.6-7.
activity in employment society. As we have seen, under colonial capitalist society female prostitution was legalised and regulated, and education for girls spread in response to the increase in demand for women to go out into society and work. But society, it seems, was not ready for them.

**Sexual Harassment**

Patricia Johnson has suggested that the sexual crisis that marked the onset of the industrial revolution in England is displayed most clearly in the rampant sexual harassment working women faced in their workplaces and on the streets. She writes:

> Given the tensions between men and women at a time when many working-class men felt their jobs and their control of the family threatened by changing economic conditions, sexual harassment played an important role in securing male dominance.

In colonial Korea also harassment and discrimination met working women in all occupations, in offices, factories, bars and hospitals. And women fought sexual violence and harassment in stop-works and strikes, in their list of demands on working treatment, in letters to newspapers, in poetry, and in countless other ways that have not survived the telling.

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81 Sin Yŏng-suk, p. 301. Elyssa Faison has discussed how the ‘good wife, wise mother’ doctrine arose in the early Meiji period in Japan in response to debates over the education of females when compulsory primary education for all children was instituted. See Elyssa Faison, 2001, p.3.
82 See Han’guk Yŏsŏngsa, Kŭndaep’yŏn, pp. 66-67.
83 Johnson, p.46.
The sexual harassment of working-class women, and other women who went out to work in this period, had several functions: it kept them in sex-segregated jobs, and it reinforced their subordination to men in the workplace.84 This double subjugation has led historian So Hyŏng-sil to suggest in her Masters thesis Research on the Women's Labour Movement in the Colonial Era, that sexual harassment was also a deliberate management strategy.

Writing about the systemic sexual control of women workers in the rubber industry and silk-weaving factories, So argues that the strategy of foremen and supervisors to enter into sexual relations with factory girls ended up providing them with the means to divide and control their workforce. She points out that in Yu Jin-o’s novella ‘Factory girl’ (Yojikkong), which shall be discussed more fully in the next chapter, we observe how the supervisor “selected specific workers to conciliate, bribe, and get into sexual relations with in order to be able to survey the movements of the other workers.”85 Factory girls who copulated with their foreman were often also suspected of being informers, and due to this or to disapproval or jealousy of the patronage they received, were frequently shunned by their fellow workers.

Thus sexual harassment could be an industrial issue also, a strategy to coopt some factory girls and intimidate others, to create disorder amongst the

84 This summary is taken from Catherine McKinnon's book The Sexual Harassment of Working Women, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
85 So Hyŏng-sil, p.59.
workers. At heart, it expressed the degree of control that male foremen, and male co-workers, believed they could exercise over females and shows how few rights were accorded to women when they entered the new social space of the factory. 86

There are a number of reasons why reports on sexual harassment and on the general conditions of factory girls from this period are so fragmentary. Although charges of sexual harassment were frequently made in strikes by women workers, there is very little reported evidence of how this harassment was part of factory culture in these years. An important reason for this is that very few labouring women were literate. 87 Even those who could write were constricted by long hours and heavy labour in the factory, and suffocated by the dormitory surveillance system. Presumably, most of them would have lacked the space or energy to write in to newspapers or magazines at the close of their shift. At a time when yangban women were just beginning to claim a portion of the literary world for themselves, 88 how distant was literature to factory girls, the daughters of peasants and slaves, their lives “silenced by ordinary labour”. 89

86 Kim Kyŏng-il reports that in 1927 when the father of a fourteen year old factory girl at the Katakura Silk Spinning Factory in Taegu charged a factory supervisor with assaulting his daughter, the factory supervisor was granted a stay of prosecution. pp. 59-60.
87 For an account of the scanty education program at one colonial factory see Carter Eckert, 1991, p.201.
88 For an account of how yangban women first began to interject into the Confucian literary world in the late Choson Dynasty see Chŏng Hae-ŭn, 1999, pp.233-237.
89 The phrase belongs to Michael Denning, 1997, p.228, who used it to describe the dwindling of the proletarian literature experiment in America in the 1930s.
Yet despite the obstacles they faced, including the fact that there was no term for sexual harassment, and indeed no legal notion of the rights of factory girls, working-class women found ways to object to the treatment they received in the colonial economy. That they turned to industrial action and to the modern media to address their society has much to do with their historical moment when writers began paying a new critical attention to their own society, and exponents of the new ‘proletarian literature’ movement began to depict workers as the central revolutionary subjects of art and politics. Writers influenced by the proletarian literature avant-garde would take up the cause of factory girls, and in the next chapter we shall examine how authors of proletarian literature responded to the sexual crisis through the trope of seduction, depicting working-class women as the sexual victims of capitalism.

The language that women workers themselves used to describe sexual harassment was sometimes vague, and yet violence against factory girls was cited again and again in the list of grievances that were issued upon taking industrial action in factories where women laboured. At the Chikbo Factory in Mokpo in 1926, 140 workers stopped work to make a single demand: that sexual violence by factory foremen should cease. In 1930 in P'yŏngyang, 600 workers at the Sanship Silk Reeling Company went on strike to demand

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90 For more information on this see Lee Hyo-chae’s list of strike demands in the rice mills that relied on female labour. In particular, see the strike of 1926 that demanded an end to arbitrary assaults on factory girls and requested that a manager be replaced; and the rice mill workers in Inch’ŏn who went on strike “enraged at the Japanese manager’s beating of pretty, young factory girls”. See Lee Hyo-chae, 1978, p.165.
a 10-hour day, edible food, and that male co-workers should cease their “practical jokes” (namkong-ŭi nongdamŭl kûnhara).92

The part that male co-workers played in the harassment of working-class women is not always clear. Many times they were the assailants, and I have found only one case of male and female workers together protesting the sexual harassment of women workers. But there are other examples of male and female workers acting together, such as the two strikes in Ich’ŏn in 1931 that took place in rice mills, where male and female workers went out on strike together to demand, amongst other things, that women workers receive wages equal to men.93

Descriptions of sexual coercion in the factories, when they appeared, were damning. In 1926 the leading progressive journal of the day, Kaebyŏk (Creation), published the following poem anonymously. It’s title was “Factory Girl”.

Although spring is here winter lingers in the sleeping streets of tired souls.  
The first factory siren breaks the dawn and violently sears the blue-black sky to howl in the ears of three hundred thousand.  
A girl races to the factory breathing painfully she could not stop to set out the mourning altar for her husband who died, his neck crushed in a harness.  
In that evil cave I stoop for twelve hours and do not once turn my head

91 Kim Kyŏng-il, p.567.  
to see that wretched foreman making eyes at me.
But in this bastards' world I must take what comes
Oh my ancestors! My husband!
Why did you leave me behind in this wretched world?\textsuperscript{94}

Here we can see how one writer expressed some of the contradictions that working women were entangled in. Caught between desiring a protector (that is, a husband) and resenting her own powerlessness, this author, of whose identity we cannot be certain, expressed what would be a major lament of factory girls in the first decades of capitalist industrialisation.

From the writings of Yi Sŏng-ryong and the \textit{Kaebyŏk} author, it would appear that the utopian society that some factory girls longed for was located in the feudal past, not the capitalist or socialist future. Both writers hark back to a patriarchal society that, though oppressive, expounded the protection of women, and use that model to criticise the industrial culture that exploited them ruthlessly. This ambivalent voice captures the industrial moment of the 1920s and 1930s, when working-class women laboured at the intersection of feudalism and modernity and spoke in the language of both to analyse their predicament.

The ambivalent voice of proletarian women is related to their ambivalent social position also. In a society that viewed female labour outside the home as shameful for both the girl and her family, young women labouring in

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Kaebyŏk}, 1926, 4, No.68. Quoted in Lee Hyo-chae, pp. 141-142. Translation by Chung Jin-ouk and Ruth Barraclough.
factories were without social sanction.\textsuperscript{95} The repressive dormitory system, which has been compared to minimum-security prisons, was the factory’s response to their workers’ need for ‘protection’, promising to guard young women and their sexual reputations from the outside world.\textsuperscript{96} But as we have seen, male factory workers and supervisors, (Japanese and Korean), often sexually used the women in their control. The only retaliation the factory girls had was unified industrial action.

\textit{Women in the labour movement}

If the social position of working-class women was dubious, so too was their political status. Working-class women in the 1920s and 30s who protested their conditions were endeavouring to carve out a political space for themselves in a labour movement whose leadership positions were dominated by men.\textsuperscript{97} The feminist publication \textit{A History of Korean Women in Modern Times} stresses how this was to the detriment of the labour movement:

Labour unions did not actively take up the causes of women workers, and did not give attention to the efforts to organise women workers. As a result, women workers were not drawn into the rank and file of union organisations in large numbers, and the level of organisation of female workers stayed very low.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{95} See Elaine Kim for a discussion of this, 1998.
\textsuperscript{96} Kang Yi-su (1992) describes one factory, the Ch"ongy"on textile factory that was constructed like a prison, it had six observation towers to prevent escape, and those factory girls who did abscond were rounded up at the local railway station. (222, 223, see also Yi Ok-ji, 53).
\textsuperscript{97} Lee Hyo-chae, 1996, p.125.
\textsuperscript{98} Han’guk Y"os"ong Y"onguhoe, 1992, p.241. The writer goes on: “This was also the case for the women’s movement’s largest body Kunuhoe, established by intelligentsia women it too
The feminist historian Lee Hyo-chae was the first to restore early twentieth century female proletarian leaders, writers and socialists to their rightful place in Korean history in her meticulous study ‘The Situation of Women Workers in the Colonial Period’ [Ilcheha-ui Yösong Nodong Munje], published in 1978. She chronicles the major industrial campaigns at female factories and workplaces, strikes that have been overshadowed by the larger and better-organised disputes like the Yonghung strike of 1928 and the 1929 Wonsan general strike, which for many historians had traditionally defined the potential of the colonial labour movement.99

Lee Hyo-chae’s work was taken up and expanded by the labour historian Yi Ok-ji in Han’guk Yösong Nodongja Undongsa [A History of the Women’s Labour Movement in Korea]. Yi Ok-ji warns how easy it is to overlook the presence of female proletarians in industrial disputes where workers are referred to by the generic chikkong (factory hand) a gender neutral term which like most gender neutral terms does not exclude women, but does tend to presume the dominant gender.100 The participation of women workers in strikes alongside male colleagues can be detected in such information as the list of demands issued by the factory workers, she tells us, such as those proclaimed by the employees at Sunota Clothing Company in a strike in 1926 where amongst the grievances was “the sexual assault of factory girls by the

Japanese supervisor." From this information Yi suggests that women workers probably took part in the strike also.101

The End of the Labour Movement

The period from the 1920s to the mid 1930s was the most active period of Korea’s colonial labour movement. By the late 1930s, however, once the labour movement had gone underground and many of its member were in prison, female factory workers found it very difficult to organise strikes or campaigns in the big factories that had been the centres of labour disputes. As country girls continued to seek paid work so that they could contribute cash to their parents and siblings, recruiters continued to deceive them with tales of well-remunerated jobs and protected dormitories. For many young women from the villages, to go alone to the factory districts to seek work must have seemed a far more dangerous course than to believe the tales of roving recruiters who promised safe conduct to often distant factory establishments.

To locate the factory girls’ response to their oppressive circumstances in the large factories of the colonial war economy, Yi Ok-ji urges us to look closely at fragmentary newspaper reports that describe factories in this period as edifices that resemble prisons. She points to tales of young women fleeing their factories being rounded up at local railway stations and returned to their employers for evidence of how women sought to escape factory work.102

100 Yi Ok-ji, p.39.
101 Ibid.
102 Yi Ok-ji, p.53.
Even Chŏnpyŏng, the revolutionary labour organisation that sprung into existence after the Japanese surrender in 1945 and seemed to offer the prospect of worker control of the factories they laboured in, on closer examination appears to have been addressing an exclusively male working-class constituency.\(^{103}\) Although women made up 25 percent of the reputed 500,000 strong membership of Chŏnpyŏng in 1946, Yi Ok-ji reports that there is no evidence that women held a single official position in the organisation, either in the national leadership or in the branches.\(^{104}\) In fact, the only references to women workers that Yi is able to locate are in propaganda material publicising “factory girl strikes” at silk reeling and cotton spinning factories.\(^{105}\) Even in the organisations that purported to be seeking their emancipation, women appeared doomed to take on the role of victim, passive supplicants rather than people capable of representing themselves.

*The Contradictions of Modernity*

In his study of the labour movement in the colonial period, Kim Kyŏng-il has argued that “although women workers were employed in contracts that had the appearance of being modern, in fact they were never free.”\(^{106}\) He goes on to argue that the brutal treatment of factory women became institutionalised

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\(^{103}\) For laudatory accounts of the revolutionary and democratic possibilities of Chŏnpyŏng see George Ogle, 1991, pp.8-12.

\(^{104}\) Yi, p.62. The exception to this was Chŏng Jong-myŏng who was head of the women’s bureau. Yi Yi-Hwa, 1990, p.238.

\(^{105}\) Yi Ok-ji, p.62.
in the 1920s and 30s, an argument that has resonances for this thesis as we go on to examine the working lives of factory girls in South Korea in the 1970s and 80s. But to argue that the subordination of women in the factory economy was incongruous with modernity is to mistake the nature of capitalist modernity. In fact the systematic exploitation of working-class women is quintessentially modern, a feature not only of Korea but of other industrial societies also.¹⁰⁷

From the beginning colonial modernity held very different opportunities for impoverished women and for gentlewomen. Much of what we know of Korean women’s response to modernity, a modernity filtered through Japan’s governance and cultural influence, has focussed on the experience of yangban or aristocratic women.¹⁰⁸ Thus the term New Woman, coined to describe those females who adopted modern ideas and practices, has carried an air of upper-class privilege.¹⁰⁹ Yet while some young women were encountering colonial modernity in the new schools for girls, in cafes, friendship societies, and the department stores of the metropolis, lower-class

¹⁰⁶ Kim Kyŏng-il, p.62.
¹⁰⁷ Elyssa Faison has shown how managers in textile companies in interwar Japan adapted both the traditional terminology of Japanese womanhood, and ‘modern’ technologies of discipline to control their female workforce in ‘Producing Female Textile Workers in Imperial Japan’, PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2001. Sonya Rose has shown how the gender discriminatory labour practices in industrial England - the ‘marriage bar’, the low wages and the temporary nature of women’s work - was a key component of modern capitalist industrialisation in England in her book Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
¹⁰⁸ See for example the discussions on New Women in Gi Wook Shin and Michael Robinson, (eds), Colonial Modernity in Korea, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, especially chapters 7 and 8.
¹⁰⁹ The contemporaneous definition of a ‘New Woman’ was one who had received a modern education, an expensive accoutrements in those years.
females were being modernised in the colony’s factories and modern brothels.

The prejudice that the possession of a modern education was the marker of ‘modernity’ has hindered some contemporaries and historians from perceiving the ‘education in capitalist modernity’ that working women received on work sites and in dormitories. They learnt not only the time discipline rule that tied them to whistles and clocks, but also respect for machines that could crush them\textsuperscript{110}, and how much value could be extracted from their labour. The learnt that some modern pastimes required a salary and leisure they did not possess. They learnt, in short, that “the most feudal system of authority can survive at the heart of the most modern of factories”\textsuperscript{111}, and that this was one of the many contradictions of modernity.

The knowledge that working women gained of their society spills forth from the fragments of writing quoted in this chapter, that are almost all that remain of the published lives of factory girls from the colonial period. The location of working-class women in their society: labouring at the centre of colonial capitalism’s contradictions, while strangers to the wealth they were creating, and marginal to the union movement they were inspiring, put them in a unique position. They would embody both the promises and the brutality of

\textsuperscript{110} This is particularly the case for women labouring in Japanese mines, who could be crushed by the hoists operating in mine shafts. For an account of Korean women miners in Japan see W. Donald Smith, “The 1932 Aso Coal Strike: Korean-Japanese Solidarity and Conflict, Korean Studies, 1996, volume 20, pp. 98, 102-3.

\textsuperscript{111} Dipesh Chakrabarty, 1989, p.xi.
the modernity that brought women into the new social space of the factory and there exploited them ruthlessly.

\textit{The factory girl by fragments}

We began this chapter by contrasting the fragmentary record on working-class women with their substantial contribution to capitalist industrialisation in colonial Korea. Factory girls may have been brought into being by capitalist entrepreneurs, but the low social status of young, poor isolated women had a long tradition in Korea.

Factory girls in this period would symbolise key social anxieties of their era—the breakdown of the family economy; the modernisation of women in the new social spaces of the factory and the modern brothel; and the colonial subjugation of Korean workers. In these years, factory girls were sometimes depicted by newspaper journalists and editors as representing the poverty and desperation of rural families, a sign not of economic advancement but of economic crisis. To engage in outside work that separated you from the protection of village and family, that tossed you anonymous into the labour market, was to embody the desperation of the times.

Before closing this chapter I want to turn again to the paradox of the first ‘modern’ factory girls in Korea, who were so crucial to colonial industrialisation while their voice was almost completely lost in illiteracy and
through working conditions that afforded them few opportunities to express themselves in writing. Using only the traces they left behind - a poem, a letter, the strike demands of working women, and the reports of visiting journalists, I have tried to piece together some of the fragments of their experience.

But factory girls themselves never entirely disappear into the structures that oppress them, and here we must acknowledge the modern printing and publishing industries of early capitalism in Korea. The capitalism that would produce a new social division of labour and destroy the old ways, would also bring a new access to the means of literary production, what Michael Denning has described as "the proletarianisation of writing."

No longer solely the province of aristocratic men and women, literary production, along with schools, would experience a boom in twentieth century Korea that opened the reading and writing of modern literature to female proletarians.

In the fragments of literature and journalism in which the factory girl appears, something of the nightmare of her labours is revealed to us. But that she appears only in fragments tells us of the distance between her and Literature. It was a distance that some authors in the colonial period tried to broach, but the attempt to represent working-class women in proletarian literature was not without difficulties. In the next chapter we examine how factory girls

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112 See the editorial in the Tonga Ilbo 4.1.1934. Also quoted in Song Youn-ok, 1997, p.200.
113 Denning, 1997, p.239.
114 It should be noted that illiteracy was not the condition of all females. In 1938 women made up 14 percent of teachers at Normal Schools. Lee Hyo-chae, p.146.
were represented in three works of proletarian literature, that reveal her at the very centre of contradictory class and gender ideologies.
Chapter Two
The factory girl in literature

The overseer stood beside the fresh new factory girls who had just arrived, laughing and chatting to them. And giving one girl’s plump buttocks a resounding slap [he cried] “Work hard! That’s how you make a bonus!”

From Kang Kyông-ae’s In’gan Munjae (The Human Predicament)

On the first of August 1934 the first instalment of a new novel, The Human Predicament [In’gan Munjae], was published in the pages of the East Asia Daily [Tonga Ilbo] one of the leading Korean daily newspapers in the colony. The novel’s one hundred and twenty chapters concluded on the 22nd of December of the same year with the death from tuberculosis of its principal character, Sônbi, a factory girl. Set in the early 1930s, the novel vividly portrayed the lives of young country girls and their foray into metropolitan life, following them through Seoul’s jazz cafes and secret revolutionary societies, the fortress factories of Inch’ôn and finally to death, in the textile factories. The novel’s author, Kang Kyông-ae, was twenty-seven years old and resided in provincial Kando (Jiando), in south east Manchuria.¹ Kang Kyông-ae had already made a name for herself as a poet, essayist and writer of short fiction in the magazines New Family [Sin Kajong] and New Asia [Sin

Donga]. With the serialisation of The Human Predicament in the Tonga Ilbo, she would become one of the leading early modernists of Korean literature.²

The Human Predicament by Kang Kyŏng-ae is a fictional account of the consequences of Korea’s rural destitution of the 1920s and 1930s for young women and girls. Kang Kyŏng-ae wrote about the painful, compromised and incomplete journey from feudal village to ‘modern’ factory. In making factory girls and concubines the centre of her major work, Kang Kyŏng-ae explored the forces at work in her society that made victims of impoverished women. Part of her originality would be her very closeness to the world of the characters she portrays, and it should therefore come as no surprise to her readers that Kang Kyŏng-ae’s early life was shaped by poverty.

Kang Kyŏng-ae

Kang Kyŏng-ae (1906-1944) was born in Hwang-hae province in 1906.³ Her father was a farm labourer and after he died in 1909 her mother married a man in his sixties who had children of his own but who was able to financially support the widow and her daughter. Like the daughters of progressive, well-to-do families, Kang Kyŏng-ae entered the modern school

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² The early modernists of Korean literature wrote about their engagement with the experience of modern life in the colony. Their influences were, as many of them would insist, both external and internal, foreign and indigenous, and they wrote about themes of isolation and flux, critiquing established forms and even a stable sense of selfhood. Prominent early modernists in Korea’s literary pantheon include the novelists Ch’ae Man-sik and Yi Kwang-su, and the poet Yun Dong-ju.

system for girls, however her family was neither tolerant nor wealthy. When her mother remarried she had entreated her new husband’s family to enroll her daughter in school, and in 1915 when Kang Kyŏng-ae was nine years old she began at Changyŏn Elementary School for Girls. But despite Kang Kyŏng-ae’s thirst for learning the family appears to have been disinclined to spend money on her, or on her mother, who became a virtual servant in the house of her new husband. Throughout her school years, even at the well known Sunghŭi Girls School in P’yŏngyang, Kang Kyŏng-ae had trouble paying her school fees and several sources record that she was punished at school for stealing money and articles from her classmates. Her own writings reveal a child ostracized and humiliated at school, and constantly in fights with her older step-siblings at home.

In 1923 Kang Kyŏng-ae took part in a strike at Sunghŭi Girls School, a missionary school run by an American headmistress, an action which attracted considerable publicity. The strike took place in October 1923 when Kang Kyŏng-ae was in her third year of middle school. She and several other boarders were expelled for protesting draconian conditions in the dormitory when at the Chusŏk holiday a student was refused permission to go out to

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4 It should be noted that these new missionary schools had their own class distinctions. Thus, one female politician informed the anthropologist Chung-Hee Soh that neither she nor any other upper class girl would have considered attending Ewha Girls School, the first modern school for females in Korea, “because its student body in the early days was composed of concubines and other low class girls.” Quoted in Chung-Hee Soh, 1991, p.33.

5 Kim Yang-sŏn, p. 348; Yi Sang-kyŏng, p. 815. These experiences are also mentioned in Kang Kyŏng-ae’s writings, School Fees [Wŏlsakŭm] and 200 Won Manuscript [Wŏnkoryo Yi Baek Wŏn].

6 Kang Kyŏng-ae, Ibid.

7 See Tonga Ilbo 17.10.23 and 18.10.23.
visit the grave of her friend. At this time Sunghuí Girls High School was derisively referred to by some as P’yŏngyang’s second penitentiary. Kang Kyŏng-ae’s political instincts appear to have been honed early, a not uncommon occurrence in the middle years of the colonial period when many Korean schools were hothouses of political activity.

Kang Kyŏng-ae wrote from what was patently a close understanding of the pressures and traps created by female poverty in her society. In Raymond Williams’ study of the writer D.H. Lawrence, Williams argues that the pressures specific to Lawrence’s class (Lawrence was the son of a miner) formed his understanding of the social world. Williams wrote of Lawrence:

> That he was the son of a miner adds, commonly, a certain pathetic or sentimental interest; we relate the adult life back to it, in a personal way. But the real importance of Lawrence’s origins is not and cannot be a matter of retrospect from the adult life. It is, rather, that his first social responses were those, not of a man observing the processes of industrialism, but of one caught in them, at an exposed point, and destined, in the normal course, to be enlisted in their regiments.”

Like D.H.Lawrence, Kang Kyŏng-ae too wrote about how poverty exposes you to the dramatic contradictions of the social world. Many literary historians have noted the connection between Kang Kyŏng-ae’s own personal experience of poverty and the destitute characters she brings to life in her fiction, explaining her compulsion for vivid social realism in personal

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8 Yi Sang-kyŏng, p. 816.
Kang Kyŏng-ae’s realism does not only apply to peasants and factory workers, however. Upper-class women and even *Sinyŏsŏng*, the “New Women” of Korea’s colonial modernity whom Kang encountered in her school years, appear in her books in a less than flattering light.

In *The Human Predicament* the author’s most sympathetic characters are the girls Sŏnbi and Kannan, who must battle to gain entry into the shabbiest corners of the expensive, ‘modern life’ in the colony. We discover that the modernity that *yangban* New Women-in-the-making long for, a modernity of big city adventures, the stimulation of public life, and an array of consumer commodities; holds a miserable fate for women who are without the protection of money or status.

One of Kang Kyŏng-ae’s innovations was to suggest that working class women are the exemplary New Women of colonial modernity, struggling to realize some of the promises of modernity – such as greater political and personal freedoms - and overcome some of its more brutal manifestations. In 1931, before she moved to Manchuria with her husband Chang Ha-il, Kang worked for six months in the factory districts of Inch’ŏn. At the end of this period a poem she wrote appeared in the magazine *Sin Yŏsŏng* (*New Woman*).

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Reply to a Brother’s Letter

Oppa!13
The letter you sent after a long silence
Asked “How is my darling sister?”
Oppa!
After you were taken away your sister14
Could never wear silk ribbons in her hair
And sobbed with her fist in her mouth when the rice jar was empty
Oppa, I am no longer that little girl
That foolish weeping baby
Now I make sturdy rubber shoes in the factory
Oppa, you should see my forearms
They are larger and stronger than yours
I am no longer the sister who yesterday sat on your knee eating sweets
Oppa! The year is nearly over
The wind whirls through the streets
Oppa, do you know? Have you heard yet?
Oppa, be happy for your little sister
Who no longer shrinks modestly but stands tall
I am the guide of all the girls in the factory
And I *** with the factory owner till the blood rushes to my face.15

In this poem Kang Kyŏng-ae problematised gender and class in a way that gained greater expression in The Human Predicament. Both this poem and The Human Predicament would foreground contradictions that were repressed in society – the unfettered exploitation of the young women that Korea’s patriarchal society averred to protect, and their political activity that revealed them as victims as well as agitators. However Kang Kyŏng-ae’s was not a lone voice. It is only by assessing her work as within a cultural formation, informed by the debates of the proletarian literature movement and animated too by the concerns of contemporary factory girls, that we can

12 It is unclear whether economic necessity drove her to seek factory work, whether she was working to earn money to fund the move to North China, or if she was simply seeking material for the novel that would become Ingan Munjae.
13 ‘Oppa’ is the address a younger sister gives an older brother. As in this poem, it is often used as a substitute for the brother’s name, and is an intimate appellation.
14 The implication is that he was arrested.
understand *The Human Predicament* in all its historical richness. That it was published by the literary editors of the *Tonga Ilbo* also connects the book to a wider cultural and political circle of publishers, authors, critics and readers whose own communities can tell us much about cultural life in the colony.

Kang Kyŏng-ae was not alone in making the misery of industrial capitalism in the cities and the impoverishment of the countryside the subject of much of her writing. She was part of a whole community of social realist authors who from the mid 1920s wrote against the status quo of colonial bourgeois society while honing their critique of what they saw as backward 'feudal' traditions. In this chapter we will compare *The Human Predicament* to the work of other authors of proletarian literature who also critiqued their society through tales of the lives of factory girls.

**Proletarian literature**

“That these writers could even contemplate the poor as central, individualised characters establishes the period,” writes Sheila Smith, speaking of the transformation of the novel in England into “Serious Literature” in the 1840s and 50s as writers began to imaginatively depict the inhabitants of the slums and factory towns, thereby paying a new critical attention to their own society.16 The same radical impulse might be said to

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15 Sinyŏsŏng (*New Woman*) December 1931, reprinted in Yi Sang-kyŏng, pp.800-801. The word in the last line was censored.
16 Sheila Smith, 1980, p.2.
have motivated Korea’s artistic movement in the 1920s, committed to realising in literature the terrible costs of colonial industrialisation.

Like many other trends taken up in the colonial period, proletarian literature was a foreign import, adapted to suit the distinctive terrain of colonial Korean society. It was Korean students in Japan reading Japanese proletarian literature journals such as Sower [Tane Maku Hito] and Literary Frontier [Bungei Sensen] who would start up a proletarian literary movement when they returned to Korea.¹⁷

In July 1925 the Proletariat Literature and Art Movement Association was formed, with an initial emphasis on literature, but soon widened to encompass plays, film, music and the fine arts. Proletarian fiction first appeared in Korea in the mid-1920s in the magazines Creation [Kaebýok]¹⁸, Light of Korea [Chosòn Chikwang]¹⁹, New World [Sin’gyedan]²⁰, or as novels and novellas serialised in Korean Literary World [Chosòn Mundan]²¹.

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¹⁸ Kaebýok was the leading progressive journal in colonial Korea during its run from 1920 to 1926, when it was shut down for its increasingly radical line. The KAPF writer Song Yông wrote proletarian literature for Kaebýok. For more on Kaebýok see Kim Kunsu, 1992, p. 153; and Michael Robinson, 1988, p.115.

¹⁹ Chosòn Chikwang published its first issue on the first of November 1922 and was a magazine devoted to disseminating articles on “socialist theory, social movements of the time, and proletarian literature”. After having withstood frequent confiscations, it was finally closed in 1930. Kim Kunsu, Ibid, p.125.

²⁰ Sin’gyedan came out in 1932 and was edited and published by the same man who had edited Chosòn Chikwang, Yu Jin-Huí. It closed in September 1933 after having published only eleven issues. Ibid, p.151.

²¹ Chosòn Mundan first appeared in 1924 and became one of the leading literary journals of the period. It published the proletarian literature of Yi Puk-myǒng and Pak Hwa-sǒng. For more on Chosòn Mundan see Ibid, pp. 126-137; and Michael Shin, 1999, p.427 n.90.
the Korea Daily [Chosôn Ilbo]22 and Tonga Ilbo. While letters and
journalist’s views appeared in the newspapers, poetry and short
fiction was being sent in to magazines from people who would be hard
pressed to describe themselves by the neat tag of ‘writer’ or ‘worker’. Kang Kyŏng-ae,
for example, was a school teacher in her native town of Changyŏn, but she
worked in the factories in Inch’ŏn before migrating to Kando with Chang
Ha-il in 1931.

As a literature that intervened in the politics of its day, the political
lineages of proletarian literature have been of more interest to most literary historians
than its content, which has rarely been examined.23 The Human Predicament,
precisely because it is not clearly tied to a political movement shows the
extent of the influence of the broad political imagination of proletarian
literature on authors of the time. If proletarian literature was an international
phenomenon in the early 1930s, flourishing in Paris, Tokyo, London,
Shanghai, Moscow, New York and Seoul, it also made sense in the
backblocks of provincial Kando in Manchuria, where Kang Kyŏng-ae lived
and wrote. The conventions of proletarian literature inform the world of The
Human Predicament where rural proletarians become urban workers,
 servants become factory girls, and factory girls become militants.

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22 The nationalist newspapers Chosôn Ilbo and Tonga Ilbo were the largest circulation daily
in the colony until they were both closed in 1940. Like the magazine Kaebỳŏk, they were
revived after liberation in 1945.
But a comparison of Kang Kyŏng-ae’s work with that of her contemporaries reveals that the male authors of proletarian literature ran into difficulty when they attempted to represent working class women. In chapter one we saw how factory girls in the 1920s and 1930s became the focus of key social anxieties about colonial capitalism: the breakdown of the family economy, the modernisation of women in the new social space of the factory, and the colonial subjugation of Korean workers. Working women’s ‘cause’ was taken up by radical journalists and the male dominated labour movement, but by concentrating on the apparent helplessness of factory women many commentators and activists failed to present working-class women as capable of achieving their own emancipation. We see the same dynamics played out when writers of proletarian literature turned their attention to factory girls. In the works of two authors we shall discuss below, Yi Puk-myŏng and Yu Jin-o, the sexual crisis faced by working women was rendered as the trope of seduction.24 The sexual roles made slightly fluid by political-economic changes could not be dealt with by these male authors except in terms of a new aesthetic of victimisation, that re-established the passivity of females.

Unable to fully grasp the class and gender ideologies at stake in the suppression of working class women, these male authors simplified the complex experience of factory girls into tales of seduction. The

23 Proletarian literature in the 1920s and 30s was situated somewhere between popular fiction and Literature with a capital L, an impasse that expressed the conflicting aims of its authors who sought to capture an elite literary as well as a proletarian readership.  
24 It should be noted that seduction in colonial Korea’s semi-feudal society could prove fatal to its victim.
representation of factory girls as the sexual victims of industrialisation did not furnish them with a political voice, instead it cleared the way for them to occupy the “feminised position of victim”. 25 Unable to participate in their own emancipation or liberate themselves, in this literature factory girls were rescued by radical males.

Kang Kyông-ae’s ambiguous place within the very male world of the proletarian literature movement, where her writing was admired for its “masculinity” 26, her distance from metropolitan literary circles, and her conviction that money, more than education, was essential to female liberation placed her on the periphery of the organisations that purported to be seeking the emancipation of working class women. 27 Her ambiguous position might be compared to factory girls themselves, who were at once central to the colonial economy and peripheral to the modernising ideologies of ‘empire’ and ‘industrialisation’.

The Human Predicament

25 The term is Patricia Johnson’s, who uses it in a different context: to describe the character Stephen Blackpool in Charles Dicken’s Hard Times, who is physically and sexually dominated by his wife in a role reversal of conventional accounts of domestic violence in working-class homes. See Patricia Johnson, 2001, p.149.

26 Together with the only other prominent female author of proletarian literature of the time, Pak Hwa-sông, Kang Kyông-ae was dubbed a ‘masculine writer’ by literary critics. Quoted in Sŏ Un-ju, 1992, p.296. The association of proletarian literature with ‘masculine’ writing points to a more essential equation of proletarian with male. It also assumes that the practice of writing about proletarian characters is unfeminine, even when the characters, and the author, are female.

27 Kang Kyông-ae discusses this point in ‘Songnyŏnsa’ [New Year’s Message] published in Sin Kajong in December, 1933. Part of this text is reproduced in the conclusion to this chapter.
Kang Kyông-ae is an author who has eluded definition. Her institutional affiliations are tenuous - although she wrote proletarian literature she never joined the Korean Artists Proletarian Federation, and her involvement with the feminist Rose of Sharon Association (Kûnuhoe) was marginal. Her output is eclectic – poetry, short stories, essays, book reviews and two novels, and a host of autobiographical writings. Her novel The Human Predicament barely survived the tumultuous era in which it was published. After Kang Kyông-ae’s death in 1944, and the collapse of the Japanese empire in East Asia in 1945, Kang Kyông-ae’s husband, Chang Ha-il went to North Korea, where he became associate editor at Nodong Sinmun (The Daily Worker) newspaper. Yi Sang-kyông, a leading authority on Kang Kyông-ae, surmises that he is the person responsible for arranging the republication of The Human Predicament in North Korea in 1949 by The Daily Worker press, thus ensuring the manuscript’s survival into post-colonial Korea, north and south.

The heroine of The Human Predicament is Sônbi, the orphaned daughter of poor sharecroppers, who is taken in as a servant by the village landlord, Tôkho, is raped by him, then flees to seek work and anonymity in the factories of Seoul and Inch’ôn. Sônbi, a virtuous and passive figure, seeks the friendship of Kannan, another pretty village girl who was also forced to

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28 Kyeong-Hee Choi notes that Kang Kyông-ae was on the periphery of the KAPF circle; she was a sympathiser but never joined the organisation. Kyeong-Hee Choi, 2001, p. 441, n. 31. Yi Sang-kyông, a leading authority on Kang Kyông-ae’s literature and the editor of her collected works, notes that Kang Kyông-ae in a review she published in the Chason ilbo in 1929 signed herself “Kang Kyông-ae of the Changyôn branch of Kûnuhoe”, p.705.
become one of Tôkho’s concubines, but Kannan has made a new and independent life for herself in Seoul. It is Kannan who gives Sônbi the opportunity to live a different, more independent life, becoming her guide in metropolitan Seoul and getting them both jobs in a new textile factory just opened in Inch’ôn.

With the first half of the book set in Dragon Lake village and the second following the protagonists as they try their luck in the factories and dockside of industrial Inch’ôn, *The Human Predicament* manages to be both peasant literature and proletarian novel.\(^\text{30}\) Like the industrial novels by Elisabeth Gaskell, *North and South* and *Mary Barton*, Kang Kyông-ae portrays the encroachment of industrial life upon the countryside, and the exhilarating, and ruthless, velocity of change.

In colonial Korea proletarian literature contains no trace of a nostalgic longing for the pre-modern idyllic countryside. Kang Kyông-ae opens her novel with a village legend of surpassing brutality, a simple but chilling tale of starvation and its consequences:

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\(^{29}\) Yi Sang-kyông, p. 4-5.

\(^{30}\) Indeed proletarian literature has frequently been charged with borrowing from earlier forms of pastoral literature. In an essay on proletarian literature first published in 1935, William Empson notes how the forms of proletarian literature are indebted to the pastoral, with the “mythical cult-figure” of the worker replacing the Christ-like figure of the shepherd from pastoral literature. He calls proletarian literature “covert pastoral” where “simple people express strong feelings in learned and fashionable language”, Empson, 1974, p.11. I am indebted to Lewis Mayo for this reference. Michael Denning also discusses proletarian literature as a form of ‘ghetto pastoral’ in *The Cultural Front*, 1997, pp.251-254.
Long ago, before the lake appeared, there lived in this area a rich Magistrate. He ruled over a household of countless servants, possessed vast rice fields and a multitude of plump cattle. But the Magistrate was a cruel miser and every year the autumn harvest that his family did not consume would lie rotting in his granary, despite the throngs who lived in poverty outside his gates... One day after successive years of poor harvests and just as all the peasants were on the brink of starvation, they came to the Magistrate to entreat his assistance. When after a long wait the Magistrate came out to meet them he did not even pretend to listen to their supplications but announcing that their suffering was no business of his, he barred his house and grounds to them. Left with no other recourse the peasants made a secret plan. That very night they swooped down on the official’s house and made off with his grain and fatted animals. The Magistrate went straight to the Complaints Office of the County Bureau and ordered all the peasants living around his village to be arrested. Those they did not execute they tortured or exiled to far away lands. The children of the village who had lost their mother and father, and the elderly who had lost their sons and daughters went to the Magistrate’s gates and wept aloud, searching for and calling out the names of their lost ones until their throats grew hoarse. They stayed all night and wept and wept until their tears collected and by morning the Magistrate’s lands had become an enormous pool, the size of a great whale’s back. That pool is the blue lake you see before you now.31

Thus readers are introduced to the world of Dragon Lake village through its terrible past, alerted right from the beginning of the relationships that order the district. The first lines of the novel inform us of the whereabouts of the Labour Office, the Colonial Police Office and the landlord Tôkho’s new fangled galvanised iron-roofed residence, while “those tiny hamlets squatting darkly around the village are the houses of peasants.”32 Most of the action in the first part of the book takes place in these hamlets as the main characters come into view.

Ch’otjjae

Ch’otjjae is a village boy who lives with his mother in bitter poverty.\textsuperscript{33} Ch’otjjae’s mother is the sexual instrument of the village men, and Ch’otjjae grows into an angry youth, given to drunkenness and fights, but also possessing a fierce sense of justice. When he and the other villagers are swindled by Tökho, Ch’otjjae is determined to study ‘the law’ that has robbed them all. Ch’otjjae makes his way to the docks at Inch’on where he meets the university student Sinch’ôl and discovers the labour movement.

Shinch’ôndaek

Sônbi is introduced to us as a child trying to make sense of the fate of one of the young women in the village, Tökho’s concubine Shinch’ôndaek:\textsuperscript{34}

“What are you running away from?” asked Sônbi’s mother. Sônbi shook her head and putting her lips to her mother’s ear she whispered, “Mother, they... The lady at the big house got into a fight with Shinch’ôndaek and the old gentleman scolded them terribly.”

Sônbi’s mother’s ear grew ticklish and she turned aside, “They’re fighting night and day now. So who was beaten?” she asked.

“Last time wasn’t the lady at the big house the one who was hit? But today he beat Shinch’ôndaek terribly, oh poor thing!”

“Women who become concubines deserve a beating,” said Sônbi’s mother.

“Is it right that first wives are the only ones beaten day and night?” She glanced at her daughter’s prim expression. Since this spring a soft pink blush had bloomed in Sônbi’s two cheeks.

\textsuperscript{33} The characters’ names evoke their class and class pretensions. Thus Sônbi, who longs to be educated, is given an elevated name meaning scholar, Ch’otjjae has a throwaway name meaning first born, common for children in large peasant families and Kannan’s name is similarly prosaic.

\textsuperscript{34} Shinch’ôndaek’s name also clearly delineates her status. She is from Shinch’ôn and the suffix \textit{taek} signifies that she is married. Thus taken together her name means “a married woman from Shinch’ôn”, an appellation that renders the bearer invisible, and an illustration of the saying that in traditional Korea, women had no names. I am grateful to Kenneth Wells for pointing this out.
"But Mum, you heard Shinch’ôndaek say she never wanted to come and be his concubine, she came because her father sold her [to Tôkho] for such a lot of money," cried Sônbi.
"Yes, I heard that too... They say there’s nothing so dangerous as money."

Sônbi’s mother then slips into an anxious musing about Sônbi’s future. With her own death imminent, Sônbi’s mother is fearful for her daughter who is rapidly growing to marriageable age, a dangerous age to be without a parent or protector. She discourages the scruffy peasant boy Ch’ôtjjae from bringing her medicine and seeing Sônbi, but she encourages Tôkho, the largest landowner in the village; a wealthy, ruthless man grown tired of his wife and concubines. In this one short exchange between mother and daughter all the dangers of female poverty are brought acutely to our attention. Sônbi will grow up to make the perilous journey from ‘feudalism’ to capitalism, from servant to factory girl, and the reader can never be certain that she will survive it.

Shinch’ôndaek is a portrait of a woman who must sell herself to fulfil her obligations in this patriarchal community, where she is bodily exchanged for her father’s debts. Loyal to the strictures of the patriarchal village system, she is the necessary casualty of that system, one of the outcasts who fills an occupation that keeps everyone else respectable. Like Ch’ôtjjae’s mother, who is a cheap alternative for those village men who might otherwise spend

35 Kang Kyông-ac, p.23.
36 Concubinage has been defined by the literary historian Yung Hee Kim as “a pseudo marriage form... based on male polygamy [it] endorses the male monopoly of female sexuality, while it stigmatizes a concubine as a parasitical appendage and an amoral deviant who suffers social anonymity.” Yung Hee Kim, 1999, pp.30-31.
their family’s money on enticements in the capital, Shinch’ôndaek has been enlisted to ensure that the wealthiest man in the village has a male heir to succeed him.

Shinch’ôndaek fails to fall pregnant, and her overthrow in the household is imminent. Before she quits Tôkho’s house and departs the village, Shinch’ôndaek pays a parting visit to Sônbi’s mother, and leaves her with a warning that Tôkho is seeking new quarry in Kannan’s house.

Minsu

Sônbi becomes an orphan early in the novel. Her father, Minsu, is Tôkho’s retainer, an ethical but ineffectual man who dies after being sent out in a snow-storm to collect the rent from one of Tôkho’s far-flung tenants. Minsu is shocked by the tenant family’s abject poverty and instead of collecting the rent he gives the family some of Tôkho’s money. When Minsu returns and reveals this to his employer Tôkho responds with an exaggerated fury. When Minsu dies of an illness contracted from his long walk through the snow-storm and subsequent beating from Tôkho, his departure seems to indicate the demise of a type as well. In a foreword to her novel published in the Tonga Ilbo and entitled Writer’s Word (Chakja-ui Mal), Kang Kyông-ae wrote: “In this work I grapple with the fundamental problems we face in these times, and [try to discover] who amongst us has the strength and the
force to solve these predicaments.” Minsu, the retainer whose life is wasted in faithful service, is not able to solve or even recognise the predicament he is caught in, the servitude he is born into. That task is taken up by his daughter and her friends.

Minsu’s death exposes his wife and daughter to poverty. With the loss of their protector and breadwinner, Sonbi and her mother are adrift in the village, and their living conditions quickly plummet. From being the wife of Tōkho’s trusted if mistreated steward, Sonbi’s mother becomes a widow reliant on scraps of sewing and cleaning work and the charity of others to survive. When she falls ill, her daughter’s precarious future preys on her mind. Sonbi’s mother is fastidious about their status and respectability and plainly wishes the peasant boy Ch’ŏtjae to leave when he visits bearing the ingredients for a herbal treatment for her illness. Sonbi’s mother will not allow her daughter’s reputation to be compromised by a visit by Ch’ŏtjae, whose character is as disreputable in the village as his mother’s, but her attitude is entirely different to Tōkho. When Tōkho visits she greets him graciously and pinches her daughter to make sure she does the same. Tōkho gives them money and is playing the benevolent patron when Kannan, Sonbi’s childhood friend, abruptly enters the room.

Kannan

When Kannan becomes Tŏkho’s new concubine she is shunned by many of the females in the village. When she visits the house of Sŏnbi and her mother she is ordered out by Tŏkho, who does not want her present when he is making Sŏnbi the object of his advances. Once Tŏkho begins to tire of Kannan she escapes to Seoul and must support herself in the metropolis. Kannan is a worldly adult woman by the time Sŏnbi joins her in Seoul, aware of all that Sŏnbi has been through, aware too of the difficulty of supporting oneself in the colonial economy, yet confident that they both can transform the society that appears determined to trample on them.

New Women and Superfluous Men

Shinch’ŏndaek and Ch’ôtjjae’s mother embody the misery of village life for impoverished women. But they are minor characters, cameos to the girls Sŏnbi and Kannan, and the cupidity of the landlord’s daughter Okjŏm. It is when she turns her attention to the wealthy New Woman, Tŏkho’s daughter Okjŏm, that Kang Kyŏng-ae calls into question the possibility of female solidarity in colonial Korean society. In Okjŏm Kang Kyŏng-ae gives us a New Woman full of spite and greed. As the social historian Kang Yi-su puts it:

As the daughter of the wealthiest landowner in the district, Okjŏm the university educated ‘new woman’ has no contact with the servitude and oppressiveness of the colonial condition; only the problems of free love and
“desire” concern her and as such she exemplifies the women of the leisured class and their dilemmas.\textsuperscript{38}

Kang Kyŏng-ae’s disparagement of New Women might be compared to that of male nationalists, who as Kenneth Wells has shown criticised New Women as frivolous and selfish when they couldn’t see how “women’s” concerns supported nationalist objectives.\textsuperscript{39} Kang Kyŏng-ae’s doubts about upper-class New Women stem from a different source to those of the male nationalists, however. Her critique is from the perspective of maidservants, factory girls and concubines; it is a class critique, not a gender one.

As noted in chapter one, the contemporary definition of “New Women” as females who possessed a ‘modern education’ could be interpreted to include factory girls, learning the ways of capitalist modernity in the colony’s rice mills and rubber factories. Like their more famous peers, the yangban New Women who strikingly embodied and articulated the contradictions of the society they were raised in, factory girls too were a variety of New Women caught between modern and traditional gender ideologies.

In Kang Kyŏng-ae’s novel the promising New Women are those being modernised in the new social space of the factory. Kannan, who survives the factory system that kills Sŏnbi, ends up being one of the characters best equipped to recognise, and perhaps one day overcome, the predicament she shares with other Korean females of her class. Kannan understands early on

\textsuperscript{38} Kang Yi-su, p.338
that the traps of female poverty – rape and concubinage in her village and sexual harassment in the factory districts - are something she shares with other lower class women.

The prominence of New Women presupposes the existence of Old Women or kuyŏsŏng. Kang Kyŏng-ae also explores the relationship between the Old Women of traditional Korea, and the emancipated, worldly New Women of colonial modernity. As Kang Yi-su notes:

The divide between new women and old women, class differences and the very gap between the women’s respective lives and interests mean that [this novel] contains an important key to examine the composition of women’s lives under colonialism.\(^{49}\)

In her portrait of the jealous first wife of Tŏkho (Okjŏm’s mother), and Okjŏm herself, Kang Kyŏng-ae seems to imply that there is very little difference between New Women of the prosperous classes and their old-fashioned mothers. They are both shown trampling on other women, their female servants, whose domestic labour frees them to pursue self-fulfilment (Okjŏm) or enjoy domestic tyranny (Okjŏm’s mother). In writing about the collective and self-emancipation of factory girls Kang Kyŏng-ae enlightens us as to the very limited possibilities of solidarity between women from different classes in colonial Korean society. In her novel, working-class women and servant girls are “victimised by all other

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\(^{40}\) Kang Yi-su, p.337.
women,`\textsuperscript{41}` and Kang Kyŏng-ae implicates yangban and bourgeois women in her critique of the society that exploits village girls.

But Kang Kyŏng-ae reserves her deepest critique for the intellectual hero, the ‘superfluous man’, the solitary and idealistic university student Sinch’ŏl. The ‘superfluous man’ is the creation of the Russian writer Turgenev, who created protagonists caught between idealism and a repressive state, men who read Rousseau on their landed estates and dreamed of change. When Korean left-wing intellectuals in the 1920s and 30s compared their country to the state of Russia fifty years previously, they also borrowed the terminology of Russian writers and adopted their fictional characters, like Turgenev’s ‘superfluous man’.\textsuperscript{42} Turgenev and other Russian writers’ ambivalent portrayal of intellectuals, aristocrats and clerks, of anyone who talked of changing their society but was unable to act, appealed to Korean authors in the 1920s and 30s who found themselves similarly placed in having a cultural freedom greater than their political liberty. Kang Kyŏng-ae’s Sinch’ŏl embodies this ambivalence.

Sinch’ŏl is introduced to the reader as a university student friend of Okjom’s whom she brings home to stay with her family during her school holidays.


\textsuperscript{42} The proletarian author Kim P’al-bong likened colonial Korea to Russia under Alexander III (1881-1894) and called for people to choose between being “a Turgenev” and a labourer. Kim Yoon-shik, p.31. The South Korean author Son Ch’angsŏp would write a short story entitled \textit{The Superfluous Man} after the Korean war.
Sinch’ôle is the son of Okjóm’s teacher, a handsome Seoullite studying for his bar exams and prey to the great vice of young men of his generation – politics. Okjóm falls in love with Sinch’ôle, her family approve the match and Sinch’ôle’s own father orders his son to marry the rich daughter of the usurious landlord. Only Sinch’ôle cannot bring himself to trade his principles for a comfortable match. He is ambivalent about Okjóm, and he finds that his growing feelings for Sônbí provide him with a powerful stimulus to join a political movement for the emancipation of the working classes. By the end of the novel, Sinch’ôle would come to embody the vexed issue of male intellectual leadership of working-class movements.

Sinch’ôle with all his advantages is not able to inspire Sônbí’s love, and Sônbí finds herself increasingly drawn to Ch’ôtjjac. Sinch’ôle’s fascination with the servant Sônbí is introduced to the reader in the first third of the novel. Staying in the same house as a guest of Okjóm and her parents, Sinch’ôle becomes fascinated with the beautiful Sônbí who washes his shirts. He muses with a naive perplexity on the distance that class puts between them:

If she were a classmate they could meet in cafés or other places but this was the first time he had found it so difficult to get to know a woman.43

Sinch’ôle considers Sônbí his equal and Okjóm considers her a rival, only because of Sônbí’s superior beauty. In Kang Kyông-ae’s novel female beauty is a commodity that crosses class boundaries, a trope familiar from classical
Korean literature. Though she is from a respectable village family, bereavement has robbed her of parental protection and her vulnerability is known throughout Dragon Lake Village. Her movements are watched proprietorially by more than one pair of male eyes - Tókho, Sinch'öl and Ch’ôtjjae all dream of her. Only Ch’ôtjjae is beneath her status, and abased by unrequited love.

**The rape of Sônbi**

Orphaned at the age of seventeen, Sônbi is invited by Tókho to move into his household and take his daughter, Okjöm’s bedroom while she is away at school, appearing to treat Sônbi as his own daughter. Sônbi complies and comes under Tókho’s protection, where he takes the role of both employer and guardian. Things begin to go wrong when Okjöm returns from her ‘enlightening education’ and unceremoniously turns Sônbi out of her room. The pert young Okjöm knows a servant class girl when she sees one, and sisterhood is not attempted again. Kang Kyŏng-ae is not completely dismissive of the emancipatory possibilities of education, however, and halfway through the novel there is a section where Sônbi indulges in her favourite dream - going to school.

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44 As in the story of Ch’ŭnhyang, the beautiful daughter of a *kisaeng* who secretly marries an aristocratic young man and then proceeds to deserve him by going through numerous public trials of her virtue. Kang Kyŏng-ae tells us that she read The Tale of Ch’ŭnhyang when she was eight years old and thus began her passionate attachment to classical Korean literature. Kang Kyŏng-ae, _Chasŏ Sojŏn [An Autobiographical Tale]_, reproduced in Yi Sang-kyŏng, pp.788-789.
Here we encounter what will become one of the themes of factory girl literature – the glittering dream of ‘education’. School is the repository of hope, a pathway to the world of ideas and action, where one can meet members of the opposite sex freely, meet youth from higher classes and not be expected to serve them, and attain equality of accomplishments. To be devoid of education, of the power to write one’s innermost thoughts and of the confidence to share them, is to Sônbi and the factory girls who would follow her, to be condemned to the life of a menial. As in the literature of factory girls in the 1970s and 80s, education is emancipation, and like the autodidact authors of nineteenth-century industrial England, such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Anne Brontë, these women authors too needed only a few snatched years of schooling to set them reading and writing for a lifetime.

When Tôkho makes his first sexual advances to Sônbi he uses the lure of education, promising that he will send Sônbi to school like his own daughter, Okjom. It was a promise that was often used by factory owners to recruit girls who could not otherwise afford to go to school. The cruelty of this deception is underlined by Kang Kyông-ae when following her reverie about education Sônbi is raped by Tôkho. While Tôkho seems to offer her a chance to better herself, he ends up injuring her and making life in her home village

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45 See Carter Eckert on the education program for textile workers at Kyongjang, which he describes as “extremely useful in helping persuade reluctant parents to turn their children over to the factory”, 1991, p.201.
untenable, setting her on the path of flight to the city to encounter all of the hardships and oppressions of being a factory girl.

Following the rape Tŏkho comes regularly to Sŏnbi’s room to copulate with her, and Sŏnbi is unable to do anything but comply. Once the old servant, Nan (*Halmŏm*) is dismissed by Tŏkho, Sŏnbi is utterly alone in the house and her thoughts twitch between ruling the household and escaping it. The stakes are high – if Sŏnbi falls pregnant and gives birth to a male heir she knows that she will become the most powerful woman in Tŏkho’s establishment. However, if like Kannan and Shinch’ŏndaek she does not conceive, her downfall in the household is inevitable. In this mood she recalls her childhood friend Kannan, whom Sŏnbi along with the rest of the village had despised for becoming Tŏkho’s concubine:

The moon rose as it always did in the night sky, and a soft breeze fluttered. And then Sŏnbi remembered what had been haunting her for days. It was Kannan. Before Tŏkho raped Sŏnbi she had believed along with everyone else that Kannan was a corrupt girl, but after the first violation Sŏnbi would meet Kannan in dreams and they would hold on to each other, weeping. Now whenever Sŏnbi hesitated, should she go or stay, the image of Kannan would flash into her mind. "Where is she now?" thought Sŏnbi. "They say she’s doing well somewhere, earning money…" 

With nowhere to turn, and spurred on by her memory of Kannan, Sŏnbi visits Kannan’s mother who lives alone in a hut. But Sŏnbi is exhausted by the

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46 Kang Kyŏng-ae, p.191. The myth of city success was a powerful one in the countryside, something we will encounter again in the autobiographies of factory girls in the 1970s. Thus Kannan, who is scraping out a living in Seoul as a factory girl is believed to be “doing well” and “earning money” by her friends and family back home. I am grateful to Miriam Lang for pointing this out.
effort of leaving the house undetected, and when she enters Kannan’s
mother’s house the trauma of her recent experiences overwhelm her and she
is unable to speak.

"It’s a long time since I laid eyes on you. I saw you when your mother
passed away, but I haven’t had a chance since... well, you’ve grown very
beautiful."

So spoke Kannan’s mother as she looked at Sônbi sitting inert before her.
She waited for some word from Sônbi’s lips.
But Sônbi, though she was now safe inside could not help wondering if
Okjôm’s mother, or else Tôkho himself, had stolen behind her and was even
now waiting outside the door, so that once she stepped outside the house
they would scream "You bitch. What are you doing here?" and attack her.
Try as she might Sônbi could not utter a word. She only sat quietly, stealing
glances at the door from time to time.
Sônbi’s manner appeared very peculiar to Kannan’s mother. She
remembered her daughter one night before she went to Seoul, pacing up and
down the house unable to sleep, "Mum, just wait and see Tôkho will take
Sônbi one day. When he’s done with me..."
As though with a sigh these words suddenly sounded in Kannan’s mother’s
cars...
Can this girl too have been banished just as Kannan was, she wondered. The
more Kannan’s mother thought about it the more intense her suspicions
grew. And one part of her exulted that this girl has been as badly used as
Kannan had been. But another part, seeing Sônbi’s despair, felt how closely
in attitude Sônbi resembled her own daughter sitting in that very spot, so
that she seemed to see Kannan sitting quietly before her very eyes."47

As Sônbi begins to open up to her, we realise that Kannan’s mother is gripped
with fear that her daughter, who has escaped to Seoul, will be drawn back
into Tôkho’s control. When Sônbi asks where Kannan has gone, Kannan’s
mother shouts at her “Why should you want to know where she is? It’s not
enough just to ruin people’s daughters, is that it?”48

Kannan’s mother harbours the anxieties of a social outcast. Here is a casualty of the small, unitary village world that promises to protect women but blames them for their own victimisation. When Kannan’s mother quietly exults that her daughter is not the only young woman to be ‘ruined’ by Tökho we perceive the divisions that male violence can create amongst women, a scene that is repeated in the factory at Inch’ón. She is even reluctant to hand over to Sônbi a letter bearing Kannan’s address, so urgent is her fear of surveillance, so powerless does she feel herself and her daughter to be:

Kannan’s mother followed Sônbi out the door, begging her repeatedly to be careful with the letter. Sônbi stuffed the letter in the breast of her blouse but remembering how Tökho’s hands had stroked her breasts she immediately drew it out. 49

The letter’s address is in Chinese characters, which neither of them can read. Although Sônbi is without a plan of action, she guards the letter carefully and eventually hides it in her socks. Meanwhile, Tökho is convinced that Sônbi is pregnant to him, and hopes for a son. Tökho gives Sônbi money and promises she will replace his wife once he is certain Sônbi is pregnant.

In the following chapter Tökho’s wife shares with her daughter her suspicions about Tökho’s sexual liaison with Sônbi. Okjóm then confronts Sônbi and charges her with carrying on a furtive relationship with Sinch’öl. Just at that moment Tökho walks into the kitchen and his daughter confronts him not with the accusation of his having slept with their servant-girl, but

with the news that Sŏnbi and Sinch’ŏl have been having an illicit affair, the
news most likely to turn her father against Sŏnbi. Tŏkho interrogates Sŏnbi,
who realises that she must leave the house, for Tŏkho will not defend her now.
This experience is the impetus she needs to take the fearful journey to Seoul.

Leaving the village

All three main characters of *The Human Predicament* (Sŏnbi, Kannan and
Ch’ŏttjae) are expelled from village life, and in this they resemble the author
herself. In 1923 when Kang Kyŏng-ae was seventeen she met and fell in love
with Yang Ju-dong, a young graduate of Waseda University who had just
divorced his first wife and was giving a speech attacking feudalism at a
gathering of youth and students in Changyŏn. “The female student sitting in
the very front row and listening intently to every word of his lecture was
Kang Kyŏng-ae,” reported an observer of this meeting. Kang Kyŏng-ae
and Yang Ju-dong fell in love, and when Kang Kyŏng-ae was expelled from
Sunghui Girls’ High School in P’yŏngyang for taking part in a students
strike, she and Yang Ju-dong ran away to Seoul and started living together,
scandalising their families back home in Changyŏn. Kang Kyŏng-ae
published her first poetry in the magazine Yang Ju-dong established,

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50 Yi Sang-kyŏng, op. cit., p. 816.
51 Sunghui Girls High School in P’yŏngyang gained fame for its support for the nationalist
movement prior to the March First independence demonstrations of 1919. Through its secret
society, the Pine and Bamboo Association, the school funnelled money to nationalist
groups outside of the colony. See *Uri Yŏsŏngū Yŏksa*, 1999, p.330.
52 This poem, *One Book*, is reproduced in the Conclusion.
Kumsong [La Vénus], and she resumed her studies at Tōngtok Girls School in Seoul. However by September 1924 her relationship with Yang Ju-dong was over. When Kang Kyŏng-ae returned to Changyon to stay with her step-sister and her husband in the hotel they ran she was beaten by her brother-in-law for having shamed them by running off to Seoul and living with a man. Kang Kyŏng-ae’s hearing was permanently impaired from this assault.

Kang Kyŏng-ae left no written record of her time with Yang Ju-dong, a prominent figure who supported the national literature movement and would go on to become an eminent scholar of Korean literature at Yonsei University in the 1950s, and write a book on T.S. Eliot. We do, however, have Yang Ju-dong’s own remembrance of their first meeting after his lecture at Changyon:

In those days in the countryside even young male and female students refrained from meeting freely or visiting each other, for fear of [exposing themselves to] slander. In such a place a wild-eyed, bold young girl caught up with me that dark night pouring with rain, flying after me like a mountain.

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53 Kumsong introduced the poetry of Byron, Baudelaire and Tagore to Korea in translation. Kim Kūnsu, p. 125.
54 Yi Sang-kyŏng, p.817.
55 The national literature movement was the rival literary circle to the proletarian literature group. Its adherents expounded ‘art for art’s sake’ and produced much of the most popular literature of the time, and the most lasting. Many of these writers, whose political opinions were generally speaking, moderate and reformist, had by the late 1930s and early 1940s joined literary associations that put their talents at the service of the Japanese Empire’s war propaganda. The most famous examples of this are Yi Kwang-su and Ch’oe Namsŏn. It should be noted that by the early 1940s a number of former authors of proletarian literature had done the same, most notable are Pak Yŏng-hŭi and Yu Jin-o. This will be discussed later in this chapter.
bird. She said peremptorily “Sir, please do teach me English! And poetry, and literature! I am in my third year at middle school and I still don’t know anything. But please help teach me for I am filled to the brim with a passion for literature.57

Kang Kyŏng-ae’s first romance displays the vulnerability of women who adopted sexual freedom before they had acquired legal or social freedoms. The injury her brother-in-law inflicted on her, he punctured her inner ear in the beating, is believed by some to have contributed to her early death.58

Unable to endure the censure of her family and the condemnation of people in Changyŏn, Kang Kyŏng-ae left her home town and made her first visit to Kando in Manchuria around 1925, the place she would eventually make her home, together with Chang Ha-il, in 1931.

In a manner reminiscent of their author, Sŏnbi, Kannan and Ch’ŏtijjae must all three go to the city and become proletarians in order to be fully awakened to their shared Human Predicament. Sŏnbi moves in with the more worldly Kannan who will be her guide in metropolitan Seoul. But Kannan has a secret.

Sŏnbi viewed with suspicion Kannan’s habit of returning home late at night, her mind obviously on other things. And when Sŏnbi thought back to her own life in the village and how every night she was forced to submit to Tŏkho, she shuddered involuntarily. Sŏnbi began to wonder despondently if Kannan too might be committing that kind of vice.59

57 From Yang Ju-dong, 1963, p. 149.
59 Kang Kyŏng-ae, p.238.
As the reader soon discovers, Kannan’s absences have nothing to do with either male sexual predators or illicit romance, she is involved in a workers movement. And like the socialists who were entering industries all over Korea at this time, 1934, to create labour unions, improve working conditions, in short to build a workers movement, Kannan signs up for a textile factory in Inch’ŏn to earn a living while she secretly distributes political pamphlets to her co-workers. Kannan’s political contact in Inch’ŏn turns out to be none other than the student Sinch’ŏl. Disowned by his father for not marrying Okjŏm and giving up politics, Sinch’ŏl throws his lot in with the labour movement, and his first mission is in the industrial sector in Inch’ŏn, and the very factory where Kannan and Sŏnbi are engaged as factory hands.

*Tales of Seduction*

On her first night in the factory Kannan gazes out the window, intimidated by her isolation and the political aim she will pursue there. She locks apprehensively at the wall guarding the factory grounds, which appears like an impenetrable fortress, and wonders if she will be able to find a hole through which she can crawl to meet her contact, Sinch’ŏl, on the outside, and get assistance with her mission.

Kannan is exploring the dark corridors, peering outside at the gates when a noise in the corridor distracts her:
In breathless apprehension Kannan watched as a door creaked open. A factory girl was creeping noiselessly down the corridor and seemed to be making for the supervisor’s night duty office. Drawn by curiosity Kannan followed. Outside the night office the girl stopped, hesitating before opening the door and going inside. “Who could she be?” wondered Kannan... And then the memory of how she had tamely submitted night after night to Tōkho’s assaults flashed through Kannan’s mind with such force that her back prickled with perspiration.

She stood for a long moment caught in memories, then crept up to the night office and bent her ear to the door. Kannan could hear nothing. If there had been no important mission to carry out how she would have pummelled the door and raised hell until the entire factory was turned upside down, in order to expose the truth to all the other factory girls.\(^{60}\)

But Kannan does not pummel on the door. On her return to bed Kannan warns the sleepy and bewildered Sŏnbi about the factory overseers, saying “These overseers who manage us and all those behind them are one thousand times, ten thousand times more frightening men than Tōkho.”\(^{61}\) Kannan does not tell Sŏnbi what she saw, but several nights later she disappears through a drainage vent in the factory compound for a few hours and the next morning flyers appear in odd places all over the factory — under bedding and stuck on walls, telling of all the events in the factory, known and secret. This is repeated every morning for days and all kinds of topics are raised in the notices; one morning the factory girls are surprised to read a critique of the overseer’s speech to them from the night before. The flyers bring the employees closer together and they begin to discuss with each other their lives inside the factory walls. A group of girls one night start to wonder about the bonus system:

\(^{60}\) Kang Kyŏng-ae , pp. 248-249.
\(^{61}\) Kang Kyŏng-ae , p.250.
“Well girls, I don’t know who brings us this paper but what they write is true. The overseer did promise that everyday somebody in the factory would win a bonus of 20 [sen] for their work, but who’s seen this bonus? It’s just an empty word.”

“What about Haeyöng who always works so hard, she hasn’t got any bonuses… It must be a lie.”

“But that new girl, the pretty one in room 7, she’s received a bonus.”

“She has? Who?”

“Be careful what you say, someone might hear.”

“Who is going to hear and who’s listening anyway at this time of night?”

“Don’t you know anything? Our overseer does the rounds every night.”

“So what? He can’t hear what we whisper under our quilts. Anyway tell me who it is… Oh I know! Its that girl who’s just arrived they call Belle.” Belle was Sônbî’s nickname in the dormitory.

“No, not her. Haeyöng said it’s the new girl who stands in front of her. The one our overseer always trails after smiling from ear to ear. What a disgrace. I don’t even like looking at them. He did the same thing to Yong-nyô.”

“But she’s better looking than Yong-nyô. That’s what happens with pretty girls. If I was a man I’d like her too. Her eyes and nose are so pretty.”

At this a factory girl who was partly deaf piped up, “Pretty, what’s pretty? There’s something wrong with his hands. I’m frightened whenever I look at his hands.”

“Oh this stone deaf silly. What did she hear? Hee,hee, ha, ha.” Everyone burst out laughing.

The deaf girl covered her ears with her hands.

“Stop laughing,” said a girl lying in bed and she put her hand over one of the laughing girl’s mouths.

“But Hyosun,” the deaf girl addressed the girl in bed, “who came and put this paper in our room? I don’t know if they put it in other rooms too… But it must be one of the girls in the dormitory who’s done it. We should do something too.”

The deaf girl suddenly threw off her quilt and taking a deep breath began to speak with the urgency of someone unburdening themselves:

“Listen to me. I used to work in a milkhouse in Seoul. The overseer there was a disgusting man. He didn’t pay us our proper wages so why shouldn’t we go out on strike? So that’s what we did only a couple of the girls snitched and told the overseer everything and everyone was fired. I was lucky not to be dismissed, but the overseer was so bad that eventually I quit anyway. That’s how it ended…”

“Those snitches all deserve to die! And I bet they were having a love affair with him…”

“Look at us. We work until we collapse and they don’t even pay us our wages, what sort of a state is this? We are our parents’ precious daughters and here they treat us like dirt. Today I nearly caught my hand in the machine, I could have lost it. Before we came here who amongst us ever thought that the factory would be like this?” As she spoke the girl put her hand to her cheek and shuddered. She seemed to hear the turning of the spinning reel.
"I'd like to meet the person who brought us this paper. Should we try and find them?" 62

Here we can see factory girls participating in their own ‘awakening’. The sexual economy of the factory is something they are all familiar with, and they reproduce its cruelty in their own analysis of the ‘seduction’ of factory girls by overseers, which divides working class women into ‘snitches’ or hard-working factory girls.

But in this scene we also perceive Kang Kyŏng-ae’s stake in presenting writing as a form of political illumination. The provocative tone of the flyers (we never actually read one, we are only told about them), and their instant effect on the factory girls intimate the inseparable links between literature and political awareness. The rhetorical message of the flyers broadened the awareness of the women from their own individual concerns to an appreciation of a shared predicament. In this sense the flyers might be said to share, in part, one of the projects of The Human Predicament, which was to chronicle the lives of factory girls to a society that had for so long tolerated, or not even noticed, the suppression of lower-class women.

Sŏnbi falls ill before any of the overseers swarming around her can entice her or sexually assault her, and soon after a new batch of factory girls arrives to distract them. In this portrait Kang Kyŏng-ae gives us distinctly lower-class colonial heroines, without the adornment of sexual purity that was simply

unavailable to most poverty-stricken girls on the move. Even the circumstance of a young lower class girl living in lodgings in Seoul exposes her to the unabashed sexual interest of her neighbours.63

Sŏnbi and Kannan can be described as archetypal figures of Korea’s economic and social history. In the final pages of *The Human Predicament* Sŏnbi’s death from tuberculosis, the disease of the spinning and weaving factories, is in contrast to Kannan’s political resolve. In the character of Kannan, the author Kang Kyŏng-ae proposes that it is collective organisation into a union of workers that will enable female proletarians to confront the real sexual crisis within the working class. Politics saves Kannan from the menace of the material world, from poverty and vice.

But in this novel the author Kang Kyŏng-ae does not forget the cruelty of the world that industrialisation and modernisation is leaving behind. In the small, closed world of the feudal village where Sŏnbi becomes an orphan, she is exposed to the terrible fate of an unprotected female in such an environment. But rather than suggest that there is any key difference in relations between the sexes under Confucian feudalism, and incipient capitalism, Kang Kyŏng-ae shows Sŏnbi’s continued victimisation under both systems. Her pretty face and guileless ways are as alluring to the next men who enter her

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63 Kannan is an object of enormous interest to her neighbouring lodgers, a group of young, impoverished but educated fellows who share a room to save on expenses. Sinch’ŏl joins them when his father throws him out of the house for refusing to give up his political interests and marry Okjŏm. Thus when Sinch’ŏl and Kannan first formally meet in Inch’ŏn
life forcefully – the factory overseers – as they were to the feudal landlord:

“The thought flashed into Kannani’s head, how many Tōkhos there must be out there in that bustling metropolis.”

*Red Love*

As noted in chapter one, the crises that colonial modernisation and industrialisation created in Korea were not only economic and political in nature, but also reverberated in cultural and social life, and in sexual relationships. For some women the sexual crisis that was part of the transformation of Korean society provoked a rethinking of the old moralities, and they turned to new or ‘modern’ sexual relationships to assert a radical modernity. *Red Love (Pǔkun Yónae)* or The Marriage of Comrades (*Tongji Kyŏlhon*) were two terms coined in the 1920s to describe radical socialist couples who openly flouted feudal traditions on marriage and campaigned against repressive social conditions.

In proletarian literature also Red Love thrived. We see it played out in both Yi Puk-myŏng and Yu Jin-o’s stories in a way that presents it as a ‘liberating’ resolution of the plight of ‘unprotected’ factory girls, while leaving intact the inherited hierarchies of male-female relations in families with the male as ‘teacher’ or ‘guide’ and the female as ‘pupil’.

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they instantly recognise each other from their lodging house in Seoul. Kang Kyŏng-ae, pp.184-185.

64 Ibid, p.350.

65 Perhaps the most well-known example was the revolutionary Chŏng Jong-myŏng who “burned her youth in the flames of love and revolution”. Chŏng Jong-myŏng
Although the trope of seduction is continued through *The Human Predicament* and rape is found in both village and industrial life, Kang Kyōng-ae refuses to find resolution in romance. Sŏnbi, the hyper-suffering heroine of this hyper-realist novel, is before her death rewarded not with love but with political awakening. In *The Human Predicament* there is no romance to glide over and finally resolve the rest of the action. Gender relations are not easily solved in the fix-all of Red Love, and instead we are faced with the complexities of desire and victimhood, in the characters and fates of Sŏnbi and Kannan.

In the charged finale Sinch’ŏl’s rushed marriage to an anonymous New Woman becomes a part with his betrayal of Ch’ŏtjjae and other comrades. Rather than concluding with an optimistic marriage, the union of Sinch’ŏl and his “heiress” defines the opportunism of a bourgeois model of marriage for profit, while Sŏnbi and Ch’ŏtjjae never attain Red Love with each other.

The issue of the sexual victimisation of Korean working class women was taken up by other authors associated with the proletarian literature movement, who would establish factory girls at the centre of a trope of seduction. Proletarian literature of the 1930s by male writers expressed the sexual crisis

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66 Kang Kyōng-ae never specifies if the woman Sinch’ŏl marries is Okjom, his bride is not identified in the text where she is referred to simply as an ‘heiress’. Kang Kyōng-ae, p.301.  
67 For more on Red Love see Yi Yae-suk, ‘Yŏsŏng, Kudŭl-ŭi Sarang kwa Kyŏlhon’ [Women, Their Loves and Marriages], in *How Did We Live Over The Last 100 Years*, vol. 2, pp. 208 – 211.
and the trauma of industrialisation in blunt tales of seduction where factory girls are depicted as the sexual victims of capitalism, seduced by factory overseers.

But the casting of factory supervisor as rapists/seducers and working class men as relatively ethical men simplified the complex experience of working women. As we saw in Chapter One, working-class men were also implicated in working women’s experience of factories as brutal, and often times they were the perpetrators of sexual harassment. The image of seduction in proletarian literature from the colonial period clearly served a political purpose as well as a literary one. Anna Clark in her essay on the trope of seduction in British radical fiction at the time of the onset of the industrial revolution had this to say about its wider role:

The image of seduction imbued fiction with a political context linking the reader to larger struggles, and inspired the public rhetoric of class struggle with personal, emotional images of oppression.\(^{68}\)

When members and supporters of the Korean Artists Proletariat Federation (KAPF) began to represent working class women in literature, they wrote sexual violence in the factories at the centre of the experience of their factory girl heroines. In Yu Jin-o’s short story Yōjikkong (Factory Girl), serialised in the Chosŏn Ilbo in January 1931, and in Yi Puk-myông’s Yŏkong (Factory

\(^{68}\) Anna Clark, 1986, p.48.
pubilshed in *Sin'gyedan* in March 1933, sexual harassment defined the working lives of their young heroines.\(^69\)

**KAPF**

At the same time that factory girls were writing in to newspapers and magazines, working-class politics and literature were meeting in the proletarian literature movement, an avant-garde literary trend steered by the Korean Artists Proletariat Federation (KAPF, 1925–1935). It was a movement for the cultural enfranchisement of the lower classes that saw workers as the central subject of art and politics. But the male authors of proletarian literature were unable to fully grasp the gender ideologies that were at stake in the suppression of working class women.

Yi Puk-myŏng and Yu Jin-o, writers associated with the Korean Artists Proletariat Federation, portray factory girls as the helpmates of advanced male workers who teach them about the new world of capitalist modernity. Depicted as handmaids to revolution, the working class women in these stories come to political awareness, not through their own experience in the factories, but via the careful instruction of their boyfriends or male acquaintances. In Yi Puk-myŏng’s story the factory girl heroine is the romantic partner of the radical male worker, his sexual reward for going to

\(^{69}\) Yi Puk-myŏng was a member of KAPF. Yu Jin-o did not officially join KAPF and might be best described as a “fellow traveller” who supported its political line and wrote proletarian literature for the Chosŏn Ilbo, works that were later banned by the South Korean state. Both Yu Jin-o and Pak Yŏng-hŭi, another leading author of proletarian literature, would in 1939...
prison or otherwise taking on the burden of the class struggle. Lacking the capacity to analyse their own experience or begin to free themselves, these portraits of factory girls alert us to how limited were the roles available to working class women in the political and literary movements that aspired to liberate them.

In Yi Puk-myong’s Yókong, the radical male Ch’ang-su teaches the unsophisticated factory girl Chóng-huí the alphabet in English, and along with lessons on the proper role of women he instructs her in “comradely love”. After Ch’ang-su’s imprisonment Chóng-huí is pursued by the factory overseer, who presses money upon her and tries to kiss her. When she resists, the Japanese overseer blames the influence of Ch’ang-su, turning the harassment of Chóng-huí into a battle between two men. Although Chóng-huí is the main character in Yókong, she is not the principal agent. That responsibility is given to Ch’ang-su, whose influence and leadership, even though he is absent for most of the story, directs the worker/protagonists who blossom into class consciousness when they enact his teachings and begin a strike.

Yu Jin-o’s Yôjikkong is a longer and more complex work, whose main protagonist is Oksun, a young unmarried woman who works in a silk reeling join the Association of Chosón Literary Figures, a literary group instituted by the colonial state for the production of literature favourable to the Japanese imperial state.

factory. Oksun’s father is disabled from a fall on a construction site and Oksun and her mother must work to support their family. Oksun is not interested in politics but she admires her old friend Kunju, a factory girl not much older than Oksun but married and with children, who speaks out openly against the managers’ plan to cut wages. One day Oksun is called into the foreman’s office and there she meets the Japanese director of the factory, Chônjung. Director Chônjung compliments Oksun and gives her a present of money, saying that he keeps an eye out for the poor girls. Unable to refuse without annoying this powerful man, Oksun also agrees to insinuate herself with Kunju, and the next evening she visits Kunju’s home, a sweltering room located under the railway line.

There Oksun, and the reader, discover a socialist cell led by another radical male, Kunju’s husband Kang-hun. Oksun is deeply impressed by the young workers she meets that night, and she is surprised to meet some of her acquaintances from the factory, women whom she did not realise were politically active. But Oksun is uncomfortable and nervous during the meeting, and the next day when she is called into the foreman’s office again she discloses to Director Chônjung the identities of those in the cell. Chônjung is delighted with her information, but Oksun’s fear is mounting. Chônjung asks the Korean foreman to leave the room and then he rapes Oksun. Yet what starts off as a description of a violent rape ends as a narration of a sex scene. In this important passage the author steps out of his

identification with Oksun in order to describe, as though from above, the Japanese director have sex with Oksun. Thus:

Their two bodies fell with a thud onto the worn linoleum floor. When Oksun recovered her senses she was no longer a virgin... She looked up and saw the sweaty face of the Director as he sat smoking a cigarette... “You’re okay?” he asked. 

And at the very end of the story, when everyone has been sacked and Oksun has turned to radical politics, the author concludes: “And so the company, after shaking off the undesirable elements in the factory (although amongst them the director was able to taste one unexpected honey sweet), completed its third stage of restructuring.” As though torn between the merits of a politics of emancipation, and an appreciation of factory girls just as they are – as exploitable “honey sweets” - Yu Jin-o offers us this disturbing story where rape becomes the trigger for a factory girl’s political awakening.

**Radical males**

Political authority resides in the men in both these stories, and while Kûnju is the most knowledgeable person on the factory floor it is her husband Kang-hun who must teach her and the others about the theories that inform their actions. While the radical men in both these tales, Ch’ang-su and Kang-hun, are impervious to the temptations of betrayal, the factory girls teeter dangerously close to it, and in Oksun’s case, succumb. It appears that these women’s sexual virtue is being tested as much as their politics. Yet

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neither Chŏng-hŭi nor Oksun are able to combat the sexual harassment they face in a way that recognises it is a problem for all factory girls. It is on this point, and in writing factory girls as the principal agents of their ‘awakening’, that *The Human Predicament* presents greater possibilities for working class women.

When in *The Human Predicament* Sinch’ŏl is arrested for his political activity he is offered a choice by the police – fit in with society and give up criticising or trying to change it, or face prosecution as a political criminal. Deliberating in his prison cell, Sinch’ŏl is haunted by the memory of his friend Ch’ŏtjjae, and we begin to realise that for Sinch’ŏl radical politics always meant fighting on behalf of others. By presenting himself as a leader - playing the part of an experienced cadre to Kannan even though he has never seen the inside of a factory - and taking the gullible Ch’ŏtjjae under his wing, Sinch’ŏl has taken on a role that made him a target for the Japanese police. When Sinch’ŏl turns and gives up his political allegiances and friendships, he makes a choice that acknowledges he is not actually central to the labour movement he is involved with. For all its pathos and bitterness, Sinch’ŏl’s betrayal becomes a kind of resolution in the book for it allows Ch’ŏtjjae and Kannan to come into their own as revolutionaries. Whereas in the stories of Yi Puk-myong and Yu Jin-o, the radical male who straddles the world of ideas and the world of the day labourer is the lynchpin of all political activity in the female-dominated textile factories, in *The Human Predicament* he is revealed as peripheral and fleeting.
Kang Kyŏng-ae, an author on the margins of colonial Korean society, would fix the experience of working class women at the heart of the changes taking place in Korean society and culture in the 1930s in *The Human Predicament*. Kang Kyŏng-ae’s female protagonists suggest that the labour movement was not the sole province of men, and the ideas shared by Kannan and Sŏnbi underline the attraction of socialism for workers. I mention these two obvious points only because they are so persistently overlooked in the literature on the origins of socialists and a labour movement in Korea’s colonial past.

Socialism is charged with being a foreign import, dreamt up by European intellectuals, and not Korean ones. Socialism is in fact about as native to Korea as capitalism is, or liberal democracy for that matter. Nevertheless the difficulties post-colonial intellectuals have in claiming a history of socialist anti-colonial resistance are most succinctly put by the sociologist Kim Dong-ch’un:

> Chosen’s socialism experienced an extremely unfortunate birth because it was imported from the colonizing country, Japan. Therefore we can say that there was the possibility from the beginning that Chosen’s socialists, tacitly disregarding their own cultural, historical resources, could lean towards a

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73 Leaving aside the ticklish question “What is Native?” the enduring controversy surrounding imported ideas is not unique to socialism or to Korea. For example, it was centuries before Christianity in Europe achieved hegemony, and even into the fifteenth century scholars of Latin and Greek found Christian practices, such as mortification of the flesh, inhumane, and the theology outlandish. The novelist George Eliot captures this conservative dissent in her book *Romola*, set in fifteenth century Florence and featuring the scholar Bardo who says of christians that they “lash [themselves] and howl at midnight with besotted friars... men who know no past older than the missal and the crucifix” George Eliot, *Romola*, London: Penguin, 1980, p.99.

74 Chosen is the Japanese name for Korea employed during the colonial period. It is a Japanese language variation of the word Chosŏn, the title of the ruling Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) when Japan annexed Korea.
hasty ‘universalism’. The overwhelming majority of early socialists were those who could receive a new-style education because they were from the landlord or moneyed class...For this reason, as in the case of liberalism, we can view socialism as, more than anything else, part of a new way of thinking for intellectuals. 75

This perception of the shallowness of socialist ideas in the colony is reinforced by the fact that large numbers of professed socialists ‘turned’ from the mid 1930s. Prominent amongst those who shifted their political allegiances would be authors of proletarian literature and members of the Korea Artists Proletariat Federation. 76

The end of KAPF: the separation of Art and Politics

KAPF had been targeted by the Japanese police since 1931, when some of its leading members were arrested. When the poet, novelist and critic Pak Yong-huí, a leading member of KAPF since its earliest days, left the organisation in 1933 he famously said: “What was obtained was ideology, what was lost, art.” 77 The move from defending and improving the status of working class people to defending and elevating Art was in the circumstances a predictable resolution. Because Art and Literature are seen by so many to transcend society and politics, loyalty to their civilising air becomes implicitly a commitment not to intervene in the politics of the day, especially at a time when political intervention was becoming dangerous. As a strategic

75 Kim Dong-chun. 1996, p.4. Translator unknown.
76 In her study of the proletarian literature movement in Japan, Heather Bowen-Struyk has suggested that the large proportion of proletarian writers and other leftists who recanted and “re-embraced nationalism” following the mass arrests that began in 1928, was partly explained by the tactics of the justice department that sought to re-educate leftists to “love” the nation, rather than punish them for having rejected it. 2001, pp.26-27.
77 Kim Yoon-shik, p.33.
conversion for those wanting to distance themselves from any political entanglements it makes perfect sense. But it is no less an ideological position for that.

It is perhaps paradoxical that these proletarian writers would decamp to the imaginative realm of Art just when they had shown themselves incapable of the imaginative leap that would enable them to depict factory girls as fully sentient human beings. With their departure and the collapse of the proletarian literature movement, factory girls lost a powerful, if flawed, ally. Working class women would not again gain cultural prominence in literature or wider public culture until the 1980s in South Korea.

Yet the disappointment with the shallowness of the socialist tradition in Korea, such as that put forward by Kim Dong-ch’un, is usually expressed only in terms of an intelligentsia class, and that in the most cynical or ‘classical’ sense of the intelligentsia as being “disassociated from every established social interest”78, except their own. That many working class women also had a stake in these movements is not often acknowledged.

*Kang Ju-ryŏng*

1934, the year that *The Human Predicament* was published, was an important year for working-class women in the colony. In 1934, Kang Ju-ryŏng, the heroine of the P’yŏngwon Rubber Factory Strike, lay in prison without trial,
while Seoul was engulfed by printery strikes over back wages, and unfair dismissals.

Kang Ju-ryŏng was perhaps the most famous female proletarian to lead a labour dispute openly as a socialist. She was captured in 1931 and died in prison one year after the publication of The Human Predicament, in 1935. If Kang Kyŏng-ae was looking for inspiration for the character of Kannan, she could not have found a better person than the young widow who "turned upside-down" the rubber factory she worked in.

After her husband’s death Kang Ju-ryŏng began factory work when she was twenty-four years old, to support her parents and younger siblings. Kang Ju-ryŏng came to prominence when she led her fellow workers at the P’yŏngwon Rubber Factory in a 30 day strike to protest low wages. The strike came just over a year after P’yŏngyang’s largest rubber industry strike in which 1,800 workers from 10 rubber factories walked off the job for twenty-three days to protest low wages, bad working conditions, inhuman treatment, compulsory night shifts, and many other daily brutalities.

Kang Ju-ryŏng led the workers at the P’yŏngwon Rubber Factory in a hunger strike before going underground to assist in organising the women at other rubber factories, and provide leadership in industrial disputes. We know

78 Andrew Milner, 1993, p. 22.
about Kang Ju-ryong because the newspapers covered her activities ever since she climbed on to the roof of her factory to denounce “capitalist oppression” (chabonjii hoengp’o).\(^8^0\) She joined the P’yôngyang Red Labour Union and was arrested in the P’yôngyang Red Labour Union incident late in 1931.\(^8^1\) In 1934, when The Human Predicament was being serialised in the pages of the Tong’a Ilbo Kang Ju-ryong lay dying in prison. She died in 1935 without ever having been brought to trial.

1934 was also a key year for the socialist movement in Korea, and for proletarian literature worldwide.\(^8^2\) 1934 was the peak year in the colony for industrial strikes, thereafter the labour movement declined significantly until it was forced underground following the 1938 promulgation of the National General Mobilisation Law.\(^8^3\) Also in 1934 the police outlawed night schools

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\(^{79}\) This information about Kang Ju-ryong is taken from Ch’oi Min-ji’s Hangôk Yôsông Undong Sosa [A Short History of the Women’s Movement in Korea], reproduced in Yôsông, vol.1, 1985, p. 288; and Yi Ok-ji, Ibid, pp. 50-51.

\(^{80}\) For more on the press coverage of Kang Ju-ryong see Kim Kyông-il, p.426.

\(^{81}\) The P’yôngyang Red Labour Union was a revolutionary, underground union that was part of a wider communist labour movement with branches in Wonsan, Haeju, Yongsan, Yôsu and Masan. It was directly influenced by the Comintern and its platform included the following demands: an eight hour day; equal pay for all workers regardless of age, gender or ethnicity; the right to strike; the right to demonstrate; social insurance; the right to form revolutionary organisations; and etc. Yi Yi-hwa, p.230. The colonial government came down hard on the Red Labour Unions and by 1933 had arrested about one thousand union activists. Soon-Won Park, p.123.

\(^{82}\) In the same year, 1934, the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers was meeting to discuss the “crucial formula of proletarian literature” (William Empson, p.18.) that is, socialist realism. While Pickhanov defined art as the “superstructure” formed out of a material and determining “base”, a formula that valorised realism, others were to urge a blatant cultural imperialism and call for an art that would be politically useful to the Soviet state. (Andrew Milner, p.28) The same year the proletarian movement in Japan and colonial Korea was withering away.

\(^{83}\) Carter Eckert, 1991, pp.221-222. ‘Among other things, it authorised the Government-General to “issue necessary orders regarding the prevention or settlement of labour disputes or the closing of plants, suspension of operations, or restriction or prohibition of acts relating to labour disputes.”’
for urban workers and rural youth, which had been a major means of spreading socialist ideas about the importance of organising into unions. 84

Kim Yang-sôn asserts that following the publication of *The Human Predicament* in 1934, Kang Kyông-ae would never again write a work that so completely embodied her political ideas. 85 Kang Kyông-ae wrote not only within the broad stream of current events – on established topics like the labour movement, New Women and urban poverty. She also amplified a voice new to Korea’s literary world and to wider public culture, who could comment on these topics as well as on the sexual crisis that faced working class women in the colonial economy – the voice of factory girls.

**Conclusion**

It was not the social realist school of the proletarian literature movement that would capture the lives of factory girls in literature but someone on the periphery of that movement. As Kang Yi-su reminds us, Kang Kyông-ae was a habitué not of metropolitan literary circles but of provincial writing groups. 86 The first woman to write successfully about factory women’s lives in the 1930s herself lived on the border between classes, a visitor to the working class but not submerged by labour. A high school teacher who had worked in the factories at Inch’ón, Kang Kyông-ae was the daughter of a poor farming family who received a ‘new education’, expelled from school.

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84 Soon-Won Park, p.41.
85 Kim Yang-sôn, p.359.
86 Kang Yi-su, p.336.
she would become a teacher, a migrant to Kando she wrote in *The Human Predicament* of the road from feudalism to capitalism in her characters’ lives.

Kang Kyông-ae took her uncompromising vision of society from the perspective of village girls-come-factory girls. She wrote openly of the contradictions they faced and elaborated working women’s interest in their own emancipation. She wrote *The Human Predicament* within the influence of the proletarian literature movement, that held to the notion that to describe the daily conditions for working class people in their graphic realism is to be forced to act. 87 To name Sônbi’s fate as a “victim” is only half of the story, for in *The Human Predicament* her death is neither isolated nor ambiguous, she is clearly murdered by the factory system, the “slaughterhouse” of Yi Sông-ryông’s letter. 88

The flowering of factory girl literature was an historical and economic moment as well as a literary one. Written at a time when social realism was as much a political intervention as an aesthetic choice, this literature enables us to read gender and class minutely into Korea’s industrial revolution, and trace the relations between working people and the writers and intellectuals who had “gone out to meet them and perhaps wish to expropriate their role.” 89

87 See Kim Yun-shik, pp.32-33.
88 See chapter one.
In a New Year’s message published in the magazine Sin Kajông in December 1933 Kang Kyông-ae wrote:

If we do not see in society complete economic reform then we shall never see complete female liberation... The more women are commodified, the more our standing as human beings is blighted.\(^\text{90}\)

In fact the capitalism that would produce a new sexual division of labour, would also bring a new access to the means of literary production. John Guillory has said “The same system which ‘commodifies’ women in new ways also permits them to produce new commodities (such as novels), to become new kinds of cultural producers.”\(^\text{91}\) In using writing to alert her society of readers to the miserable living conditions of factory girls, and the need for ‘complete economic reform’, Kang Kyông-ae was demonstrating that the very system of production that exploits female labour also distributes the ‘cultural capital’ necessary to generating a critique of that system.

*The Human Predicament* was published in the wake of a dynamic working class movement at a time when politically colonial Korean society was shutting down. It is a work that reproduced some of the hopes operative in political groups already forced underground, and illustrates how by 1934 cultural work was taking the place of political activity now outlawed. In writing the industrial revolution as the tragedy of the factory girl, Kang Kyông-ae was to fix the experience of working class women at the heart of

\(^{90}\) Reproduced in Kang Kyông-ae Chonjud, p.746.

\(^{91}\) John Guillory, 1993, p.349 n.25.
the changes taking place in Korean society and culture in the 1930s. Part of the “productive mood” of the 1920s and early 1930s, *The Human Predicament* might easily have disappeared completely; for all its insights it lacked one crucial element. Though it included factory girls, *The Human Predicament* did not speak to them. The high rate of illiteracy amongst lower class women, and the gruelling nature of their work in the factories made reading itself a pastime beyond their compass. It would take another two generations, and a revolution in literacy, for factory girls themselves to address their society, and attempt to change it, through literature.
Part Two
Literary and Political Representation
the 1970s and 1980s

The retreat of the factory girl from literature after the 1930s until well into the 1970s was part of her departure from political life also. When she re-emerged in literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s it was as a much more socially engaged figure, no longer cut off from society and the solidarity of other men and women. The world she inhabited in the 1920s and 30s was the world of the factory, defined by sexual harassment and intimidation. By the 1970s working-class women in their writings occupy a social sphere larger than their workplace. Based in tiny slum lodgings in Mansók-dong or Kuro-dong, they venture into metropolitan life and discover true friendship and solidarity, education and romance; and unravel the prevailing ideologies that mediate their lives.

The “labour literature” (nodong munhak) of the 1970s and 1980s differed in a number of important respects from the proletarian literature movement of the colonial period. Firstly, the early proletarian literature avant-garde was largely a literary movement whereas the labour literature of the 1970s and 1980s was embedded in an assertive and culturally vibrant labour movement. This is borne out by the class background of the authors, where we find that the writers of proletarian literature from the colonial period came from all sections of society – a few were professional writers, some subsisted on the
border between classes and wrote about the factories and mines they had laboured in, while others were ‘tourists’ to the working-class whose political inspiration was more abstract. By contrast, part of the novelty of “labour literature” from the 1970s and 1980s was that its creators were almost all ‘authentic’ proletarians, many of whom wrote witness accounts of industrial disputes already famous in dissident circles.

While there are important distinctions between the literature of the two periods, there are also striking similarities in the political conditions in which these literatures were produced. Both colonial Korea and South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s were military states, ruled by former high-ranking military commanders. In both periods the state oversaw an extremely intense period of industrialisation, and also in both periods the bourgeoisie (Japanese and Korean) took advantage of a repressive political climate to overwork their employees without restraint. Both these literatures flourished during a period of stringent censorship. Indeed, proletarian literature from the colonial period was banned in South Korea under Park Chung Hee and General-President Chun Doo-Hwan (1980-88), and thus the plebian authors of South Korea’s labour literature wrote their stories without being versed in the earlier proletarian literature experiment, and these two literatures cannot be said to ‘talk to each other’ across history.

\[1\] In fact, General President Park Chung Hee (1961-79) was trained in the Japanese Kwantung Army which he entered in 1940 before joining the Republic of Korea Army set up by the American Military Government after liberation in 1945.
Outside forces also influenced South Korea’s path to industrialisation. Like Japan in the Meiji period, Korea forced itself to undergo a version of economic development known as ‘rapid’ or ‘late’ industrialisation. Situated far behind the developed economies of Europe, North America and Japan, South Korea launched into a race to compete that led it to be dubbed the ‘catch-up economy’. The enormous social and personal costs of this race: the injuries, the separations and the degradations are part of the history of this industrialisation as much as the proliferation of jobs, the shift from kerosene to electricity, and the building of the Seoul subway. No-one appreciates these contradictory boons and costs of rapid industrialisation more acutely than factory girls.

In Part Two the factory girls themselves direct our approach to the 1970s and 1980s and make working women the foremost subject of the social world of rapid industrialisation. If the representation of working-class women in literature during the colonial period revealed them as unstable figures, uncovering contradictions repressed in society, it also presaged their capacity to expose and overturn those contradictions. Part Two examines the way that factory girls constructed a labour movement and a literature with themselves as subject, an act that combined literary and political representation in a radical challenge to literature and to society. Unlike earlier proletarian literature, these autobiographies are addressed to readers from both the literate labouring classes and the middle classes. Penned by autodidacts who

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inform their readers of their own self-directed, adventurous journey into literature, these books inspired a new aesthetic form, *nodong munhak* or “labour literature” that in the 1980s made visible the “world of brute politics”\(^3\) in one of the most popular cultural forms of the day.

The industrial setting in these life stories is not merely, in Raymond William’s words, “formative”. The very use of texts was itself the outcome of a social struggle for access to cultural literacy. When one of the authors, Chang Nam-su, describes herself in the early pages of her autobiography as a thirteen year old sitting high in a tree astride a branch reading *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, her formal schooling was already over and the years of labouring by day and studying by night just beginning. When Chang spied her old school-fellows winding their way home with their books and school gossip, her envy is palpable. She allows that her pleasure in reading was not unmixed, and neither is her story free from the strains of a hard-won cultural literacy.

Literacy levels amongst female waged workers had increased remarkably since the 1930s and 1940s. Where in 1946 nearly 40 percent of waged workers had received no schooling at all, by 1963 only 5.5 percent of workers were illiterate. By 1970, 42 percent of all workers in the manufacturing sector had acquired a secondary education, a figure that by 1980 had increased to

\(^3\) The phrase belongs to Edward Said, who said “culture works very effectively to make invisible and even “impossible” the actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas
61.4 percent. Working women were the poorest paid and usually the youngest and least educated of South Korea’s modern waged workers in the 1960s and 1970s. When in the 1970s large scale firms were required by the government to provide vocational training to their workers, textile factories instead set up on-site primary schools, an indication of the youth and neglected schooling of their largely female workforce, and the irrelevance of vocational training for employees who were not in line for promotion, and who lost their jobs when they married.

The reputation of factory work as being harmful to women physically and morally remained after colonialism ended and Japanese capitalists abandoned their interests in Korea. After Major General Park Chung Hee assumed power following a military coup in May 1961 he began the series of economic plans that would turn South Korea into one of the world’s major exporters of clothes, shoes, wigs and from the late 1970s - electronic goods. Women, particularly young, poor, unmarried rural women would be crucial to the accomplishment of Korea’s economic transformation. Thus in the 1960s it was the Korean government, and not journalists or novelists, who would return to the domain of the factory, this time to extol the proper image of the working-class woman as patriotic, obedient and frugal, and attempt to

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4 These figures are taken from Alice Amsden, p. 222.
5 Ibid, p.252.
6 His official title was Chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction, before he became President at the 1963 elections.
redress the disreputable image of factories, and the women who worked in them.\(^7\)

Working-class women’s central role in the ‘late industrialisation’ of South Korea in these decades cannot be divined from the remuneration they received, or in their job security, or in the possibilities for promotion in their workplace. Socially it is hard to find evidence of their value or significance anywhere – they left school early, their concerns were largely ignored in the news press, and in public culture and ‘high art’ they appear to be almost completely invisible. They were valued in the most cynical way by their employers and the state – as symbols of a patriotic and selfless devotion to national prosperity. Even on their way to work they were taunted and harassed in the streets for being kongsuni, degraded by their need for money and the manual labour they engaged in.\(^8\)

It was against this obscurity that working women wrote autobiographies. Chapter Three places this construction of self in the context of South Korea’s

\(^7\) Seung-kyung Kim captures this nicely in a government recruitment poster from 1970 where a smiling, pretty and well-groomed blue-collar woman calls for other women to become model workers and “learn the real value of labour”. Seung-kyung Kim, 1997, pp.5-6.

\(^8\) One young woman wrote: “I heard a shocking thing today. I had stepped off the bus and was walking along when I heard “Hey! Kongsuni!” A group of male students were slouching nearby. “Hey, Kongsuni! What are you gazing at? You worthless bitch.” There was no way I would take that so I replied, “So I’m a Kongsuni. So what have you got to be proud of? Just because you scraped into school, does that make you students? What a load of bullshit. You should improve your minds, you bastards.” But they kept going with their senseless talk. “You ignorant bitch, what do you know? This ignorant bitch, how dare she…” I swallowed down the abuse I wanted to give them, and went on my way. As soon as I got home I burst into tears I was so outraged. Why do we have to hear such things? Why do we get called this ‘Kongsuni’?” From Na Po-sun (ed.), 1983, pp. 47-8.
state led rapid industrialisation that asked young blue-collar men and women to sacrifice themselves for a future prosperity. The contradictions that factory girls were caught in are already familiar: they were central to the export market, and the wages they remitted home helped sustain the rural economy, but they were never seen as “real workers”, and they held temporary positions at the bottom rungs of the factory. When labouring women began to assert themselves as workers in union campaigns at the Tongil and YH factories and other worksites, the response from factory owners and the police was ferocious. I argue that the suppression of working-class women was a key feature of South Korea’s successful export led development, and explore how the opposition strategies the women employed reveal them as both critical of and enmeshed in the gender and class ideologies that were part of their lives.

In Chapter Four I examine how these authors used autobiography, the genre of self-representation, to imprint their voice on their times. They related the intimate effect of the class divide, and critiqued their society in tales of their hard-won education, their longing for cultural literacy, and their doomed love affairs with males from higher classes.

9 Park Chung Hee promised that the sacrifice was temporary and would eventually be rewarded: “In order to increase our export volume, we have to produce good quality goods at lower prices than goods produced by other countries and this is impossible if wages are high. What will happen to us if export volume decreases because of high wages and high prices for goods? I want you to understand that both improvements in workers’ lives and the growth of corporations depend on our national development, so I ask for your cooperation to take pride and responsibility for the establishment of the nation. I can assure you that the rapid growth of the economy due to the continuing expansion of exports will provide a prosperous future for our three million workers.” Park Chung Hee, 1970, pp.2-3.
Chapter Three
The Road to Seoul

“What sort of women are you, who prefer [the] labour movement to marriage?”

National Textile Trade Union official to Tongil women workers¹

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s hundreds of thousands of country girls flooded into Seoul’s back streets, carrying within them dreams of what they might find in the boulevards and glittering skyscrapers of the capital. But the elegant constructions of industrial luxury were not for them. Instead, alighting at the domed Seoul Station, a shabbily grand building from Korea’s early modern era, the provincials dragged their packages up teetering staircases before dispersing into the shanty towns and slums of the city. Song Hyo-sun, chaperoned by her grandmother, arrived at Seoul Station one rainy night in 1973: “Watching the rain fall... I lost myself in the surging crowds and cars and simply forgot my loneliness.”²

Working-class women and girls were central to the industrialisation of South Korea in these decades. In the areas where they predominated – the textile

¹ Quoted in From the Womb of Han: Stories of Korean Women Workers, 1982, p. 10. This extraordinary book was put out by the Christian Conference of Asia’s Urban Rural Mission in 1982, one of the international church organisations based in Asia that provided crucial support to the labour movement in these difficult years. In keeping with the collective nature of their struggle, as well as for security reasons, none of the book’s authors or interviewers gave their names. Instead there are articles signed by “Women workers at Hai Tai” and “Bando women workers”.
² Song Hyo-sun, 1982, p. 27.
and garment industries, rubber footwear factories, and later in the electronics industry, the unfettered exploitation of factory girls was one of the keys to wealth creation. The economic and political marginalisation of working-class women was not a tragic byproduct of the rush to modernise, but was at the very heart of South Korea’s capitalist society.

The opening quotation frames this chapter’s analysis of the gender and class ideologies that suppressed blue collar women in these years. The political suppression of factory girls in all-male unions and their economic marginalisation in dead-end jobs has obscured the significance of their role in late industrialising South Korea. They were central to the rapid development project in so many ways that seemed to efface them — as low paid, diligent workers; as financial supporters of rural households; as young females slotted in at the bottom of the factory’s gender hierarchy in ways that provided continuity with feudal patriarchal hierarchies. And when they asserted themselves as workers, and exposed the contradictions in their society that effaced them at the same time that it leaned upon them so heavily, they provoked the full wrath of their employers, of the police, and sometimes of fellow male workers also. The dissident labour movement responded to their endeavours for democratic relations in the workplace and in wider society by sentimentalising them and fitting them into the “feminised position of victim”\(^3\). It is for these reasons that the writings of Song Hyo-sun,

\(^3\) The term is Patricia Johnson’s, who uses it in a different context: to describe the character Stephen Blackpool in Charles Dicken’s *Hard Times*, who is physically and sexually
Chang Nam-su and Sŏk Chŏng-nam are crucial to understanding the lives and times of working-class women in these years.\(^4\) Marginal to the meta-narratives of national development and of class struggle, factory girls created their own narratives and in so doing wrote unparalleled accounts of Korea’s industrialisation experience. Our understanding of Korea’s tumultuous twentieth century is incomplete without them. It is this literature, and the industrialising society it reveals, that is the subject of this chapter.

We begin by fixing the marginalisation of factory girls at the centre of our understanding of the culture and economy of South Korea’s rapid industrialisation, and use their autobiographical accounts to scrutinize their social world. I argue that their foray into literature and their fight for unions to represent them were twin aspects of a single struggle to emancipate themselves in a capitalist society and a wider culture that did not acknowledge them as fully human. That they should turn to industrial politics and to literature has as much to do with their historical moment as their class and their own predelictions. At a time, the 1970s and 1980s, when writers and artists in South Korea were “going to the people”\(^5\), these young women spoke back, and such was the impact of their political stand and their confident,

\(^4\) It should be noted that there have been rumours over the years that these books were not really authored by the women themselves, but were instead co-written or written entirely by university students under assumed names. Yet both Song Hyo-sun and Sŏk Chŏng-nam went on to writing careers, Sŏk Chŏng-nam in fiction and Song Hyo-sun in women’s self-help literature, while the later career of Chang Namsu is not known.

unembroidered style that they would enkindle the women’s movement in South Korea. Their influence on the labour movement and on literary and cultural forms, however, is neither so readily acknowledged nor so easy to trace.

In analysing how social realist representations of working-class women expose the contradictory class and gender ideologies of industrialising South Korea, I follow the work of Patricia Johnson, who has argued that the difficulties in representing working-class women in Victorian social problem fiction demonstrate “the masculine bias in the construction of the Victorian working-class and the middle class bias in the construction of femininity.”

In South Korea also factory girls found themselves caught between class and gender ideologies that saw them as neither real workers nor properly feminine, and they turned to workplace politics, and to writing, to fully represent themselves.

In South Korea the working-class autobiography came to fruition in the 1970s and early 1980s, as working-class people began to address their society, and attempt to change it, through literature. In the early 1980s in South Korea three proletarian women would publish autobiographies to tell their readers “a little more about the world”. These three women are Song Hyo-sun, whose autobiography *The Road To Seoul* was published by

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6 A number of feminist historians acknowledge the women’s labour movement of the 1970s as having reigned the feminist movement in South Korea. See Yi Song-hui, 1999, p.403.
7 Patricia Johnson, p.8.
Hyongsongsa in 1982 and became for a time the consummate factory girl tale; Chang Nam-su who would publish *The Lost Workplace* in 1984 with Ch’angjakkwa Bip’yōngsa; and Sŏk Chŏng-nam’s *Factory Lights*, also published in 1984. These books and the world they illuminated found a ready readership. They appeared amidst a spate of working-class autobiographies and anthologies of workers’ writings, all produced through the auspices of what was becoming known as the Democratic Union Movement (*minju nojo undong*).  

What began as isolated labour unrest in factory districts in Seoul from the early 1970s in the garment and textile factories, mushroomed into a fully fledged labour movement in the 1980s. When the regime changed following President Park Chung Hee’s assassination in 1979, the new President Chun Doo-Hwan exerted ‘power without hegemony’ and in the midst of a repressive political climate dissident groups of students and working people grew. When the Korean Congress of Trade Unions or Chŏnnohyŏp was established in January 1990 as the central organisation of the democratic labour movement, a left wing cultural market was already flourishing:  

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8 These are Chang Nam-su’s words, 1984, p.36.  
9 Other works from this period include Yu Dong-wu’s *Onu Dolmaengi-ui Oech’im* [The Cry of One Stone], published in 1984; Pak Yong-gun’s edited collection of worker’s writings *Kongjang Oksang-e Olla* [To The Factory Roof], also published in 1984; an edited collection by Kim Kyong-suk, *Kurona Urimun Oje-ui Uriga Anida* [But We Are Not Yesterday’s We], published in 1986; and *Uridul Kajin kŏt Pirok Chŏgŏdo – Kŭllojadŭl-ui Kŭlnoam 1* (Even Though We Don’t Have Much: Workers’ Collected Writings 1), published in 1983. In addition, unpublished collections of stories and autobiographical writings also circulated in factories, night schools and literary circles throughout the 1980s. Kim Pyŏng-ik discusses
In the course of the desperate struggle to build Chŏnnohyŏp plucky worker’s songs came into mass circulation, and a whole variety of working-class culture - portraits and folk music [depicting] workers’ struggles and longings - developed and spread.¹⁰

A number of labour historians and sociologists have used the three autobiographies listed above as important sources on the 1970s union movement. Hagen Koo quotes straight from all three books¹¹ to reveal ‘culture and consciousness’ in the union movement in the 1970s. But in arguing that it was the unified class solidarity amongst women workers that caused them to lead the union movement in the 1970s, Koo neglects the opportunity to investigate the different meanings and experiences of class that these authors write about. Ch‘ong Mi-suk in her Masters thesis ‘A Study of the Experience of the Expansion of the Women’s Labour Movement in the 1970s– The Case of the Textile Industry’¹² uses a ‘life-histories’ approach to explore the world of work and the union movement in the 1970s. Quoting extensively from interviews and autobiographical writings, Ch‘ong Mi-suk draws attention to the objective historical conditions that facilitated solidarity between the women. But the first person to explore the objective and subjective experiences of class described in these factory books is the historian Ch‘ong Hyŏn-baek. In an article that has influenced all later work on the 1970s union movement, Ch‘ong Hyŏn-baek argues for an analysis that

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¹⁰ Chŏnnohyŏp: Chuyo P’alleye [Leading Case Studies in the History of ChŏnnohyOP] volume 2, 1998, p.385. It should be noted that Chŏnnohyŏp was an illegal organisation, and that the umbrella organisation representing democratic or independent unions in South Korea would not be legalised until March 10, 1997.

¹¹ Hagen Koo, 1996, pp. 53 – 76.
looks at how women workers experienced class; not only in relation to the means of production, but in their relations with the social world also.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{The female labour market}

The export-orientated strategy that General-turned-President Park Chung Hee presided over in the 1960s and 1970s was, in the words of Hagen Koo, a “capitalist’s heaven”.\textsuperscript{14} State-led development with “the government as entrepreneur”\textsuperscript{15} ensured that the state and individual employers shared the goal of building a ‘rich and strong nation’ that required the exploitation of many hundreds of thousands of workers. As we shall see, many employers suppressed worker protest with the assistance of the state’s security agencies.

From the onset of export-oriented strategies in the early 1960s, the number of women employed in the light manufacturing sector increased from 182,000 in 1963 to 1.4 million in 1985.\textsuperscript{16} And in the key export industries of apparel, textiles and electronics, young women in their teens and early twenties made up the vast majority of the workforce.\textsuperscript{17}

Their presence had already been felt in the first economic plans of the 1960s, and by 1970 textiles were South Korea’s leading export industry, at a time

\textsuperscript{12} Unpublished MA thesis, Department of Womens Studies, Ewha Womens University, 1993.
\textsuperscript{13} Chŏng Hyŏn-baek, 1985, pp. 116 - 162.
\textsuperscript{14} Hagen Koo, 2001, p.33.
\textsuperscript{15} Amsden, p.79.
\textsuperscript{16} Koo, 2001, p.35.
when more than 70 percent of the industry’s employees were female.\textsuperscript{18} The light manufacturing sector had its boom in the 1970s when it was, according to Jung-En Woo, “a bridge between the light and heavy phases of industrialisation.”\textsuperscript{19} While the textile sector was still the largest export industry in 1979, it was rapidly being overshadowed by a burgeoning heavy industry drive that would transform the South Korean economy, and the composition of its working-class, in the 1980s.

The textile industry was one of the most resilient sectors in the period between the end of Japanese colonial rule and the military takeover of the state in 1961 by General Park Chung Hee. It had been resuscitated in the 1950s with the assistance of American aid money and was thus able to resume its role as one of South Korea’s most important export industries quite soon after the Korean war.\textsuperscript{20} The resilience of the textile industry, one of the biggest employers of females, is particularly noteworthy given the received notion of the 1950s and 60s in South Korea as a period when women returned to their homes following their contribution to the war economy.\textsuperscript{21} The triumph of the domestic ideology “good wife, wise mother” seems most applicable to this period, when after the routing of the left in the 1940s only

\textsuperscript{17} Hagen Koo cites an Economic Planning Board study that estimates that in 1985 women made up 88 percent of garment workers, 77 percent of textile workers and 68 percent of electronics workers. Ibid, p..36. 
\textsuperscript{19} Jung-En Woo, p.144.
\textsuperscript{20} Carter Eckert, 1990, p.396.
\textsuperscript{21} According to Chŏng Mi-suk, the large number of young females employed in the textile and apparel industries, in 1963 67.9 percent of workers were women and in 1571 the figure was 69.7 percent, lead to these factories being nicknamed “women’s industries” (yŏsŏng sanŏp), p.37.
conservative patriotic women's organisations survived, and in the early 1960s when the military junta extracted a promise from women's organisations that they would concentrate on charity work or be banned. Although working-class women almost completely disappeared from public culture and political debate in these years, they continued to labour in the fluctuating South Korean economy.

This was also the period when the South Korean state was perfecting that comparative advantage which would make its economy so competitive, the envy of business leaders, politicians and finance bureaucrats throughout the Asia-Pacific. The formula was simple – long hours and low pay, and plenty of young people streaming into the cities looking for work.

Many of the young women and children entering factories at this time were the daughters of poor tenant farmers who took the road to Seoul to find their fortune in the factory districts and slums of South Korea's industrialising capital. In their own writings factory girls would record the drama of their first sight of Seoul. Over the thirty years from the late 1950s until the late 1980s the population of Seoul increased enormously. In 1972 it was already a metropolis of 6 million people. With very little international immigration the

22 "A phase of transition and backlash in women's activism set in after the military coup. In 1961, the military government disbanded all voluntary associations as well as political parties. Two years later, when women's organisations were allowed to reform, they opted to be politically neutral. During the decade of the 1960s, the activities of women's organisations were limited to those concerning self-improvement and voluntary social work for national reconstruction. Women's liberation activities were not pursued." Chung-Hee Soh, 1991, p.84.
population explosion was almost entirely domestic, draining the countryside. Seoul would eventually reach 10 million in 1988.24

In Seoul and other industrial areas in Inch’ön, Masan and Pusan, young women found themselves central to a labour market that would seem both foreign and strangely reminiscent of the social and cultural practices they had left behind in their villages. The anthropologist Seung-kyung Kim puts it best when she says:

> Viewed from the perspective of traditional Korean expectations, factory jobs for young women represented both change and continuity. When young women took factory jobs, they acquired an unprecedented public role outside the household, but the low status and meagre wages attached to these jobs was wholly in accordance with the low status with which young women were conventionally regarded.25

Despite their central role in the South Korean economy in the 1970s, women workers were not regarded by their bosses and their working-class male colleagues as ‘real workers’.26 Their low pay, their status as temporary workers expected to leave the factory upon marriage, and the almost complete absence of promotion for females in the factories led to them occupying the lowest rungs of the factory hierarchy, below the working-class men who supervised them. In fact, an important cause of the defeat of the female led labour disputes of the 1970s was their sabotage by male workers

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23 Yi Ok-ji mentions three major disputes at textile factories in the 1950s in which women workers played important roles, p.69.
24 “To get an idea of how acutely the population of Seoul was increasing in this period, after 1959 a million person increase was recorded after 5 years (1964), 4 years (1968) and 2 years (1970).” Chông Sung-kyo, 1998, pp.58-9.
collaborating with management and the police. In her book on female factory workers in South Korea, *Class Struggle, Family Struggle*, author Seung-kyung Kim has argued that the women’s labour movement in the 1970s was betrayed by male workers who were “distracted by a formal structure of unions designed to co-opt them” while women workers’ very exclusion radicalised them to fight their employers and their all-male unions.27

*The Country and the City*

In the 1970s and early 1980s the vast majority of women working in factories were single, and over 90 percent of them were born in the countryside or the provincial cities.28 The role of many factory girls as a conduit between the country and the city underlines one of the key features of South Korea’s successful late industrialisation program and the importance of proletarian females both to rural households and to the export economy. As Alice Amsden has shown, the labour of wives and daughters sustained the agricultural economy during South Korea’s development drive. When young women left the farms in large numbers, shifting their labour from rural households to commercial enterprises, they helped to preserve the agricultural economy by faithfully remitting their wages back home, while at the same time as underpaid workers they made profits for their employers.29

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26 Ibid, p. 103.
27 Ibid, p. 104.
28 Chŏng Hyŏn-back, p.121.
29 Alice Amsden, p.203.
In effect, they subsidised both economies and played an essential stabilising role throughout the traumatic experience of rapid industrialisation.

To the young women Seoul was the focus of both high hopes and trepidation. They would come to the capital at the apex of Park Chung Hee’s centralisation policies that was to make Seoul a modern, rich and powerful city to outshine that rival model city to the north, Pyongyang. Their excitement and sense of intimidation is palpable. However, by the time their stories are in full swing they will divulge their disillusionment with Seoul and all it seems to represent to the daughters of peasants. Sŏk Chŏng-nam wrote of her life in Seoul “I gained nothing whatsoever from those several alien years. Only the shattering of my dreams and the end of my hankering for a grand and beautiful Seoul.”

Yet it is through their involvement in emancipatory strategies in the factories, in night schools and in their literary endeavours that they would come to perceive Seoul as the achievement of peasants and workers like themselves, as a city that lives off the countryside. In so doing they would acknowledge themselves as legitimate subjects of the city.

In their books factory girls took upon themselves the task of interpreting the country and the city to each other. Their detailed accounts of farm and factory life served the function of informing their middle class readers of the inner
lives of working-class women, a novel notion for many. But it also established the narrator as the subject of larger social forces in South Korea – the migration experience, militaristic modernisation, and late industrialisation, to name but a few. They detailed their encounter with factory culture, and explained why painful working conditions alone were not responsible for the difficulties of their work situation. As people who had grown up in the relative freedom of the countryside with its inherited work rituals they had to accustom themselves to the strange discipline of the shift system:

On the farm regardless of time, when the day gets dark you go to bed and when dawn breaks you get up, but in this place we become complete slaves of time, regardless of changes in the weather, or if it is dark or light. At midnight or 1am, deep in the night we would be working, and go for our meal in the kitchens. For people living on farms this is just unimaginable. Even at the height of a busy working time or eating a meal in the middle of the night, I would sometimes wonder if I had stepped into a strange world and was leading a demented life.

However, awakening and consciousness do not necessarily begin in the city, they warn their readers. I do not mean to suggest that the women had to first come to Seoul and experience capitalist exploitation before they could clearly analyse their oppression, as though countless fights had not been fought in farms and in childhood. The fights were legion, and the bitterness palpable. This is particularly the case, Chông Mi-suk points out, when it

30 Sok Chông-nam, 1984, p.11.
comes to the girls having to abandon their schooling to make way for a sibling, an experience I will consider more fully in the next chapter.32

Chang Nam-su gives us a glimpse of how her family and village appear when she comes down from Seoul, a Wŏn’pong factory girl now, to renew her identification papers. Nam-su has taken the night train and arrives at her little village station at 8 o’clock in the morning. The platform gate has disappeared due to road works and she must plod through the dug open highway to get home. Seoul has altered her sensibilities forever, it seems, and Chang Nam-su’s first glimpse of her old home shocks her:

How can I put into words the return to that shabby house and my destitute family...Our squalid home, so different to what it had once been. But then, perhaps it was because I had seen the grand world of Seoul and the new Koch’ung Building that our home seemed so wretched by comparison.33

Chang Nam-su begins to compare her experiences of poverty in the countryside to poverty in the city. On meeting old friends and neighbours who have remained in the village, she is aghast at their ignorance of the true hardship of the lives of blue-collar workers and the poor in Seoul. In a midnight conversation with her neighbours she launches into an expose of Seoul:

Ha, you folk think that city people live well, but do you know anything about how poor people in the city scrape by?...Towering skyscrapers, gorgeous things for sale, glittering department stores, university kids and

32 Chŏng Mi-suk, pp.54-60.
33 Chang Nam-su, pp.33-34.
chauffeured cars, my God its indescribable. But in the midst of all that we
the children of peasants go to make our living and our life is misery. Picture
to yourselves, amidst the bright faces of students toting their satchels to
school, the yellow faces of workers off to the factories. When students take
the bus they have special coupons and the conductresses, even though they
are working people themselves, bend over backwards to serve them, but we
who pay the full fare, do you know how rude they are to us?34 I hate Seoul.
So why don’t I come back home? What would I do here in our place where
we don’t even have our own paddies or dry fields to till?35

The experience of the city, its sights, stimulants and endless possibilities
provoked Chang Nam-su to compare her life to others around her. When she
returns to her natal village we can see her make the painful acknowledgment
that her old village is now too small to contain her. This experience of
displacement was shared by many country girls in Seoul who had
relinquished the rural household as the centre of their economic, social and
cultural life for the industrial suburbs and inner-city excitement of Seoul,
Inch’on, and Pusan. This displacement that industrial capitalism did so much
to bring about would eventually lead working-class women to create new
ways of analysing their world. From it would come the birth of working-class
radicalism and a ‘labour feminism’36 that offered new ways of breaking
down the old society and constructing an alternative one.

Just as factory girls were forced to adjust their aspirations once they
discovered that the “grand and beautiful Seoul” was not within their reach, so
also did many working-class women end up finding their own powerful

34 See Cho Wha Soon on the working conditions of bus girls, and the successful Inch’on bus
35 Chang Nam-su, p. 46.
36 I borrow this term from Michael Denning, 1997, p. 145.
reasons to feel at home in the capital. In his book *The Country and the City*
Raymond Williams talks about the city as an achievement of the countryside:

Looking up at great buildings that are the centres of power, I find I do not say ‘There is your city, your great bourgeois monument, your towering structure of this still precarious civilisation’ or I do not only say that: I say also ‘This is what men have built, so often magnificently, and is not everything then possible?\(^{37}\)

Or expressed less grandiloquently by an activist from the Hai Tai factory union:

> Our dream before was to save enough money to build up our home in the village. Now this is all over. My mother and I are now used to city life. Although we are poor, we feel that city life has broadened our outlook and enriched us in many ways.\(^{38}\)

By the late 1970s it was clear that women workers were here to stay; in Seoul, in the factories, and in the union movement.

**Recruitment**

To speak of the romantic images of Seoul held by these women is not to say that people came aimlessly or dreamily to the capital, without a careful plan of how and where they might start work. These plans usually included the assistance or patronage of a relative or personal contact, perhaps someone from the same region, or an older girl from the village who had come to Seoul and knew of openings. In the early 1970s there was an oversupply of

\(^{38}\) From ‘Interview with Hai Tai Workers’, *From the Womb of Han*, p.61.
unskilled labour and the big companies with the best reputations could afford to pick and choose. In addition, if word got out that a certain company had particularly good conditions or pay then competition for jobs was fierce.\textsuperscript{39}

Chŏng Mi-suk makes the important point that a system of recruitment based on personal connections made the employers position very powerful: “In this sort of situation where people were employed through personal connections, employees easily became both materially and psychologically in thrall to their employers.”\textsuperscript{40}

This was particularly the case for young, unmarried girls from the country, schooled in the value of giving respect and obedience to their social superiors. As Chŏng Mi-suk writes: “For these young women it was difficult to see the employer-employee relationship as a contractual one, and not a personal one.”\textsuperscript{41} In fact the ‘personal relationship’ shared by the employer and the employees frequently made management more despotic. However in the bloated labour market of the 1970s, kin and regional ties were an important means of obtaining casual work, or gaining the opportunity to sit a factory entrance test like the one described below for Tong-il:

The entry test was stringent. The interview wasn’t too difficult but lots of people failed the physical check-up. If you weigh more than 53kg, or if your height is more than 155cm you’re out. There is a manual test that checks your hand and foot co-ordination, an eyesight test, hearing tests, tests for colour-blindness, it went on and on... Of course I can see that a physical test is a sensible idea, but the process is just like that of slave

\textsuperscript{39} Chŏng Mi-suk, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p.61.
dealers in a slave market, buying and selling healthy bodies like merchandise. In the market womenfolk are purchased for being fresh and clean like foodstuffs, and people are in demand according to the amount of physical strength they posses and their ability to do arduous work.\textsuperscript{42}

In addition to the recruitment tests stipulated by factories, people also found work by selling their labour at various ‘human markets’, like those that operated outside large railway stations in the Japanese colonial era.

The “Human Beings Market” is right in the centre of the Peace Market. It is the place where workers like us are sold. At lunch time, buyers gather there to purchase shidas or machine operators.\textsuperscript{43} It’s not always owners or managers of factories, but sometimes workers themselves exchange jobs with each other there. It is not only the place for job seeking, but also for exchanging information. People with no lunch go there to spend time.\textsuperscript{44}

The process of recruitment itself illustrates the sense of position and degree of leeway workers felt they had when they entered the factory floor. It was a process where the employers unilateral power of selection was taken for granted, and an authoritarian and uneven class relationship was promoted as natural. “How many hours they would work a day, what sort of provisions were available for insurance, or redundancy pay, these and other regulations were never made explicit by companies, and the idea of the women workers themselves demanding this was beyond the imagination as most would not

\textsuperscript{42} Chŏng Myŏng-ja, 1989, p.91. Quoted in Chŏng Mi-suk, p.61.
\textsuperscript{43} A shida is an apprentice in a garment factory. When Chŏn T’a-ae-il carried out his survey of the lives of garment factory workers in Seoul’s Peace Market in 1970 he found that four thousand shidas between the ages of 12 and 21 worked in the market for an average of fourteen hours a day. They earned between 1,800 and 3,000 won a month, a salary that made it difficult to feed and clothe themselves adequately, especially in winter. See Chŏn T’a-ae-il, 1988, pp. 181-182.
\textsuperscript{44} Anonymous, translated from the Japanese by Miyazawa Teruko and the American Friends Service Committee. This extract is taken from the article ‘The Human Beings Market’ from \textit{From the Womb of Han}, p. 17. The article is introduced with the following information about
even have known that such things existed." Chŏng Mi-suk maintains that it was the recruitment process that tacitly ordained the character of employment relations.

Yet the fact remains that within the working-class female labour market, factory jobs were a coveted occupation. In the early chapters of *The Road to Seoul* Song Hyo-sun describes her first jobs in Seoul. She begins as a kitchen hand in a Chinese restaurant, then works behind the counter in a general store, becomes a public baths attendant and finally makes it to become a factory girl. From this history we have some sense of the variety and hierarchy of jobs available to women. Desire for factory jobs, despite all their horrors, was intense. They were the working-class jobs furthest away from the uncertainty of the streets.

*Factory districts and red-light quarters*

Factory work was only one form of the mobilisation of plebeian women into the service of the development state. Women and girls also sought work in the cities as servants, shop girls, secretarial clerks or “office flowers” and, as the service industry in the 1970s embarked on the beginning of a long boom, as waitresses, bar girls, masseurs, and prostitutes.

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45 Chŏng Mi-suk, pp.61-2.
It is important to note that the propaganda campaign to bring young women willingly into the factories gave women symbolic credit for their labour that helped build a rich and strong nation, but their actual remuneration was cynically low. With no prospect of promotion in the garment or textile factories, with no prospect of ever leaving poverty behind, it should come as no surprise that many young women were drawn to sex work, even temporarily. In the absence of any other vent for their ambition, any other possibility of making some money, thousands of women entered brothels and bars in the ill-named “entertainment” districts.

Ten years ago, when there were many houses of ill-fame in Chong Kye-Chon and Chang Shin Dong, a lot of young girls who came from the countryside and had trouble making a living drifted here. These people entered factories and worked as shidas and then as operators. But their wages were terribly low and they had no place to live. They slept leaning against the wall in the hallway near the entrance to the factory. Finally almost all of these girls had to go to the amusement section of town.46

The traditional Korean view that, in the words of Elaine Kim, “women’s labour outside the home degrades the family”,47 affected factory women acutely. It formed part of the image of working class women as tainted by economic need. In his book about his experience in the Samwon textile factory, Yu Dong-wu noted that women were sexually stigmatised by factory work. “There is not a single virgin in the industrial districts” was one of the rumours flying around the industrial areas where women workers lived.48

46 From the Womb of Han, p.16.
47 Elaine Kim, p.112.
The received image of factory girls as fallen women was not unrelated to the slide of factory girls into prostitution, but it also expressed the taint of any work, any reason why a woman should be out at night labouring in factories or brothels. In the larger culture many working class women were seen to be already prostituted by factory work and the pejorative kongsuni, roughly translated as “factory girl” or “working girl”, captures this. A kongsuni is a girl who is easily approachable, unprotected by social laws of etiquette and strict rules of honorific address that ostensibly apply to all people who are strangers to each other.\(^{49}\)

Elaine Kim has written about the sul munhwa or “liquour culture” that thrived in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s (and continues to absorb many men in South Korea today). Sul munhwa encompasses hostess bars, nightclubs, brothels, massage parlours, street prostitution, cafes, bath houses, and a whole assortment of businesses that trade in alcohol and sexual services. In her article ‘Men’s Talk’, Kim interviewed South Korean men from a wide range of social backgrounds on their views of women and men. Her interviewees proffer a number of reasons for the flourishing of sul munhwa in its heyday:

\(^{48}\) See Yu Dong-wu, 1984, p.44.
\(^{49}\) For more on the term kongsuni and its association with earlier forms of address for slaves see Hagen Koo, 2001, p. 62. For an example of the use of the appellation kongsuni as a term of abuse see Part Two. Carter Eckert also discusses the connection between institutionalised slavery amongst the landowning class in the early twentieth century and before, and attitudes of South Korean capitalists to their working class employees in Carter Eckert, 1993, pp.113-115.
[It] was allowed to flourish as a kind of anesthetic that would keep citizens from rebelling against military rule and the continuing postponement of political reforms in the name of economic development. Others insisted that the government obtained "underground money" for slush funds through bribes from entertainment industry operators. Still others believed that sul munhwa is rooted in Japanese and Korean military culture, and a few thought it came from the West.\(^{50}\)

By 1989 as many as one in four working women were estimated to be employed in the South Korean sex industry.\(^{51}\) Indeed, the commercialisation of female prostitution was as much a part of South Korea's economic boom as the labour of women in the top performing export industries of the 1970s and 1980s. Elaine Kim reports that during the 1970s the Korean government encouraged and publicly praised the women who were employed in kisaeng tourism\(^ {52}\) for bringing in precious foreign currency from Japanese and other foreign clients.\(^ {53}\)

Indeed these were the years when prostituted women and girls were being paid to accept treatment that women in factories were going onto the streets to protest, namely sexual harassment and dangerous working conditions.\(^ {54}\) For if the textile industry survived the Korean war and the economic downturn of the 1950s and 1960s, so too did the sex industry. And while the

\(^{50}\) Elaine Kim, 1998, p.110, n.5.

\(^{51}\) Elaine Kim quotes this figure from a National Assembly report of the same year in 'Men's Talk', p. 110, n.4. Although in the 1990s the South Korean sex industry was globalised in new ways as Eastern European, South East Asian and Russian women entered the sex economy in South Korea as prostitutes, dancers and hostesses, in the 1980s and 1970s, prostitutes in South Korea were predominantly Korean.

\(^{52}\) Kisaeng tourism is the peddling of Korea's traditional female entertainment business to foreign clients.

\(^{53}\) Ibid, p.109, n.4.

\(^{54}\) Sheila Jeffreys makes this same point in her discussion of the unionisation of prostitutes when she says: "Prostituted women are being paid to receive exactly the treatment as sexual objects that other women workers are seeking to abolish." Sheila Jeffreys, 1997, p.192.

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textile industry was a model export industry in the 1970s and early 1980s in securing foreign capital, the sex industry at the same time was boosting the domestic economy as sex tourists flocked to South Korea from Japan, and US soldiers stationed in Korea as well as Korean men spent their earnings in local red-light districts.\(^{55}\)

But deep contradictions were at work here. The development myth of “Confucian capitalism” was that factory girls could be protected by the company, living *en famille* in the dormitories, while profit was extracted from them. But when working-class women appeared in danger of asserting their rights as workers they were sexually intimidated and assualted by thugs hired by the factory, by male co-workers, and by the police.\(^{56}\) In short, they were exposed to the same sexual violence that prostitutes were.

Despite their social proximity to prostitutes, working-class women rarely drew attention to the similarities in their conditions.\(^{57}\) Patricia Johnson has written that in Victorian England the figure of the prostitute “haunted”

\(^{55}\) For an examination of US soldiers’ patronage of the Korean sex industry see Katherine Moon, 1999.

\(^{56}\) For an account of the sexual violence against women workers during the Tongil dispute see Sŏk Ch'ŏng-nam, pp.90-91. Sin Il'yŏng describes the sexual violence perpetrated by the *kusadace* or “save the company” corps, a collection of factory foremen, guards and hired thugs or men recently released from prison who were paid to break up strikes, in *Yŏsŏng, Nodong, POP* [Women, Labour, Law], Seoul: P'ulbitt, 1988, pp.294-297. It should be noted that the *kusadac* were a phenomenon of the 1930s and the 1980s.

\(^{57}\) While men frequently drew parallels between working-class women and prostitutes, factory girls rarely did. One exception is Kim Kyŏng-sŭk who wrote about prostitutes and factory girls: “You and I are from the same lot, all thrown out by this society. But is it right to live like this without making any protest against the world which treats us like worms?” From Kim Kyŏng-sŭk, 1986, p.106. Quoted in Hagen Koo, 2001, p.137.
working-class women wherever they went.\textsuperscript{58} In a society were females were believed to be ‘corrupted’ by factory work, or any sort of work that exposed them to the dangerous and immoral streets, sexual harrassment greeted them everywhere. As in industrialising England, in South Korea too women who refused the cover of patriarchal protection, or were too poor to benefit from it, were “unowned, huntable creatures.”\textsuperscript{59}

In South Korea the ways in which women labouring in factories and women labouring in brothels were defined – sometimes in opposition to each other, and sometimes equated – reveals the instability of the image of a woman worker, and the threat she posed to a patriarchal society that found the prospect of her economic and sexual independence disturbing. The social proximity of blue-collar women and prostitutes will be more fully considered in the next chapter, when we examine how the stigma of labour played out in the women’s own personal relationships, leading them to construct the notion of a factory girl virtue.

\textit{Patriarchal Capitalism}

The paternalistic management style of both large and small scale factories was nothing new to girls from conservative patriarchal families. In a structuralist analysis of the forces that subjugate women Lee Hyo Jae points out how

\textsuperscript{58} Patricia Johnson, p.57.
\textsuperscript{59} The terms is J.M. Coetzee’s from \textit{Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship}, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p.82.
President Park Chung Hee extolled those authoritarian and chauvinist traditions in the family system that offered up females for usage:

Park’s educational and cultural policies emphasised the traditional ideology of loyalty and filial piety, granting official awards to self-sacrificing women, faithful daughters-in-law and virtuous wives. The creation of such a cultural milieu justified the social conditions under which the state mobilised women as a cheap labour force, which sacrificed itself for national industrialisation.60

The entrepreneur in South Korea did not dwell in his factory “like a plantation owner amongst his slaves”61 but preferred to visit from time to time and adopt the gentler sobriquet “Father” to express his benevolent paternal feelings for his “daughters”.

The equation of boss with Father and the practice of referring to women workers as one’s children is revealing of current gender and class ideologies. By classifying women as children, particularly as one’s own children, male bosses and managers implied that the women who worked for them were not independent, politically or economically. Whether in the family or the factory they were to be represented and “protected” by men, and had no need to try to represent themselves.62

Patriarchal ideology played a particularly important role in socialising women into the type of labour force most desired in the low-wage, labour-intensive export industries – one that was docile, submissive, diligent, persevering, and oblivious to workers’ citizenship rights. Thus,

60 Lee Hyo Jae, 1988, p.147.
62 Patricia Johnson makes this same point about the classification of women with child workers in the 1847 legislation that restricted their working hours, p.10.
rather than being an obstacle, the traditional family system functioned as a crucial mechanism through which a desirable labour force was produced and reproduced for the export industries.\textsuperscript{63}

Paradoxically, the story of the development of South Korea’s patriarchal capitalism, where factory owners posed as “Father” and encouraged their employees to labour for them as though they shared the same blood\textsuperscript{64}, is echoed in countless mournful songs and poetry as the estrangement of family members.\textsuperscript{65} The break-up of families so that juveniles or parents could search for work in the industrial centres was a key feature of paternalistic capitalism in South Korea.

The forced estrangement of families and siblings, when combined with the enforced paternalism of factory culture, and its collective and supervised leisure – the television room and library at Tongil, the dormitory surveillance system, the group outings – makes one wonder if the single, independent female was potentially a dangerous figure for her employers. To accept a wage without loving the factory, without labouring towards marriage, was to subvert the patriarchal order of Korean style capitalism, and begin to imagine other worlds, and live by other systems.

Yet working-class women themselves, and those involved with them, were by no means immune to the appeal of a paternalistic political culture. Even

\textsuperscript{63} Hagen Koo, 2001, p.48.

\textsuperscript{64} For an account of how the ‘Father-son’ relationship operated in male dominated factories see George Ogle, 1990, pp.49-51.
the veteran worker-priest Cho Wha Soon, who laboured alongside the Tongil employees and was a key instigator of the campaign for a democratic union, betrays in her language how deep the ideologies lie. When she says “My relationship with the labourers is like that between parent and children”, we are in no doubt as to who is the parent and who are the children. Yet later in the same book Cho elucidates the structures that render women, especially blue collar women, invisible in political movements, and calls for a women’s movement that will have lower class women at its centre.

For Chang Nam-su the cruellest separation was from her younger sister, Hyung-suk. Their household in a tiny rented room in Seoul was broken up when Nam-su entered the Wonpoong Factory dormitory and Hyong-suk travelled to Pusan for a job. Drawn by the promise of education, Hyung-suk left Seoul to work in a factory in Pusan that provides schooling for its young workforce. Chang Nam-su says nothing to dispel her sister’s hopes, but she suspects the life of toiling all day and studying each evening will wear out her sister.

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65 For an excellent account of the popular songs that expressed this estrangement from family and from the past see Yi Yong-mi, 1998, pp.96-114.
66 Cho, p.55.
67 “In the political movement group or labour movement group, a woman’s opinion is often ignored or marginalised by the men. No matter how hard she tries to be heard, she will be pushed away from the centre against her will and eventually be left out completely. This kind of thing happens quite often. I myself have had such experiences. And the wounds from these experiences are very deep.” p. 136, passim.
68 Chang Nam-su, p.27.
When Chang Nam-su goes to Hyŏng-suk’s school in the mountains to visit her, she is directed to the factory where Hyŏng-suk works. Her fears for her sister are realised:

As soon as [Hyŏng-suk] caught sight of me standing by the gates she stopped, and crying “Sister!” she flew to me and threw her arms around my neck. Tears were pouring down my face. “It’s been hard for you, hasn’t it?” [She didn’t answer] and I too felt my throat dry up and could say no more. I only had to look at her poor gnarled hands to know how much she had suffered. 69

Chang Nam-su’s experience of rapid industrialisation in her family in childhood and early adolescence is described in terms of the separation of siblings and parents due to the sway of financial considerations. If we follow the narrative strand of the book – the form of The Lost Workplace leads from rural family poverty to the journey to Seoul, the family’s vulnerability in the city’s ruthless labour market ending in the father’s breakdown and defeated return to the provinces. It is only after describing the breakup of her family and her isolation in Seoul’s employment society that the author is able to fully account for her relief at discovering the union. The relief of the union – the solidarity of the factory floor and the fellowship of friendship and collective dreams – becomes the body of the book, the answer to grief and hardship suffered in solitude.

69 Chang Nam-su, p.48.
Factories, on the outside at least, formed part of the iconography of South Korea's drive for prosperity. Their planned space, even down to the body-heated dormitories, were testament to the efficiency principles shared by factory owners and economic planners who believed they could harness their employees' very rest and ablutions to the time-discipline rule of modern capitalism.

And the discipline of South Korea's military modernisation was indeed immense. In the decade from 1976 to 1985 the average working week for employees in the manufacturing sector was 53.3 hours. And there are many cases of women and men employed in the garment factories working 60 hours a week, and even as much as 80 hours, when large orders needed to be filled quickly. The long working week was not limited to blue collar workers either: schools, banks and government departments all operated on a six day week and the Saturday half-day attendance of employees and school pupils was mandatory.

The working hours of males employed in the manufacturing sector were similar to females, but the remuneration men received was more than twice

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70 For more on the symbolic power of factories in South Korean development see Eun-shil Kim, 1993, p. 182.
71 See Hagen Koo on this also, 2001, pp. 63-64.
72 From The Womb of Han reports that following the economic slowdown in 1979, working hours went up in the textile and electronic industries, p. 68.
73 Alice Amsden makes the interesting point that South Korea's long working week is a legacy of the work practices that Japan introduced when it colonised Korea, and that Japan
that of factory girls. In 1980 women in the light manufacturing industries earned 44.5 percent of male earnings and for most of the 1970s and 1980s they received less than half what male workers received. 74

Conditions in the garment factories were particularly bad. It was in the apparel factories in the Peace Market near Seoul’s East Gate that working people’s anger would first explode into the open in 1970. In that year a young garment worker called Chôn T’ae-il took his own life during a street demonstration in a desperate effort to bring public attention to the conditions in the garment factories. Suicide was Chôn T’ae-il’s final declaration in the campaign he and his work colleagues were waging to force the labour law to be implemented.

The shock at the manner of his death: Chôn T’ae-il burnt himself alive while clutching a copy of the Labour Standards Law, continues to haunt South Korea today. Every Labour Day his diary is read over the radio, and his name and memory reverberate in almost every labour demonstration. Chôn T’ae-il was twelve when he left school to become a paper seller and a shoe-shine boy at Toksu Palace, but he wrote prodigiously. 75 He wrote a diary and drafts of several novels. He conducted a comprehensive questionnaire on the lives of itself during its early period of industrialisation modelled its practice on the lengthy working week of Germany and France. Amsden, pp. 205-206.
74 Han’guk Yŏsong Nodongjahoe [Korean Women Workers’ Association], 1987, p. 32. See also Hagen Koo, 2001, p.59.
75 The mix of threadbare jobs was common practice for male child workers who could not support themselves by one occupation alone. Like Chôn T’ae-il they might shine shoes during the day, sell the evening paper to commuters going home, and at night collect and sell
his colleagues in the Peace Market, and he also wrote poetry. Revealed in his writings as a complex and principled person, Chôn T’ae-il would become a lasting symbol of the youth who in the 1960s and 1970s came to Seoul to seek their livelihood in factories and on the streets, and experienced brutal exploitation.

In the diary which was circulated after his death and later published, Chôn T’ae-il reached out to young people in higher classes. He wrote of his longing for a student friend his own age with whom he could discuss ideas, and study the abstruse labour law. Almost immediately after his death his wish was answered as students who had heard rumours of the demonstration came to the hospital where he was lying, and to his funeral in Peony Garden. It was to be the beginning of a new relationship between working-class and middle class youth, the ramifications of which I will explore more fully in the next chapter.

In the 1970s and 1980s conditions in the garment factories remained bad, dust from threads and the absence of windows, proper light and ventilation meant that workers frequently suffered from a variety of health problems, including gastointestinal problems, eye disorders, and tuberculosis. Industrial accidents were a major worry in all blue-collar industries, where an abusive work culture and lack of even minimal safety precautions meant that one

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1 cigarette butts from Myondong’s alleyways and outside Midopa Department Store and the Choson Hotel. See Chôn T’ae-il, p.97.
could lose a finger, or an eye, to a machine or a manager, or even to a
coworker. For example, Seung-kyung Kim reports how one manager
sometimes threw scissors at workers, and Cho Wha-soon writes of the
terrible fights between bus girls at an Inch’ón bus company. 76

Many commentators have noted the militarised management style of
industrial enterprises in South Korea during the years of the
have also noted the presence of pre-capitalist practices in South Korean
industries, in particular a patriarchal authoritarianism where “workers were
looked on not as the sellers of their labour with their own contractual rights,
but as children or as traditional servants.” 78 Yet the reciprocity of the ideal
traditional patriarchal system, where the patriarch used his power to protect
those who laboured for him, was missing in the factories.

Instead employers preached a Korean style management system that saw the
company adopt its young workforce as “dutiful daughters”, house them and
feed them and bid them work till their bladders leaked, and they could not
stand unsupported and their lungs filled with fluff. When working-class
women began to strike, they ripped open the contradictions in a society

76 Seung-kyung Kim, p.159, Cho Hwa-soon, pp. 108-109. See also Song Hyo-sun, p. 60 and
Pak Yong-kün, p. 128 and p. 139.
78 Ibid, p.67.
whose traditions were based on a belief in the protection of women, and a factory system that exploited them ruthlessly. 79

It was at these moments, when factory girls asserted themselves as workers, that they would expose the contradictions in the class and gender ideologies of “Confucian capitalism”. 80 The originality of Confucian capitalism was that it thrived by grafting Korea’s feudal hierarchies onto the modern factory system, an act that provided the whole industrialisation process with a veneer of cultural continuity. For factory girls this continuity was their economic and social marginalisation. 81 The pattern of gender hierarchy in the light industries was defined in ways that provided continuity with feudal patriarchal hierarchies, with women workers at the bottom.

Seung-kyung Kim notes that the gender hierarchy that operated in the electronics factories in Masan in the late 1980s delegated unskilled work to women, while ensuring that their supervisors were almost always men. 82 This notion of “women’s work”, the idea that the labour of men and women is naturally divided by their gender, permeated all segments of South Korea’s segregated employment society – down to single sex schools and people’s

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79 Seung-kyung Kim writes: “[T]hey received neither the protected status promised to women by patriarchal families nor the freedom promised to women by their participation in the labour market.” Seung-kyung Kim, 1992, p.228.

80 “Confucian capitalism” is a widely contested term. Roger Janelli has discussed both the problems and the illuminations that arise when applying it to the ideologies practiced by Korean companies. He focuses on how Confucian “moral claims” filtered into management strategies where “the use of cultural constructions and the pursuit of material interests were brought into congruity.” Roger Janelli, p.239.

81 Seung-kyung Kim also makes this point, 1997, p.172.

82 Ibid, p. 5-6.
Seung-kyung Kim explains: “The subordination of women within the workplace seemed natural or common sense because it derived from the traditional hierarchical relationship between the genders that permeated society outside the workplace.”

But the gender hierarchy was not the only hierarchy operating in the factories, far from it. Suk Chông-nam writes about the torments of the pecking order, Seung-kyung Kim in her ethnography recorded regional discrimination as well as status distinctions amongst the women on the basis of education levels, whether you were affianced or not, how eligible your boyfriend was, and etc.

There were other areas of gender discrimination also aside from wages, promotion, and the menial nature of jobs for females. Young women were also considered temporary workers, whose true vocation was domestic. If poverty forced them to seek waged work, then ultimately even that work led them back into the family, whether through saving for their dowry, or supporting siblings through school, or paying off family debts.

Cho Wha Soon wrote candidly of her first experience in a factory – in the kitchens of the Dong-il Textile Company. Cho was a university educated Uniting church minister who entered the factory as an industrial chaplain to

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83 Perhaps the most common example of a sex-segregated activity is smoking. An activity that young women could not indulge in publicly unless they were willing to risk abuse, spitting and perhaps a slap, it became a treasured secret vice for many, many women.
“develop a theology of mission to the workers”, and this required labouring in the factory for six months, alongside other workers. Here she has just been moved from the kitchens to the textile-making department, the elite section of the factory, and endured teasing and scolding from workers much younger than herself:

Even in that kind of situation I was thinking that I should evangelise this factory. Wasn’t the purpose of my coming here for this working-training to lead these workers to God? It wasn’t just for the purpose of labour itself.

“Young lady, how old are you? Where is your hometown? Are your parents living?” With a friendly smile, I tried to talk to my younger workmates, while keeping my own hands busy. I was interrupted immediately by the sound of a whistle from somewhere. Startled, I looked in that direction to see the supervisor pointing his finger at me and shouting, “You, who are here for the first time! Why do you have so much to talk about?” It was my first time to be insulted in front of so many people.85

Cho Wha Soon wrote that working at Dong-il was a revelation. As a middle-class, educated young woman, she had never experienced the feeling of being stripped of one’s dignity that was the initiate’s introduction to factory work. “Under such circumstances ... anyone who acted gentle or refined was probably not normal,” Cho states bluntly.

Yet for all the alienation, the loneliness, and oppressiveness of their situation, there were consolations for factory girls. Chief amongst these appears to have been the friendships they formed with each other. The urgent pace of rapid, late industrialisation threw together village girls from south-west Cholla and

85 Cho, p.51. For a discussion of the informal, insulting language used to address working class women see chapter 4.
south-east Kyongsang province, and factory dormitories like the one at Tongil gathered 300 young women to eat, sleep, work and holiday together. Chŏng Mi-suk argues that alongside the anonymity and alienation of Seoul and the factory districts were the sustaining relations with work colleagues. In factories like Tongil, Bando, Wonpoong and YH, the factory girls’ loyalty to each other was to play a key role in their campaigns to build a democratic union in their workplaces.

**Industrial Disputes**

Many analysts of the women’s labour movement in the 1970s have commented on the disconnected, spontaneous nature of these disputes, given a retrospective continuity by the labour movement that would claim them as their own. In fact, as Yi Ok-ji notes, the disputes were autonomous and spontaneous precisely because no one at the time would back them: “The upper strata of the organised labour movement took the side of the government and the industrialists in obstructing the autonomous union movement coming out of the factories, and intervened directly to destroy the campaign to reform labour conditions.”

The National Textile Union official quoted at the opening of this chapter represented a union that shared with the government and employers a desire for ‘labour peace’, at the expense of workers. It was a member union of the

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86 Chŏng Mi-suk, p.67.
87 Yi Ok-ji, p. 137.
Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU or in Korean Han’guk Noch’ong) the umbrella organisation for all official unions in South Korea. The FKTU has an interesting history: it was first established by right-wing groups under the auspices of the American military government in March 1946 as a counter to the powerful leftist union Chŏnp’yŏng. After Chŏnp’yŏng was destroyed and its leaders imprisoned and executed over 1947 and 1948, the FKTU became closely tied to South Korea’s ruling party, a position it has not strayed far from ever since.88

It is for these reasons that the organisational support the workers were to receive from Christian groups would prove crucial. In the years after the Korean war South Korean society was permeated by a profound hostility and fear of anything that smacked of “communism”, a fear that was reproduced and disseminated by some of the most powerful institutions in society – the state, the army, schools, religious organisations and the leading daily newspapers, to name but a few.

Pak Myŏng-rim, writing in volume six of Understanding the History of the Liberation Period describes how the war “accomplished the foundation of a strong anti-communist dictatorship in the south where the ruling government’s ideologies of anti-communism and anti-north Korea became

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88 For a more detailed account of the activities of the FKTU and its corruption in the 1950s, and restructuring after the military coup of 1961 see Kim Yun-hwan, 1982, chapters five and six.
impervious to dispute. Yet the tradition of radicalism in the first half of the century did not disappear completely in South Korea. The spectre of communism and the terrible memory of the war with the north were kept alive by the state, and haunted Seoul in anti-communist banners slung over overpasses and government buildings wherein citizens were warned that communism was still their enemy. For the conservative government of Syngman Rhee, and for the General-Presidents, communism was a spectre continually being vanquished.

In this atmosphere the language of class conflict was not part of public parlance. When the first “industrial missionaries” arrived in the factories in the early 1960s they came with a very different mission to that which the socialists had brought in the 1920s. Where socialists had seen the working-class as the people upon whom capitalist industrialisation depends to exist, and as united making up the most powerful potential force in a capitalist society, worker-priests were drawn to labourers because they saw them as the most downtrodden and suffering members of society, as the people most in need of Christian care. But this attitude would change. In her extraordinary tale Cho Wha Soon the worker-priest details how she moved from a superior do-gooding “church-centered tendency”, to become part of the democratic revelation in the women’s factories. Together with the workers she ran night classes with, Cho discovered that self-assertion was the

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beginning of democratic practice. “We must get rid of such titles as ‘intellectual’ and ‘minister’,” she said, “the true way is to learn through the labourers and make the movement with them.”\(^9^1\) The force ranged against the women when they tried to create a union that represented them at Tongil Factory led Cho Wha Soon to acknowledge the strength and vital role of the factory girls: “nothing causes more apprehension in a capitalist society than the labourers,” she concluded.\(^9^2\)

Industrial disputes by women workers in the 1970s took place in the largest and most prestigious factories. YH was the biggest wig manufacturer in South Korea in 1970, with 4,000 employees, although by the time of its attempted closure in 1979 it had shrunk to around 1,000. The Torgil Textile Company was first established in the colonial era and at the time of the disputes was one of the largest textile companies in the country, employing around 1,300 people, over 1,000 of whom were women.\(^9^3\) The Bando Garment Company in Inch’on employed 800 workers in 1977, and Hai Tai Confectionery had 2,500 employees in 1976 at the time of the protests over working conditions.\(^9^4\)

\(^9^0\) Namhee Lee reports that before a partial lifting of the ban on contraband texts in 1983, the list included E.H. Carr’s *What is History?* possession of which could bring down a minimum prison sentence of one year. Namhee Lee, 2002, p.32, n.85.

\(^9^1\) Cho, p.124.

\(^9^2\) Ibid, p.105.

\(^9^3\) Ibid, p.55.

\(^9^4\) *From the Womb of Han*, p. 53.
The Tongil Textile workers' attempts to elect their own female union representatives provoked a vicious response from the factory's management, and the story of this union is the one most frequently singled out as emblematic of the 1970s labour movement.\textsuperscript{95} The Tongil dispute is where the ugly nature of "Confucian capitalism" showed itself. In this dispute young working-class women exposed the misogynist ideologies that the state, capitalists and working-class men laboured together to uphold and make so readily acceptable that it became the invisible "common sense" of a community.

In 1972 the first female president of a union in South Korea was elected at Tongil Textile Company.\textsuperscript{96} It was the culmination of three years of labour education in worker's rights, facilitated by Cho Wha-Soon, that had greatly increased the confidence of the factory girls. When the young women learnt that a union could represent them and through the solidarity of a union they could demand changes to their conditions and their pay, they turned their attention to the union elections. The incumbent union was an unobtrusive organisation, and its leadership positions were filled by men hand-picked by the company's managers as reliable negotiators, men who did not regard factory girls as their constituency.


\textsuperscript{96} The following account of the Tongil Labour Union is taken from Han'guk Kidokkyo Kyohoe Hyŏbuihoe, \textit{Nodong Hyonjang kwa Chungon [The Scene and Testimony of Labour]},
Knowing this, the women secretly organised their own candidates, and on the
day of the ballot elected twenty-nine young women to the forty-one delegate
positions. Following this election the delegates went on to vote in a woman
chairperson, Chu Kil-ja, and an all-women executive committee. These
women represented the most subordinate workers in the factory, and the
union now acted for them rather than for male line leaders and supervisors.\textsuperscript{97}

Following this, KCIA men began to trail the delegates and Cho Wha-soon.
After the election the delegates and the women workers generally suffered
verbal abuse, harassment, intimidation, and the threat of dismissal, while
their positions in the factory were continually shuffled around. Their main
achievement was to survive and campaign again in the next round, and in
1975 they elected another woman as chairperson, Yi Yong-suk. At the
election of delegates, however, trouble awaited them.

The election of delegates was in July 1976 but male workers who had been
bribed by the company had charges laid against Yi Yong-suk for instigating
workers to strike, and then hastily convened the election in the absence of the
women delegates and their supporters, who had been locked into Tongil’s
women’s dormitory. When they heard a company man had won in their
absence the women broke down the doors of the dormitory, forced their way

\textsuperscript{97} Cho Wha-soon and George Ogle, both UIM members, stress the incipient feminist nature
of the union election, but Seung-kyung Kim argues that the main aim was for ordinary
into the factory and began a sit-in. The next day, July 24, 1976, they were joined by hundreds more: eight hundred in the sit-in strike inside the factory and three hundred at the gates; while the company shut off all water and electricity and locked the toilets. On the third day traffic was diverted from the area, and families trying to pass in water and menstrual pads to the women were pushed away by the police. In the evening a bus of riot police drove up and in the face of their clubs and helmets the women took off their clothes. Exhausted, hot and hungry they had nothing to fight with but their bare bodies. They wanted to shame the police, and those whom the police were defending, but they underestimated their adversaries. The women were beaten badly, many were sexually assaulted, seventy-two were arrested and fourteen were hospitalised.\(^98\)

Tongil Union did survive this assault and go on to elect more women delegates. Its achievements in the workplace were few: it negotiated menstrual leave for female workers once a month; in 1976 it won a breakfast break for early morning shift workers; and later it managed to prohibit physical assault by foremen.\(^99\) But it was continually besieged by the company, by the union bureaucracy, and by the state security forces. Its main achievement, according to Cho Wha Soon, was that it brought the collaboration of these three organisations out into the open in South Korean workers to have a union that represented them, and that the overturning of the gender hierarchy in Tongil was not a motive, but a byproduct of their action.

\(^{98}\) For a graphic account of the sexual violence that she and others experienced at the Tongil dispute see Sok Chong-nam, pp.90-91.

\(^{99}\) Yi Song-hwi, 1999, p.404; From The Womb of Han, pp. 43-44.
When Sŏk Chŏng-nam went to the main union body to seek assistance, this was what she found:

When we went to Hanguk Nochong to request cooperation some office worker listening in asked “That’s the factory where the women workers took off their clothes and protested in the nude right? When women behave so shamelessly in front of a group of men, well....” They were not interested in knowing why if we hadn’t gone that far our protest would have been to no avail, but just stressed the fact that we were women taking off our clothes.

Yet by showing that they were not duped by the misogynist reality of capitalist relations - that their bodies were fuel for a whole industrial society, and that the collective endeavour for national economic development was not borne equally - the factory girls of Tongil exposed the founding contradictions of their society. They exposed them but they did not overcome them, and the response was ferocious. That the rage of the men became sexual shows how the actions of the women tapped into a misogyny more deeply entrenched than capitalist relations.

To take off their clothes in protest, in desperation, was to bring to a crisis the conflicting ideologies surrounding labouring women that were operative in larger South Korean society. One being the noble filial girl, labouring for family and nation while asking for nothing for herself, and the other as the female already prostituted by factory work and the slums who could not be degraded by or make a protest of nudity. Ultimately, they showed that to protest is to disturb layers of interconnecting and resonating ideologies intent

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100 Cho Wha Soon, p.72 and p.104.
on putting lower class women in their place as “the most degraded members of a degraded class.”

But it was the Y.H. dispute in 1979 that would bring working-class women onto the national political stage. Owing to internal mismanagement and embezzlement, the Y.H. Trading Company, once the biggest wig manufacturer in South Korea, announced it would close its doors by the end of April, in the middle of wage rise negotiations with its employees. Faced with imminent unemployment, the workers and their union, one of the new independent unions formed in 1975, decided to fight. First they took their case to the government on April 4, 1979: “When we visited the Office of Labour Affairs in northern Seoul, we were thrown into desperation upon being told that in a capitalist society, nobody can interfere with the entrepreneur’s voluntary closing of his own business.”

On April 13 the union called a general meeting and 500 workers began a sit-in strike calling the company, the bank and the Labour Office to negotiate the closure of the plant. The T’aenŭng police branch broke up the strike brutally but Y.H. employees continued their strategy, working the day shift and conducting a sit-in strike in the evening. When negotiations broke down in early August as management announced the factory would be closed on

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101 Sŏk Chŏng-nam, preface.
102 Patricia Johnson, 76.
103 From “Members of the Y.H. Trading Company Branch of [the] National Textile Workers Union, August 14, 1979” in From The Womb of Han, p.34. Also quoted in Han’guk Kidokkyo Kyohoe Hyŏbuihoe, 1984, p.579.
August 6, and the police were set to return and rout the strikers, the workers played their final card. At dawn on the 9th of August about 200 Y.H. workers shifted their demonstration to the offices of the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) in Map'o, led by then opposition member Kim Young Sam (later President of South Korea).

When police surrounded the building and Kim Young Sam announced his support for the striking workers, newspapers put the dispute on the front pages. On August 11 one thousand riot police broke into the building and attacked all inside: the Y.H. workers as well as opposition parliamentarians and journalists. In the attack one worker, Kim Kyŏng-sŏk, died when she fell from the fourth floor of the NDP building.

The Y.H. workers' involvement of the NDP in their campaign triggered a political crisis. When the NDP took the dispute to parliament and demanded that police involvement in the death of Kim Kyŏng-sŏk be fully investigated, their leader Kim Young-sam was expelled from the Assembly on October 4. In the highly regionalised political system of South Korea, Kim's constituency in south Kyongsang province came out in their thousands to support him and General President Park Chung Hee imposed martial law in the Pusan–Masan area. Park Chung Hee had built a political system incapable of tolerating dissent and he planned to send in force, paratroopers if necessary, to put down the demonstrations that every day were widening to
include anger at the entire Yushin system, at Park himself, and at high unemployment levels. On October 26, 1979, before he could send in the army, Park Chung Hee was assassinated by his KCIA chief.

Despite the publicity it generated, the Y.H. dispute ended terribly for the workers. Four unionists were imprisoned, one woman was dead and 223 employees were banished from Seoul. Though the Y.H. dispute was a catalyst for the fall of the Park regime, their concerns were not answered or even addressed by the next regime of Major-General Chun Doo-Hwan. That the YH workers were the first to involve politicians in a working-class campaign and bring the concerns of blue collar women into parliament indicates how isolated party politics had traditionally been from lower-class people in South Korea.

Leading the Labour Movement

For a few short years in the 1970s women workers in scattered industries in South Korea stood up for democratic freedom in the workplace and took the full brunt of the Yushin police state’s brutality. Most of the other radical, anti-government organisations in the 1970s were secret, underground cells. Only factory girls faced their employers, and behind them the regime and its secret police, in open defiance. For this they have been lauded by the dissident movements that would gain strength from their example – both the

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105 For an account of the three major vanguard revolutionary groups of the 1960s and 70s see Han’guk Yŏksa Yonguhoe, 1996, pp. 171 – 206.
democratic union movement and the student movement. What they won for themselves is harder to calculate.

Seung-kyung Kim does attempt to calculate the gains and losses of the 1970s disputes for democratic unions, and her conclusion is that the women’s industrial action of the 1970s produced martyrs but few victories. She criticises the tendency within the labour movement, a tendency shared by sympathetic chroniclers, to romanticise women’s role within the labour movement, an attitude that concentrates on their victimisation rather than their conflicted role.

Kim instead raises some important questions about the factory girl’s ambivalent response to their position, their “volatile mixture of deference and defiance”. For working-class women in their writings and protests reproduced key elements of the gender and class ideologies that they were trying to tear down. After they were attacked and beaten the factory girls of Tongil wrote an open letter to religious leaders calling for their support. The language of the letter is both radical and reactionary, in it one hears both the voice of serfdom and a deeply radical challenge:

Please listen to the desperate cry of our poor workers, who are struggling to live like [respectable] human beings despite society’s cold treatment... We

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107 Ibid, p.16.
108 Marshall Berman uses this phrase in a different context, to describe the 1905 demonstration of petitioners to the Russian Tsar, who were shot down outside the Winter Palace. Marshall Berman, 1983, p.251.
want to live like human beings, and although we are poor and uneducated, we have learned about justice and democracy through our union. Are we wrong to engage in our desperate struggle in order to keep our conscience alive and not to surrender to injustices? We want to hear your honourable judgement. Please give us your generous encouragement.\textsuperscript{109}

That they were willing to risk so much just to be recognised as human beings shows how factory girls were leading their society out of the feudal caste system and into modernity.\textsuperscript{110}

On the tactics of the women’s labour movement Seung-kyung Kim notes that “women workers also made use of culturally salient images of female vulnerability even as they pursued militant demands in their collective actions.”\textsuperscript{111} As mentioned earlier, the poverty of the women’s political vocabulary was in part a symptom of South Korea’s anti-communist state. The tight control over books, classrooms, speeches, newspapers and even private gatherings impeded working-class women’s allies also.

When Cho Wha Soon was arrested for giving a speech on the struggle of Tongil workers at the Catholic-Protestant Autumn Lecture in Pusan in 1978, her defence at her trial was to deflect political questions into moral ones.\textsuperscript{112}

In her court trial Cho used apocalyptic language to make points that

\textsuperscript{109} From Tongil pangjik pokjik t’ijaeng wiwonhoe, Tongil Pangjik Nodongjohep Undongsa [The History of The Tongil Textile Labour Union], Seoul: Tolbekae, 1985, pp. 73-74. Quoted in Hagen Koo, 82. Translation by Hagen Koo.

\textsuperscript{110} Marshall Berman makes a similar point on the 1905 demonstrators in Russia, who also brought a petition beseeching assistance, p.252.

\textsuperscript{111} Seung-kyung Kim, p.171.

\textsuperscript{112} The charges were of violating Presidential Emergency Decree no 9, a decree which made it a criminal offence to criticise the President; and of violating the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations, Cho, p.97.
politically she couldn't.\textsuperscript{113} In a way, theology was her last line of defence against the prosecutors and the KCIA interrogators.

By Cho Wha Soon's own account theology was often a very powerful aide in her moral and spiritual battle against the oppressors of workers, but it left her and her comrades utterly exposed. Her lack of political analysis meant that while she was empowering her fellow-workers to seek a just wage and a democratic union she was also relentlessly exposing them to a police force and its employers that were unmoved by moral or spiritual considerations. Again and again in the course of the Tongil struggle Cho Wha Soon trusts in the fairness of government labour committees and even, amazingly, the police. By running a campaign where all the risks are taken by the factory girls, and passive resistance tactics like fasting and nudity throw the whole toll of the dispute onto the bodies of the women, the Tong-il struggle would become a lesson in how not to run a labour union campaign. But these were not merely tactical mistakes. They were symptomatic of a wider trend.

\textsuperscript{113} As in the following exchange: "The prosecutor asked me: Was not your... action for the purpose of class struggle? I answered "I do not know. I am ignorant about such things and do not understand what is meant by class struggle. I have only tried to follow the words of the Bible, acting as a shepherd to find the one lost sheep, though this means leaving the ninety-nine others to do so." Cho, p. 99. And in her summing up: "In Luke's Gospel, some people came to Jesus and warned, 'Herod is trying to kill you! Please hurry and escape!' But instead of escaping, Jesus told them, 'Go and tell the fox that today and tomorrow, I will chase Satan away and heal the sick, then the third day I will finish my work. Today, tomorrow and the day after, I have to go my way. Could a prophet die anywhere else but in Jerusalem?' As a disciple of Jesus, I am doing this work with the same mind as Jesus." I turned to the courtroom audience and shouted "Even though a crowd of devils like Herod tried to kill me, I will fight against them without fear of death. My friends the workers are the same. We will fight the devils of this land, not fearing death. The han [righteous anger] of all the oppressed, poor, and marginalised will turn into the sword - the dagger - of God's judgement and stab deep into the hearts of the devils." pp.99-100.
The experience of Chŏn T’ae-il echoes in the stories of the Tongi factory girls, and the young woman, Kim Kyŏng-sŭk, who died in the Y.H. factory dispute. People whose access to public institutions through which to voice their political concerns was completely shut off, turned their desperation back onto themselves, and used their own bodies for a political voice. With no way of locating a powerful sympathetic audience, isolated as they were in the slums and factory districts of Seoul, Inch’ŏn, and elsewhere, they paint a terrifying picture of their society. Chŏn T’ae-il, as others would after him, turned the violence of that experience back onto himself.

But women who had been involved in the labour disputes addressed their society through other means also. They turned to literature, and to autobiography in particular, to articulate their lives in a form that gave them some cultural authority. Harnessing the power of representation, they used language to depict their full, ambivalent selves. These authors show how the very elevation of working-class women as suffering symbols (labour movement) or dutiful daughters (the government) imprisoned them in a symbolism that did not allow for the expression of their own conflicted agency. It is time to turn to the women’s own response to their social world, and the issues that would stir them – the getting of education, the consolations of literature, and the sexual politics of poverty.
Chapter Four
When working-class women began to write...

Anyone who tries to find evidence of poverty in the appearance of the women workers will try in vain. They usually wear comparatively good clothes, use make-up, sometimes wear earings and high heels of the latest style. But the truth is found in the room where they live. There is only a suitcase and the bedding, and poverty itself.¹

In South Korea the cultural moment when working class women began to write took place in a room shared with three or four others.² Unlike the middle class women authors whose formation Virginia Woolf charted in her essay A Room of One’s Own, working class Korean authors were not inscribing a cultural hegemony but writing outside of it. It is perhaps not surprising that in a culture that effaced them they should choose autobiography to imprint their voices on their times.

That working-class women should choose the genre of self-representation shows how far these veterans of the 1970s labour movement had come from the tales of seduction that troped factory girls in the colonial era. As we have seen, even when working-class women emerged as a potentially radical force in society and in the proletarian literature movement in the 1920s and 30s,

¹ From the Womb of Han, 1982, p. 69.
² In A Room of One’s Own Virginia Woolf claimed that the moment when “the middle class woman began to write” signalled the onset of modernity, and prefigured the important part middle class women would play in a truly modern (middle-class) society. Virginia Woolf, 1992, p.84. For a discussion of this point see Nancy Armstrong, 1987, p.256.
they were still overshadowed by the structures that defined their station, manifested in illiteracy, poverty and menial labour.

In this chapter I explore how Chang Nam-su, Sŏk Chŏng-nam and Song Hyo-sun employed autobiography to unravel the contradictions they lived in South Korea’s industrialising society. In these autobiographies we see how factory girls embodied all the things that women should and shouldn’t be – filial, hard-working and selfless, while at the same time haunted by images of working-class women as corrupt, solitary and unfeminine. They critiqued their society in tales of their hard-won education, their longing for cultural literacy, and their doomed love affairs with males from higher classes.

Autobiography, as the very symbol of self-representation, was itself a stand against the social world that had for so long overlooked them. Yet this literature’s counter-hegemonic position is more complex than a simple binary relation with elite ‘high culture’, or as subversive of the state’s strict literary censorship in the 1980s. For not only was the state under General President Chun Doo Hwan (1980-1988) itself struggling to attain hegemony in the years these books were published, but ‘high culture’, or at least one stream of literary culture, was turning to worker narratives and minjung misul or people’s art movements as a source of revitalisation.

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3 An example of this literary censorship is the ban on the re-printing of proletarian literature published in the 1920s and 1930s, including some of the works cited earlier in this thesis. This ban was lifted in 1987.
4 For a discussion of the decisive role of the middle class in the unravelling of the Chun Doo Hwan regime see Jang Jip Choi, 1993.
The three autobiographies I discuss in this chapter are representative of the cultural creativity coming from working class people throughout the 1980s. Plays, street theatre, public shaman ceremonies, music troupes, collections of essays, short stories, poetry anthologies and even a movie, *P’aôp Chônya* [The Night Before the Strike] were performed or circulated informally as part of a substantial dissident cultural market in South Korea. They were part of a wider *minjung* or people’s movement that in the 1970s and 1980s sought to popularise indigenous, ‘plebeian’ cultural traditions and make them part of everyday life. The three books I discuss were all published by ‘progressive’ commercial publishing houses and given a wide release.

The literary historian Kwon Yông-min includes labour literature in a wider category of literature spawned by South Korean industrialisation. He writes:

> As we passed through the 1980s, fictional accounts of the situation of workers and the conventional form [of novels themselves] underwent change. With the beginning of the democratisation movement and the opening of the political system, [workers literature] gave a lifelike reflection of the enormous changes brought about by the liquidation of the structure of authoritarian society in the late 1980s... It is accurate to say that the social problems brought about through the process of industrialisation were to make workers very lives and inequities a matter of concern in literature.

The books we discuss here were part of the first wave of labour literature to impact on wider society. Towards the end of the 1980s, in the atmosphere

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6 Although I do not have definite sales figures, the books were all available in mainstream bookstores by the late 1980s.
following the downfall of the Chun Doo Hwan regime, labour literature became more professionalised as left wing literary publishers consolidated their market share and new magazines and publishing houses sprung up in the deregulated publishing market.\(^8\) But when the first labour literature was published in the late 1970s and early 1980s it created ‘the shock of the new’. It is this literature, and it’s authors, that I am concerned with in this chapter.

In the process of situating themselves in relation to ‘culture’, these authors reveal how painful the process of acquiring education had been for them. After being plucked from school at the age of twelve or thirteen to make way for a sibling or to earn money for their families, these writers convey how they refused to concede to the divisions between ‘labour’ and ‘literature’, and instead chose to expose the contradictions they lived.

By focusing on the agency of writing we can examine the social process by which working class women began to write. By giving this literature a political history that connects it with literacy, education, money, time and

\(^7\) Kwon Yong-min is here referring to a wider body of literature than this study can consider. For more on ‘industrial literature’ see Kwon Yong-min, 1985, p.318, passim.

\(^8\) Namhee Lee reports that by the early 1980s more than sixteen publishing houses had been established by former dissidents, and the figure increased over the 1980s. Namhee Lee, p.32, n.86. For an account of the relaxation in literary censorhip during the Chun Doo Hwan regime see Uchang Kim, 1993, p.189. It might be claimed that censorship, rather than hindering the publishing and distribution of contraband books, instead refined it. The publishing industry in South Korea still today is host to a mass of small, privately run firms—many of them operating out of the editor’s apartment for years until they either fold or start to turn a profit. The publishing industry is de-regulated, there is a glut of translators, and new authors can arrange the vanity publishing of their own works relatively cheaply. In this climate setting up an underground publishing house is easy — finding a printer is the difficult part. Some publishers overcome this by having contacts in the printing industry who will do print runs overnight while the printing factory is ostensibly closed. I am grateful to members of the Seoul branch of the International Socialist Organisation for this information.
labour, as well as the particular cultural traditions in Korea that aided in the suppression of writing of lower-class women, I explain its "cultural moment", the years when tales of slums, strikes and class romance captured the imagination of a generation.

We saw in the previous chapter how alone working class women found themselves to be when they first protested their conditions. Their sole supporters when they first began to form unions and attempt to change their circumstances were the urban industrial mission priests like Rev. Cho Wha Soon, who had worked with them in the factory and night schools Chang Nam-su, who was employed at Wonp'ung Mobang, reports hearing about the ‘Tongil excrement incident’ in February 1978, not through newspapers or radio coverage but via rumours in the Wonp'ung factory. When Chang Nam-su enquires of her colleagues if the newspapers have carried the story someone retorts: “When would something like that ever be in a newspaper?” And they are correct, as Chang Nam-su herself concludes:

So the story of the blood curdling screams of the Tongil workers: “We cannot live on excrement” started to sweep through [the factory districts]. And even after the Tongil incident had become a major social issue, not one line referring to it ever appeared in the newspapers.10

9 The Tongil excrement incident occurred on February 21, 1978 when at the election of union delegates at Tongil a group of men and two women instigated by the company smashed the election boxes and rubbed excrement into the women workers who had come there to vote, while police and National Textile Union officials officiating at the election stood by. For more on this incident see Cho Wha Soon, chapter 12; and Yi Ok-ji, pp.340-341.

10 Chang Nam-su, 1984, p.65.
The very indifference of the established media industry in South Korea would play a role in inspiring the witness account that we see played out in these autobiographical narratives, and went some way to motivating an upsurge in alternative publishing in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

**Autobiography**

Chang Nam-su begins her autobiography *The Lost Workplace* with a history of her family’s circumstances when she was growing up in the countryside in Milyang-kun in south Kyongsang province. From the very preface of the book Chang Nam-su writes commandingly. She judges her family relations as feudal and in a few words sketches the tense atmosphere between her mother and paternal grandmother. When her father is compelled to make the journey to Seoul one lean spring Chang Nam-su describes it as “the way the first generation of industrial workers began”. Her memories of school are vivid and she describes how she discovers the limited horizons of the poor as she and the other school students watch the wealthy daughter win the class prize (although Nam-su received the highest marks). She writes of her regret at the abrupt end of her school years, and it is a familiar story. Throughout these first few pages Chang Nam-su draws upon a broad lexicon. She describes farm life like a farmer, analyses her circumstances like someone who had spent a long time in movement circles, and yet writes simply and

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11 “He [her father] would drink to vent all his resentment against the world and anger at the hardship of people’s lives. And mother with her own troubles was drawn into the whirlpool of his drinking]…Our grandmother who had so much love for her grandchildren was cold as the blade of a knife to our mother, who never complained. I don’t know if her life was harder...
directly to her readers. It is when, in the midst of a rural idyll, Chang Nam-su describes herself sitting up a tree astride a branch reading *Tess* that the first jolt of autobiography hits the reader.¹²

This moment is the reader’s first glimpse of Chang Nam-su’s skillful repudiation of the received image of working class and peasant girls as voiceless victims, unaware also of their pretty plight in literature. *Tess* is Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, a story about the pitiful lives of peasant girls and their ruin at the hands of men and religion. Chang Nam-su’s favourite books feature the plucky peasant girl heroine – Katusha in Leo Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* and Tess in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*.

The novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy is an interesting touchstone of the movement of literature into the lives and leisure time of maidservants, peasant daughters and factory girls in England as well as in Korea. Published in England in 1891, the book divided public opinion when it first appeared, with many readers unable to countenance a novel whose main character was, amongst other things, an unwed mother. But for many English readers of *Tess*, particularly those of the newer reading public, lower middle class and working class females of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was a relief to encounter Tess: “a poor working girl with an interesting character, thoughts and personality”, writes Edith Hall in

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¹² after coming to Seoul but mother’s spirit seemed to mutely age in the midst of our father’s boozing.” Chang Nam-su, p.16.
her autobiography of servant life in the 1920s. “This was the first serious novel I had read up to this time in which the heroine had not been of ‘gentle birth’”, Hall continues, “and the labouring classes as brainless automatons. This book made me feel human and even when my employers talked to me as though I wasn’t there, I felt that I could take it; I knew that I could be a person in my own right.”

In South Korea also, working-class women reported an ambivalent relationship to literature. When Sŏk Chŏng-nam is introduced to a poet (see below), her first acquaintance with someone involved in the literary world, he laughs at her taste in poetry – Byron and the German poet Heine - who represented the tastes of educated readers a half century earlier. Sŏk Chŏng-nam initially loves the library for workers at Tongil because there she can read poetry uninterrupted for a couple of hours and forget about her cramped life and menial job. She is content to exchange her labour on the factory shift for the hours of “dreaming” in the library. Yet the literature she eventually embarks on writing is not unconnected with her own lived experience. Rather than reinforce the divisions between ‘labour’ and ‘literature’, between what Raymond Williams calls “the values of literature and the lives of working people”, Sŏk Chŏng-nam in her own literature...

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12 As the reader too is presumably reading a book with a peasant girl heroine – Chang Nam-su’s own The Lost Workplace.
14 Sŏk Chŏng-nam, 1984, p.54.
15 Sŏk Chŏng-nam, p.18.
16 Raymond Williams, 1980, p.221.
renders these divisions ambiguous, in stories that are pitched as much to
factory girls as they are to poets and other possible readers.

Like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Chang Nam-su's *The Lost Workplace* is also
about a peasant girl who is caught up in some of the great themes of the times
– the journey to Seoul, entering the factory economy, and joining the union
movement’s culture of dissent. But Chang Nam-su writes herself as heroine
and reveals her autobiographical world with the confidence of someone
aware that they are ‘making history’. It is no coincidence that the first ‘labour
literature’ should have been authored by those who directly experienced the
strikes and the terror at Tongil, Wonp’ung and Y.H., disputes that spilled
onto the streets and ended in prison and interrogation for many participants.
As these young people were dismissed from their jobs, moved to other areas,
changed their names and found temporary employment, and began to write of
their experiences, they would make visible the social structures that had
quashed them for so long. They articulated how they were fighting a social
economy that rated their labour and their person ‘cheap’, a political
arrangement that demanded their ‘sacrifice’, and a cultural order that aided in
the suppression of writing of lower-class females.

It is such a voice that Raymond Williams refers to when he writes of the
prevalence of the autobiographical form in the industrial literature of Wales.

Of the working class authors Williams says:
These writers, after all, although very conscious of their class situations, were at the same time, within it, exceptional men [sic], and there are central formal features of the autobiography which correspond to this situation: at once the representative and the exceptional account.17

The coupling of “representative and exceptional”, the tension between the individual and collective nature of the working class autobiography took its toll on the authors. They were engaged in an ambivalent process, to disrupt class lines at the same time that they were memorializing a working class version of life. Jacques Ranciere, in his book *The Nights of Labour* deconstructs the relationships between workers and intellectuals in nineteenth century France, and calls attention to the disruptions that occur when workers try to escape to another kind of life through writing, only to become the embodiment of their class as proletarian authors, or proletarian poets. Ranciere poses the question: “How is it that our deserters, yearning to break away from the constraints of proletarian life, circuitously and paradoxically forged the image and discourse of worker identity?”18

It is a salient question for South Korean working class authors also. Caught in the bind between honouring the experience of working class life and fleeing from it, they attempted to reconcile these two endeavours through the genre of autobiography, situating their self-portraits within the social structures that impinged upon their lives. Thus, even in the most intimate and personal episodes in their books they make explicit the social causes of their experiences: the influence of poverty on sexuality, of peasant backgrounds

on metropolitan awkwardness, and of family burdens on the decision to take perilous jobs.19

Part of the power and novelty of these autobiographies stemmed from the very ‘suppression of writing’ of young impoverished females, evidenced by a truncated education and a massive juvenile labour market. Out of the suppression of writing would come the autodidact culture of working class South Koreans, and the thriving business of night schools.

*When working class women began to write...*

The factory books that emerged in the early 1980s from the experience of the 1970s were overwhelmingly autobiographies. The authors of these factory books did not write in command of a fictional world with a field of characters, but instead tended to write of their own past. The very intimacy of the autobiographical genre also gave these authors the space to write revealingly of themselves and their circumstances. Sŏk Chŏng-nam would write about the costs of autobiography, the stigma of revealing one’s occupation and consequently one’s poverty and vulnerability, to the public.

Sŏk Chŏng-nam does not reveal the identity of the ‘poet’ who first reads her work and encourages her to publish her diary. Although she does not tell us his name, she nevertheless gives a revealing sketch of his person and

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18 Jacques Rancière, 1989, p.64.
character. When Sŏk Chŏng-nam’s friend persuades her to attend a meeting at the Christian Academy, a Christian organisation with strong social justice leanings, and promises to introduce Chŏng-nam to a poet there who has expressed interest in meeting her, Chŏng-nam fantasises about what this poet will be like. She imbues her fantasy of him with all the hackneyed, romantic traits of a poet of convention: “I [had] imagined him to be a noble individual with long, curly locks cascading down his shoulders and a brilliant light in his eyes.” Instead, she tells us with palpable disappointment, her poet was an utterly commonplace looking chap in his thirties. Sŏk Chŏng-nam is further dismayed when he proceeds to address her in “low” or “informal” language.

Sŏk Chŏng-nam hesitates to give permission to the poet to publish her diary, but she cannot explain to him the reasons for her vacillation. She explains them to us:

19 See, for example, Chang Nam-su’s discussion of her friend Nam-ok’s decision to go to Iran for work which would be “well paid but hellish”, and her death there in a road accident one month later. Chang Nam-su, pp.56-58.
20 Sŏk Chŏng-nam, p.54.
21 The use of honorific address forms in Korean is a defining marker of status. Thus the poet, who is older than Sŏk Chŏng-nam, is a well educated man and of a higher social status than her, has a wide linguistic choice, he can address her using a variety of honorific forms, or he can drop the honorifics altogether. That he chooses to do the latter shocks Chŏng-nam, who does not have the wide linguistic choice that the poet in his social status enjoys, and must address him with honorifics attached, despite the fact that he shows no such delicacy towards her. It is a suggestive choice, but the poet’s option of address cannot be called incorrect. Rather he might be said to have misjudged their social distance, an assumption that Sŏk Chŏng-nam appears to agree with as she subtly upbraids him in her book. She says of him that “this man I was meeting for the first time addressed me as though he were an old friend who had known me since I was a small child.” Ibid. That the (mis)use of honorific and informal address forms was a significant issue for many working class women can be judged by the frequency with which the issue appears in their writings. For a rare example of equal address forms despite unequal class relations see the section later in this chapter on class romance. In making this argument I am indebted to the research of Gi-Hyun Shin, 1999.
“More than anything else what shamed me was that this diary would reveal how destitute, how plagued by poverty my life was. Of course as I was a factory girl making my own living people would naturally assume that I was poor, just as the poet had. But if all who read my diary were to discover just how degrading my life up until now had been... even thinking about the exposure brought goosebumps to my flesh. There would be no escaping the humiliation.”

In this disclosure Sŏk Chŏng-nam is candid about the personal costs of autobiography, and the convictions that urge her to dare publication. In entrusting her book to a publishing world that, as we have seen, had rarely before done justice to representations of working class women, Sŏk Chŏng-nam was risking a particular kind of exposure. Added to that was the fact that her first piece, Pult'anun Nunmul [Burning Tears], an account of the Tongil dispute, was published while she was still working at Tongil Textiles.

At first, people above her in the factory took pride in the fact that one of their employees was to be a published writer, and a female guard sought out Chŏng-nam and said “I heard that you have a talent for writing, keep it up,” and stroked her hair. But once the piece appeared, the atmosphere quickly changed to one of cool animosity. Sŏk Chŏng-nam was called in to meet the labour manager who told her she had been used by the magazine, who only wanted a shocking story to sell its product; furthermore she had created “vile propaganda” against Tongil. She was warned, but not dismissed, and meantime readers of Wolgan Taehwa [Monthly Dialogue], a small

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22 Sŏk Chŏng-nam, p.55.
23 Ibid, p.56.
left-leaning feminist magazine, were reading one of the first pieces of what would become a revitalised proletarian or ‘labour literature’ (nodong munhak) movement.25

Sŏk Chŏng-nam’s stories and later her autobiography, and the autobiographies of Chang Nam-su and Song Hyo-sun were written during the heyday of the night school or hakwon movement26 and their readership included fellow activists, workers who were not in the union movement, and also the world of middle and upper class well-meaning people whom Chang Nam-su and Sŏk Chŏng-nam felt needed informing.27 For Chang, Song, and Sŏk autobiography is a politicised genre. It stands in contrast with frivolous fiction writing and employs the device of true-story writing as a persuasive strategy. Yet it is worth re-asserting that the attraction these books held for readers was both political and imaginative. It was the desire to separate the two that the authors wrote against.

24 Ibid.
25 Wolgan Taehwa was a left-leaning feminist journal of the 1970s. The editorial board included the leading female lawyer Yi Tae-young and the academic Lee Hyo-chae. Sŏk Chŏng-nam, made her literary debut in this journal in December 1976.
26 Night schools for industrial workers have a very long and well-documented history, going back to the early part of the twentieth century. According to Han’guk Noch’ŏng’s records, night schools began as part of the ‘workers enlightenment movement’ (nodong kaemong undong) in 1907. Han’guk Noch’ŏng, 1979, p.13.
27 Both Chang Nam-su and Sŏk Chŏng-nam in their forewords take pains to address their books to a wide readership, and begin their autobiographies with a detailed introduction to farm and factory life. In doing so they appear to be introducing some readers to the ‘foreign’ life of ‘the poor’, a technique that was discussed in chapter one. However, Chang Nam-su also addresses part of her narrative to other working class women, as in the warning she gives factory girls on the dangers of forming a relationship with a man above their class (see the section later in this chapter on class romance).
These autobiographies and the influence they had on readers tells us much about people’s disenchantment with Seoul’s capitalist society in the 1970s, and who in society would most powerfully express that discontent. The urgent tone of the books and the immediacy and violence of the situations they describe indicate how absorbed both authors and readers were by this new genre. University students had never found themselves described like this before, nor had visiting journalists been able to capture the odour of factory work as these authors described it. Amidst all the rumours and propaganda of the Yusin period\textsuperscript{28} and its tumultuous aftermath, in these books the morality of ‘modernization’ found itself openly judged by the morality of honourable dissent.

\textit{Studying Under Adversity}

In their efforts to continue their education at night while labouring during the day, an activity they dub \textit{kohak} (literally, studying under adversity), these proletarian authors advise their readers how hard won was their learning. Education was one way to distinguish oneself from other young women in the poorer classes in Seoul, and to scratch off the taint of manual labour. Kim Seung-kyung observed how factory women in Masan in the late 1980s “strived to maintain the status distinction”\textsuperscript{29} between factory work and sex.

\textsuperscript{28} The Yusin period began with Park Chung-Hee’s Yusin (translated as ‘revitalising’) constitutional changes that allowed the president to appoint one-third of the National Assembly, and provided him with extensive powers to muzzle any opposition. He also possessed extensive emergency powers, coupled with a very efficient and well funded secret police. See Carter Eckert et al, 1990: pp.359-375.

\textsuperscript{29} Kim Seung-kyung, 1997, p.58.
work. Educating oneself was one means of acquiring distance from the more violent occupations available for young women.

All three authors relate the event of leaving school prematurely as the moment they discovered the limited horizons of the poor. As mentioned earlier, Chang Nam-su was withdrawn from school at the end of primary school and sent to work in the fields. She had scored the highest marks in her grade, but when the school prize at the end of the year goes to the daughter of a wealthy family, Nam-su records it as a valuable lesson on the ways of the world, and her first experience of education as social exclusion:

Sometimes, carrying the mown grass balanced on my head or driving the cows home in rows, I saw my old classmates on the road carrying their satchels. I couldn’t bear to meet those girl students in their white blouses. On the days when I caught sight of them I would be too rankled to eat dinner.

On the way that one’s relationship to education can shape how one experiences the social world, Pierre Bourdieu has written: “A large part of social suffering stems from the poverty of people’s relationship to the educational system, which not only shapes social destinies but also the image they have of their destiny.”

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30 See Song Hyo-sun, 1982, p. 18, for a particularly heartbroken account of leaving school.
31 “When deciding how to rank us the fact of [a student’s] poverty and destitution play an important part,” she says. Chang Nam-su, p.9.
Hagen Koo has suggested that education, or the lack of it, was the most stable and widely recognised marker of status in South Korean society in the 1970s and 1980s. While this judgement may not do justice to the nuances of status appreciation in upper-middle-class and upper-class families in Korea, it does explain the insecurities of working people - self-conscious about their lack of cultural capital in a society where class could be ‘read off’ a person in one swift glance.

In many urban and rural families the education of male children was of paramount importance. The literature of factory girls contain many, many stories of foregoing school to make way for the aspirations of a brother. One factory girl tells Chông Mi-suk:

> When older brother was at high school it was our job to carry the yoke and water buckets that adults lifted. We would carry [the buckets] up a hillside, our hearts thumping with the effort. And when I would see elder brother stretch out his belly and jabber away in English, I really experienced hate. Older brother was made much of as the pillar of our family, and we were expected to be submissive to him.  

While Chang Nam-su “doggedly read books and studied English”, furtively keeping up with the curriculum while at the same time working in the fields, many girls making the journey to Seoul took their aspirations for learning with them to the capital. When in 1973 at the age of fifteen Chang Nam-su

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34 Koo argues that as colonial rule, then land reform and finally civil war undid the inherited wealth and status hierarchies of earlier centuries, and given the widely held mistrust of business leaders, the military elite and politicians, education emerged as the most stable and respected means of social mobility in South Korea. Hagen Koo, 2001, p.130.

35 Quoted in Chông Mi-suk, p.55.

36 Chang Nam-su, p.13.
enters a sweet factory, she is called "Onni" or older sister by most of the employees in her section. Work begins at eight in the morning but there is no official clock off time at Rolex Confectionary Company. Because she is a hakwon student Nam-su can leave at five o'clock, leaving the resentful children to "wrap lollies in bitterness."\(^{37}\)

Generally speaking, there were three varieties of night schools in this period: factory schools set up by companies at the behest of the government; commercial hakwon or schools that were either specialty cram schools for high school students, or schools patronised by people already in the work force who wished to continue or 'complete' their education. The third variety of night schools were those set up by church groups or by radical students or a combination of the two. These schools taught a variety of subjects ranging from classes in the labour law, to lessons on Chinese characters, to lectures on the 'rights' of workers.

**Factory schools**

In response to a shortage of skilled, technical workers in South Korea, the government at the time of the fourth five year plan (1977-81) ordered firms that employed more than 300 workers to set up on-site vocational schools.\(^ {38}\)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, textile factories side-stepped this

\(^{37}\) Ibid, p.22.

\(^{38}\) Alice Amsden, 1989, p.223.
requirement, which they deemed inappropriate for the textile industry’s temporary employees who lost their jobs when they married, and faced few opportunities for promotion. Instead they established in-plant primary schools, and sometimes secondary schools. The result, according to the economist Alice Amsden, was that “paternalism came to operate round the clock. Factory girls slept and ate in company-owned dormitories, spent nine and one-half hours on the job, and devoted evenings to study in company-owned night schools”39

**Hakwon**

Chang Nam-su and her sister Hyöng-suk attended a *hakwon* in Seoul where they could study for their middle school certificate. The *hakwon* offered free tuition and the staff were university students. Chang Nam-su studied with thirty to forty others in a canvas tent, from 5.30pm to 9.30 in the evening, and wore ordinary clothes like any other student at a cram school. Despite the long hours, the windy tent, and the packed classes, Chang Nam-su was delighted to be a ‘student’ again.40

According to historian Chön Sang-suk, unskilled, low paid and unlettered girls were at a premium in the development market of the 1970s. She says: “For women already studying under adversity, obtaining a job commensurate with one’s education [if one had one] was very difficult, while on the other

40 Chang Nam-su, p.17.
hand the opportunities were legion for barely educated and low paid production workers." Longing for education, then, had very little to do with employment aspirations. People didn’t take the middle school graduation exams in order to secure promotion in their work. Why then?

**The Night School Movement**

Beginning in the 1970s university students set up night schools for factory workers "where the basics of ‘reading, writing, and arithmetic’ were intermixed with analysis of capitalism and political thought." Although these night schools were clandestine they slowly grew, and eventually fed into the *hakch’ul* movement that saw students continue their consciousness raising activities inside the factories.

When the Methodist minister Cho Wha Soon first began industrial mission work in Tongil Textile Company in Inch’on in 1966, education programs for workers were not greeted with suspicion by the company but actually welcomed. Indeed the worker priest George Ogle received government and Inchon City Council commendations in the 1960s for his work in labour education. As Cho Wha Soon writes, in the 1960s it was often the company

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43 *Hakch’ul* literally means to leave school, but it was used to describe those students who left their studies and careers to enter factories or rural areas to labour for the disadvantaged. The police term for student-workers was *wijang ch’wiop’ja*, which translates as ‘disguised workers’.
44 *Industrial mission was modelled on the French worker-priest movement of christian socialists who in the 1940s and 1950s laboured in the docks and factory areas and took workers as the subject of their ministry.*
45 George Ogle, p.88.
management that asked the industrial chaplains to set up educational programs for employees:

We cannot imagine such a situation now [1988], but at that time, in the late 1960s, it was possible. That was at the beginning of industrial mission and before the labour issue became a general social issue.46

Cho Wha Soon's first lecture program for 1967-8 had the following themes, chosen by the Tong-il workers and attended by over 200 people (of 1,300 employees) before or after their shift: "meeting the opposite sex (this was the subject of most concern), knitting, cooking, handicrafts, flower arranging, [and] home etiquette."47 In Cho Wha Soon's autobiography Let The Weak Be Strong, the evolution of the night school at Tong-il, from being classes in domesticity to lessons on the labour law, exemplifies the democratic mood of the night school movement and the connections being made between personal and political knowledge. In her autobiography Cho records her own education through the industrial struggles she participated in first at Tongil and later at Bando Textile Company.

Chōng Mi-suk writes that the young women's shared experience within patriarchal families of foregoing the chance to be educated, and thus their thirst for learning, would later become a condition for their participation in the education programs that church groups and students, and later democratic

46 Cho Wha Soon, 1988, p.57.
labour unions would offer. Often the very labour of factory girls was an expression of their distance from the promise of education. Those who were sending money home to make a gentleman of a brother, and get him into college, might be said to have contributed their labour to his erudition.

The night school movement’s attempt at ‘majority democratic education’ was the focus of a complex range of objectives. It continued the theme of self-improvement so attractive to factory workers who looked for an identity outside the shop floor, or who aspired to possess the cultural capital that education seemed to promise. A major attraction of the church and student-run education programs was that they offered a comprehensive analysis of the world, and also clues as to how to change a difficult existence.

Yet the factory workers’ relationship to education had its own hard lessons. Hoping to escape from a menial destiny, factory girls wrote how they lost themselves in books and dreamt of office jobs:

At that time [still in Wonp’ung Mobang] I was going to Hallim Hakwon in Yongdungpo which had several students from Wonp’ung Mobang. I studied abacus calculations diligently and memorised English words, and took the Hakwon’s school bus all the while dreaming of when I would progress to enter a good office. Despite the fact that working and studying was more than I could handle the prospect of only working in the factory was unbearable. Every day I would tell myself only study hard and one day you can leave this life behind, and I believed it utterly.  

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48 Chŏng Mi-suk, p.vii.  
49 Chang Nam-su, p.27.
Chang Nam-su would soon find out that in the female labour market her education in fact guaranteed her nothing but an intolerable workload: “there was no damn need for a worker who attended night school”, she would conclude.⁵⁰ Eventually Chang Nam-su was fired by her boss at Rolex Confectionary for being a student, and therefore unable to fully devote herself to the job. Jacques Ranciere defined a worker as a person to whom several lives are owed.⁵¹ This is nowhere more evident than in the spasmodic careers of worker-students.

I remember when I was in elementary school our family would use electricity sparingly to save every cent. I remember getting up in the night, stealthily so as not to alert anyone, and standing by the 5 watt globe, shielding the light bulb with my book and reading until deep into the night. I never felt any discomfort in my legs. I never felt grief like this. Our teacher’s words ‘learning is priceless’ [hyŏngsŏl chikong] engraved themselves on my mind and I believed that I too would later find success if only I threw myself into my studies. If you work hard there is nothing you cannot do, I believed. How far and long ago those naive words seem to me now.⁵²

The worker’s night schools with their complex aspirations were in many ways the compliment of the hakch’ul movement that saw university students squander their prospects to enter factories as “disguised workers” and labour for revolution from below. While not entirely relinquishing their role as ‘teacher’, university students from the more prosperous classes came to the factory districts to gain an education in the ways of the labouring classes.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.28.
⁵¹ Jacques Ranciere, p.ix.
⁵² Chang Nam-su, p.56-7.
Workers and Students

Chôn T’ae-il was the first young writer from the sweat shops who made literature out of his life for a large readership. After his suicide in 1970 his writings were circulated informally and eventually published in a collection entitled Do Not Waste My Life.53 Chôn T’ae-il’s writings cover a broad spectrum, from reflection on social injustice to poetry to minute accounts of the complexities of poverty. He wrote candidly of the juvenile labour market, and in one harrowing scene describes the events leading up to his temporary abandonment of his younger sister one night in Sōdaemun.54 For the thousands of people who would read his autobiography, here was someone who had experienced all the contradictions of a rapidly developing economy and society in their own life span. Even in death Chôn T’ae-il was caught in contradictions, he who had spent so much of his life campaigning against the physical suffering of young workers, would take his own life brutally.

Chôn T’ae-il’s writings, his struggles for the enforcement of the labour law, and the manner of his death would have an enormous impact on the youth who followed him. For Chôn T’ae-il put into writing his dreams of a different society, his revolutionary longings for equality and friendship between students and workers. It was this dream that captured the imagination of his generation and the generation that followed him, opening up the political imaginations of young people in Seoul and all over South Korea who read

smuggled versions of his texts. In being able to articulate not only what he was against, but what he was for, Chôn T'ae-il spoke to the collective desires of young people in South Korea. His vision that crossed classes, that found a broad and eclectic readership up and down the country, was one of the inspirations of the hakch’ul movement that in the 1980s brought university students into the factories and amongst the workers they had read about.

Yet that Chôn T’ae-il, who himself wrote poetry and drafts of novels and became proficient in the details of the labour law, should need to appeal to students is worth examining. To Chôn T’ae-il and those like him who were without a ‘good education’, students represented what learning and literature was. We need only look at the role that education and literature played in the lives of the working class people we have been discussing to gauge its symbolic significance. Chang Nam-su and her night school friend Songja gave up sleep night after night to secure their middle school certificate. And at the age of nineteen Chang Nam-su is able to discuss novels and sociology with a university student she meets, even though she left the school system when she was twelve. The sacrifices people made to acquire an education that was not of use in the employment market they were engaged in bears out its symbolic value.

But the significance of education to working class people, and of the students who represented it, was not merely symbolic. Education offered both cultural capital, and the tools to critique society systematically. To those, like Chôn
T'ae-il, who perceived the need for a comprehensive response to the crisis that was overwhelming him and so many others employed in the brutal 'economic miracle', this desire for a student friend would carry particular poignancy. He perhaps foresaw how powerful students and workers might be if they combined. And so it would be, by the late 1980s the student movement and its ally the labour movement emerged as the two most powerful groups to force change in their society. The student movement, with support from the populace, forced the resignation of President Chun Doo Hwan. Over three weeks in June 1987, the country came to a standstill as students, opposition politicians, Christian groups, workers, and segments of the middle class took to the streets to demand democratic change. The demonstrations were followed by a whole series of wildcat strikes affecting every major industry in Korea, demanding free trade unions, better working conditions, higher wages, and supporting the call for democratic reform. Clearly, it was a powerful combination.

In her analysis of China’s May Fourth generation of writers Rey Chow has argued that access to education was "the true marker of 'class' and thus the true site of class struggle in Chinese society." In Korea’s Sino-Confucian tradition, education, and the means to acquire it, were similarly valued both socially and symbolically. That working-class people like Chôn T’ae-il and Chang Nam-su should create such a stir when they tried their hand at 'literature' exposes the classed nature of 'aesthetic' and 'intellectual' work.
Much has been written on the ‘sacrifice’ of the *hakch’ul* or student-workers, those university students who gave up their advantages – a hard-won university place and a promising career – to become a ‘disguised worker’ and devote themselves to the labour movement.\(^{56}\) Student-workers were breaking the law by taking on factory jobs, as the South Korean Labour Law stipulated that it was illegal for university students or graduates to work in factories. One account published in 1991 estimates that as many as 3,000 students laboured in factories by the mid 1980s, and the practice continued into the early 1990s.\(^{57}\)

The *hakch’ul* movement was regularly cast in terms of the ‘sacrifice’ of students. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out of the intellectual leaders of the labour movement in colonial Bengal, “an appeal to the idea of sacrifice was really an appeal to the power that flowed from inequality.”\(^{58}\) To build a democratic movement to transform the old social practices of privilege and discrimination, while at the same time invoking those same privileges, was a contradiction in terms. Cho Wha Soon and others involved in the labour movement would acknowledge that this contradiction limited the *hakch’ul*.\(^{59}\)

55 Rey Chow, 1991, p.112.
57 George Ogle, 1991, p.99. George Ogle also cites a police record from 1985-86 that reports that 671 student-workers were arrested in that year.
If we look at the worker-student alliance [no-hak yondae] from the perspective of workers, we see that it contained many continuities with the old servant – literati relationship it was trying to disrupt. For it was workers who accepted students into working class life and taught them about the factory world and the slum districts. The nohak yondae was a revelation for students, but it appears to have made much less of an impression on workers. They were not the ones trying on a different life, slipping into university as a “disguised intellectual”. In many ways it reinforced how impassable the two classes were.

Class Transience

Class mobility did work the other way, but rarely in a style prescribed by the labour or student movements. One notable example is the ‘fake female university student’ or kajja yódaehaksaeng who gained notoreity in the 1980s as a product of South Korea’s dizzying social change and the anonymity of urban Seoul, where people could conceal their origins and take on new guises if they possessed the requisite ruthlessness and nerve.60

In Yun Jông-mo’s Koppi [The Halter], a best selling novel of 1988, a fake female university student lives on the border between classes, trying in some company to pass herself off as a flower of Korean youth, a student at one of

59 For a discussion on this see Cho Wha Soon, chapter 20.
the women’s universities. In her story her transformation into naïve, innocuous middle-class girl is contingent on unlearning the knowledge she has picked up in the ‘romance economy’ of the ‘entertainment districts’. Class transience here becomes a story not of awakening, but of concealment.

At a time when overseas travel was out of reach for all but the very elite, and information about their own society was censored and restricted, it should not surprise us that people took to travelling between classes. This contact between young people, especially those who went out voluntarily to meet each other, was revelatory. Indeed it is in factory girls’ encounters with people of other classes, particularly the university students who “have gone out to meet them and perhaps wish to expropriate their role” that some of the most revealing portraits of Seoul’s class divided streets can be found. This is particularly the case when it comes to class romance.

Perhaps the most telling examples of the fragile relationship between young people working in factories and people studying at universities is in their love affairs. Here young female workers reveal how thin-skinned they are about all the things that define them in the abstract – status, employment, poverty and lack of education. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s young, unmarried, curious youth had flooded into the capital looking for work. In

61 Another example is the ‘fake student’ incident at Seoul National University in 1984 when students discovered what they alleged was a police agent posing as a student. For more on this see Namhee Lee, p.34, n.106.
1983, 72 percent of women in the manufacturing sector were aged between 18 and 24. Many of them had come alone to Seoul, and sent wages home to their families in the provinces.

*Class Romance*

It is in the tales of class romance that factory girls and university students would develop their acquaintance and discover the limits of their social world. These episodes of (usually thwarted) romance between lovers from different classes show how class impinges on the most private and intimate of experiences.

In Chapter Two we saw how the seduction tales of the colonial era reproduced the turmoil and crisis of a rapid industrialisation carried out by a coercive state. Dividing the literature on factory girls into seduction (colonial period) and romance (1970s and 80s) speaks volumes about the changing agency of working-class women and the freedoms and relationships they desired. If factory girls in proletarian literature from the colonial period were depicted as sexual victims of industrialisation, labouring in factories far from home where they were assaulted and seduced by factory overseers and recruiters; the factory books of the 1970s and 80s, by contrast, carry a degree of autonomy and self and class consciousness in their narrative. They emphasise the political structures that impinge on relations between people, and use class romance to explicitly critique society.

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63 Seungsook Moon, 1994, p.271.
At first glance, factory work and romance may seem all but incompatible. Working long days and sometimes deep into the night, and at the mercy of a volatile shift system, factory girls had little dependable leisure time. In these conditions women's desire to enjoy romance seems all but stifled by ordinary labour. Romance would survive in these circumstances. But episodes of class romance in labour literature survived as realism, not melodrama, because the characters are never able to shed the social world that keeps them divided. The lovers visit palaces together and are trailed by worried friends; a factory girl loses her heart to a student and winds up in prison. It is their realism that makes explicit the "contradictions of the social world, which are experienced in the form of personal dramas."64

But before going on to explore the romances of labour literature in the 1970s and 1980s, I want to mention the form that romance takes in these books. Any discussion of working class women and romance inevitably comes up against the subject of women and poverty. The sexual politics of poverty were central to the women's experience of romance, and explains some of their fears and sense of vulnerability.

These episodes of romance in working class literature are pervaded by a sense of the dangers of romance for factory girls, shadowed by the 'romance economy' of the streets. The proximity of red light districts, the financial and
glamorous appeal of employment there, and the many attractive guises of the pimp added up to make falling in love a potentially perilous business. Gorge Ogle describes the dangers neatly: "The young woman from the countryside also had to guard the treasury of her meagre wages from the swarm of young men who cruised around the factory area for the purpose of detaching the women from their paychecks."

Working class women, and all women close to poverty, were haunted by the figure of the prostitute and the fallen woman. Furthermore, sexual violence and the threat of rape, by police or by fellow workers, was used to control women who might protest their exploited condition. As we saw in the previous chapter, politics was dangerous to women’s safety and virtue.

‘The Story of Unhüi’, a cautionary tale of class romance from Chang Nam-su’s *The Lost Workplace* exemplifies the hazards of falling in love outside of one’s class.

Unhüi is a country girl living and working in Seoul. She is from Cholla Province in the south west of Korea and works at a factory that makes dolls clothes. On a rare day off Unhüi goes with friends to visit the palaces of Seoul

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65 Ogle, p.84.
66 On this Jeong-lij Nam writes: "The use of sexual violence is more effective in controlling women’s protests and resistance than men’s because Korean culture promotes women’s virginity and sexual inexperience while permitting men’s sexual promiscuity. Consequently, protesting Korean women had to face an additional form of violence by the police that men did not experience – sexual violence and rape." Jeong-lij Nam, 2000, p.111, n.15.
she has always dreamed of seeing, and at the museum at Kyongbok Palace she meets the affable, attractive university student Sôngho. They strike up a friendship that quickly becomes serious and despite the warnings of friends Unhủi devotes herself to Sôngho – tidying his lodgings and even lending him money for his school fees and expenses. One evening after her shift Unhủi is waylaid by Sôngho who begs her for a favour – can she lend him the 20,000 won he needs urgently for a purpose he asks to remain secret. Unhủi hesitates, and says yes and that night they spend the night together in a hotel and sexually consummate their relationship.

The next morning Unhủi rises early and goes to the lodgings of her friend Mihwa, who has saved 30,000 won to send to her parents to pay off the family’s debts. But Mihwa is not home and the landlady lets Unhủi inside to wait. In her great haste Unhủi yields to temptation and takes the money, thinking to explain all to Mihwa later.

Unhủi goes straight to Sôngho’s lodgings but this time the spell between them is broken. There is a new coldness between them and after giving Sôngho the money Unhủi is leaving when she sees another woman – well-dressed and beautifully made up – walk up Sôngho’s lane. This, it seems, is Sôngho’s real girlfriend – a woman of his own class. Sôngho cannot hide his discomfiture and Unhủi, overcome with distress, dashes away and reaches home only to find a plain clothes policeman waiting for her. Unhủi is in prison when Chang Nam-su visits her and hears her story.
Unhūi's love story of infatuation, theft and incarceration displays the principle that someone must pay the price for the privilege exercised by a higher class to loaf through an industrial revolution. Factory women like Unhūi could find themselves bankrupted by this romance economy that paid them for their labour while charging them exorbitantly for their credulity, boredom and loneliness, and consequent craving for leisure and romance.

Strictly speaking Unhūi is not in the employ of Sŏngho, and hands money over to him because he asks for it and not because she has earned it for him. But their economic and erotic transaction that exposes her while it enriches him is close enough to the conventional relationship of prostitute and pimp to serve as a warning to all of Chang Nam-su's working class female readers.

It is in a nuanced account of her own class romance that Chang Nam-su will explore the possibilities of an equal relationship. The feminist historian Chŏng Hyŏn-baek was the first to point out what an intricate picture we can form of South Korean society in the 1970s by following the course of the romance between Chang Nam-su and the university student Hyun-u, "a relationship formed through shared interests and wide reading." A love affair culminating in marriage into a higher class was one of the few ways

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67 I borrow this turn of phrase from Michael Sprinker who wrote: Someone must ultimately pay the price for the privilege exercised by the ruling classes not to engage in productive labour”. From Michael Sprinker, 1998, p.185.
68 Chŏng Hyŏn-bak, 1985, pp. 126.
that factory girls could escape the dormitories or tiny slum-lodgings, and the private degradations of poverty.

The year is 1977 and the author, Chang Nam-su, was nineteen, and had just started work at the prestigious Wonp'ung Mobang textile factory in Seoul. Chang Nam-su had gone home to south Kyongsang province in the south eastern part of Korea to renew her identity papers. She has just farewelled her grandmother on the station platform and boarded the local train for a slow ride back to Seoul, when she is drawn into a conversation:

The young man in the next seat addressed me.
“Miss, where are you going?”
“I go as far as Yŏngdŏng'o, and where are you going?”
“That’s lucky, I’m going to Yongsan. Shall we talk a little?”
I smiled as I nodded my head. He was a second year student at K University and his name was Hyŏn-u. I told him I was working but I also wanted to study more and for the moment was studying [part-time] at a night school.

The night school Chang Nam-su was attending at this time, Hallim Hakwon, was not part of the political ‘night school movement’, but an ordinary evening class where factory workers could study for their middle school certificate. Yet this exchange illustrates how education was a flash point for factory girls who had left school unwillingly to earn money or make way for a sibling. To labour by day and study by night as Chang Nam-su was doing at this time was to cram two lives into one and put an almost intolerable strain on...
upon one's body. While she never reveals how hard-won is her learning, the flow of knowledge between ‘worker’ and ‘intellectual’ is shown as very much two-way in this exchange:

“Let’s be friends, and lower our language”

Even though I assented to this I could change my language only after he pointed out to me again and again [that I was using high form]. As we talked I felt that our ideas were similar and I chattered away without resting. We discussed Tolstoy’s ‘Resurrection’ and ‘Demian’ by Herman Hesse.

The novels discussed by Nam-su and Hyŏn-u are revealing. *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy is the story of the spiritual redemption of the dissolute Prince Nekhlyudov who forgoes his early promise when he seduces and then abandons his family’s treasured servant, Katusha. Numerous Japanese translations of the novel appeared in Korea in the colonial period. As far as I can ascertain, it was first translated into Korean in 1958. Besides being a tale of spiritual atonement, *Resurrection* is also a class love story. *Demian* also relates a spiritual journey, where the impressionable author, a schoolboy, meets the enlightened and charismatic Demian at school and falls under the influence of his doctrine – that organised religion and public morality is cant. We can appreciate that Hyŏn-u is not shamming but has really read both books as he knows not to offer himself as the rake Prince Nekhlyudov but rather proposes to play-act the magnetic, svengali-like Demian:

70 Yongdungp'o is an industrial suburb of Seoul that would become a centre for labour protest in the 1980s.
71 Chang Nam-su, p. 35.
72 Ibid.
“Nam-su, was Demian fantastic?”
“Yeah, just great.”
“Really? Then, can’t I be Demian for you?”
“Psh...Hyŏn-u, no way.”
“Why? Why ‘no way’?”
I was bursting with laughter.
He was laughing too. I showed him ‘Monthly Dialogue’, and told him to read the article in it called ‘Human Market’.
“What’s it about? Nam-su you tell me.”
So I went into a full explanation for him. Before we knew it the train had passed Anyang.
“Look, that looks like a business; why does it have its lights on at night?”
“Because they’re working,” I retorted brusquely.
“What! They’re working at night? They really keep working at night too?”
I was struck dumb. What was I thinking of? How on earth can this person become a friend? This ‘friend’ asking if people work into the night? A great gust of loneliness squeezed my heart and made me miserable. Ah, how can this person be so content knowing so little about the world? Are all university students like this?
He saw my expression, “I really didn’t know. That people keep working into the night, I mean. It must be because I have passed life so ignorantly. But poverty also has its happiness, doesn’t it? I’m convinced that the poor are happier than the rich.”
“Ah, so Hyŏn-u took the bumpkin train so he could taste a little of that ‘poverty’? What a treat! So you’re learning a little about real poverty, are you?”
At my sharp retort he bowed his head.
He didn’t go to Yongsan but got off with me at Yŏngdŭng’o.
“We can’t part like this. Shall we have something to eat?”
“No thanks, I’m off.”
“Well then give me your address. I’ll send you a letter.”
“No. See you Hyŏn-u.”
As I turned away he put out his arms like a child and blocked my way, he wouldn’t let me pass.
“OK then Hyŏn-u, you write down your address for me. I’ll send you a letter. That’s alright isn’t it?”
He had no choice but to take out some paper and write down his address.
“Aiyu, how can your handwriting be this bad?”
But he didn’t answer me and just kept writing.
“I shall write,” I promised myself.
I waved to him from the bus but he just stood there looking after me. In that empty dawn bus I said to myself, “All right, let’s write. And I’ll tell you a little more about the world,” and soon after that I did write. His reply came immediately...

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73 “Demian’ the character appears in several different guises in the novel, beginning with the schoolboy Demian, but also appearing as a portrait painting, as Frau Eva, and as the author himself; and his image becomes symbolic of spiritual or self-awakening.

74 Wolgan Taehwa or Monthly Dialogue is the magazine where Sŏk Chŏng-nam made her literary debut, see above.
Chang Nam-su and her new friend Hyŏn-u deepen their acquaintance through correspondence, and make a plan to meet:

I picked a day and a place that suited me and sent him the letter. On the day of our meeting I arrived at the rendezvous place exactly on time, but he didn't come. I waited for ages and only when my pride was thoroughly bruised did I get on a bus, alighting at the terminal, Suyuri. The April Uprising memorial is nearby. He had talked about the April Uprising... Its white pillars drew my eye. I walked through the graveyard then sat on the lawn and passed several hours just thinking. He had stood me up. I could not bear that on our very first date he had stood me up.76

The April Uprising memorial in northern Seoul that Chang Nam-su wanders into is the memorial to students who died in the April Revolution of 1960. Fired on by troops ordered by President Syngman Rhee as they led demonstrations in Seoul to protest election rigging, political corruption and police violence, the demonstrators soon gained control of the streets and within days brought down the government. The April Uprising memorial has been an important symbol for students of their painful and exemplary past in leading the attack against corrupt regimes. However this memorial holds little consolation for Chang Nam-su, whose own political acuteness seems so much greater than the student Hyŏn-u's.

I had been dreaming of him as a possible boyfriend. What a fool I was. He is a university student. He’s not someone who has the time to sit and listen to a kongsuni77 like me musing about the world... Two days later a letter arrived. “I am truly sorry for not keeping our appointment on Saturday. Conscript duties prevented me. I had no opportunity even to contact you…”

75 Chang Nam-su, pp.35-36.
76 Ibid, p.37.
77 Here Chang Nam-su uses the derogatory term kongsuni to refer to herself as something shabby and insignificant.
I knew as soon as I read those words that he couldn’t have helped what happened. His voice asking me “Do people work at night?” swirled around in my head. I am a worker in a textile factory and he is a university student...How much I had learned in the space of a few days.

If he had not been a university student I cannot say if my pride would have been so wounded, or if I would have understood his missing our appointment, or if I would be meeting him still. The Saturday evening he had asked me to telephone I spent deep in thought, then suddenly I had the urge to see my night school friend Song-ja...

It is during her walk around the fruit gardens at Oryu-dong with Songja the next morning, that Nam-su reveals the depth of her resentment. Nam-su and Song-ja stumble across an enclosure of dogs that will be used to make soup. Song-ja explains to Nam-su that the dogs have been drugged so that their bark does not carry and disturb the neighbourhood, and Nam-su stands and listens, transfixed by the dogs’ hoarse voices and bulging eyes. This is her moment to reflect, which she does ruthlessly:

As I got closer I saw that the dogs were all barking in unison but no sound came from them. It is a dog’s instinct to bark and yet here they had been muffled while they strained to bark in the most agonising way… I too felt my throat constrict and something seemed to grip my chest.

Chang Nam-su recognises herself in the trapped, gasping dogs. She describes the feeling of not only being trapped by class - by poverty, by lack of education, by one’s awkward unfamiliarity with leisure or fun - but above all knowing better than anybody exactly how trapped you are. It is such a voice that Raymond Williams describes when he writes of:

\[78\] Ibid, p.37.
\[79\] Ibid, p.38.
[T]hat deep ambiguity of a subordinated people, a subordinated class, whose visions are larger not only than those of the alien system by which they are dominated but larger also than is tolerable, when you are that far down and still seeing that far up.\textsuperscript{80}

Chang Nam-su is propelled to reflect on the social contradictions that have thwarted her desires:

The love stories that have come down to us from olden times were of a king and a country maiden, a princess and a woodcutter. But in this society it is university student and university student, the boss’s daughter and the son of an elite government bureaucrat, the worker with other workers, and so it all seems to fit into a tidy cliché. It is not people meeting each other with the deep sense of [sharing something as] human beings, but name goes with name, prestige goes with prestige, and so it goes on...When we who work in factories fall in love, we’re called sluts. If a university student gets into a scrape it’s indulged as something charming, but if a worker does something wrong everyone’s disgusted.\textsuperscript{81}

Chŏng Hyŏn-baek interprets Chang Nam-su’s relationship with Hyŏn-u as an opportunity to escape her working life and rise a class through love and marriage:

As they become closer we can sense [Chang Nam-su’s] intellectual curiosity, and her collapse into deep internal conflict. She ends up deciding that he cannot suit her on the understanding that they are both people of their class. In so doing she throws away this opportunity given to her [to ascend a class] and reveals her resentment.\textsuperscript{82}

The implication is that Chang Nam-su is refusing the transformation from Factory Girl to Lady. She will not cross classes, and by this stage the reader can recognise the principle she is struggling for – the utopian vision of a

\textsuperscript{80} Raymond Williams, 1983, p.228.
\textsuperscript{81} Chang Nam-su, p.100.
\textsuperscript{82} Chŏng Hyŏn-baek, p.126.
different society - where people can meet and fall in love, not as ‘factory girl’ and ‘university student’, but free of the constraints of a class society. In fact, for Chang Nam-su love exposes more directly than any possible argument why love cannot solve all, why politics and society and money must intrude.

For Chang Nam-su the impossibility of love between classes does not remain an individual regret. While on the one hand she is throwing her hands up in disgust at the impossibility of a class romance, in the keenness of her resentment she shows how much she wishes it were possible. And if, as Frederic Jameson suggests, we read narrative as ideology, the class romances of proletarian literature become stories of awakening.83 Personal disappointment is transformed into an awareness of the structural limitations of their world, and sexual choices. There is relief in this discovery also.

On the importance of locating structural causes for what might seem to be one’s personal failures, or cases of isolated suffering, Pierre Bourdieu has written:

Producing awareness of these mechanisms that make life painful, even unlivable, does not neutralise them; bringing contradictions to light does not resolve them. But, as sceptical as one may be about the social efficacy of the sociological message, one has to acknowledge the effect it can have in allowing those who suffer to find out that their suffering can be imputed to social causes and thus to feel exonerated; and in making generally known

83 On the social analysis of genre Jameson wrote: “So generic affiliations, and the systematic deviation from them, provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of an individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a prototypical response to a historical dilemma.” Frederic Jameson, 1975, p. 157.
the social origin, collectively hidden, of unhappiness in all its forms, including the most intimate, the most secret.84

*Factory Girl Virtue*

Chang Nam-su’s love tales tell us not only about the social world of factory girls, but about their morality also. The labour of factory girls that degraded them in the eyes of a patriarchal and class conscious society also brought them into social proximity with women who laboured in brothels. Given the fact that many, many young women who began their working life in the factory districts ended up selling their bodies in the booming informal economy of the 1970s and 1980s, the reticence of factory girls on the subject of prostitution is striking. Chang Nam-su’s *The Lost Workplace* is a book determinedly about factory girl virtue.

This silence about prostitution is another aspect of the contradictions that dogged working women. Factory girls who struggled to convince the public that they were respectable could not afford to compare themselves to prostitutes. As Elaine Kim has noted, the “traditional Korean view that women’s labour outside the home degrades the family”85 meant that when women from the poorer classes entered employment society in the new social space of the factory they were conspicuous as an affront to femininity. The old adage of “good wife, wise mother” was an unreachable, and indeed

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85 Elaine Kim, p.112.
nonsensical goal for women who supported themselves and sometimes family members too by participating in employment society.

Nevertheless, by defining womanhood in attributes that were out of reach of the poorer classes of women, working women came to be seen as tainted by an unfeminine need for money.

At a time when many factory girls had no separate domestic life, no private space, no physical separation between work and home, the equation of female virtue with domestic skills shows how working class women were erased in the language of femininity. Working class women paid a high cost for their exclusion from respectability. They were open to harassment on the street as well as in the workplace. Because one’s reputation was such an important commodity in the marriage market for working-class women, the construction of a factory girl virtue was cast as both an individual and a collective endeavour.

The received image of working class women as tainted by economic need affected factory women acutely. Virtue was as elusive as the quality of femininity, which in industrialising Korea was a class attribute. In South Korea working class women came up against an idea of femininity that was unattainable for factory women. Chang Nam-su explains:

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86 Patricia Johnson makes this point about femininity in nineteenth century English social life when she writes: “Femininity, grace and beauty are redefined as class distinctions and class property here – only a fine lady can possess them.” Patricia Johnson, 2001, p.34.
People say that women’s voices should not go over the wall; women should be modest, talk in a cultured manner, and behave gently... Then what are we? If we measure ourselves in those terms, we are nothing. We have to be loud in order to communicate on the shop floor; we have to wear uniforms and rush between the machines; naturally our movements are coarse. If the only price we get paid for our endless working for our country’s industrial development and economic growth is the contemptuous name of “kongsuni,” and the deprivation of our “femininity,” then, what are we? For whom are we working, and for what are we living?

Here we see how Chang Nam-su “lived the contradictions between the feminine role her society demands of her and the economic realities of working class women’s lives.”

Conclusion

Throughout this section we have seen how working class women “lived the contradictions” that positioned them as economically central yet socially and culturally subordinate in South Korea’s industrialising society in the 1970s and early 1980s. If the larger culture saw them as neither real workers, nor fully female, it was doubly important for the factory girls to assert both these features in their autobiographies. The genre of autobiography was a way of spurning the domestic ideology of womanhood and asserting their work both as factory girls and as writers. Chang Nam-su espoused a labour feminism that placed factory girls at the centre of urban life. She judged the world around her and its disappointments by a criteria of her own making. Thus her experience of retrenchment became “my career in sackings”, and her class romance became a critique of her society where it was possible for two

88 Patricia Johnson, p.36.
people to have so much in common, “with the deep sense of sharing something as human beings” and yet be irreconcilable.

It is no coincidence that the 1970s and 1980s should have produced some of our most extensive sources on the lives of female textile workers. These were the years when women workers fought for and gained the attention of their society through a militant union movement. For Chang Nam-su and other factory women fighting low wages was also fighting the repression of desire. The historian Joan Scott has said in a different context that “the corrective to women's low wages was … not only financial support from men but the decorum associated with the repression of desire - the desire to live beyond one's means and the desire for sexual indulgence.”89 To reject low wages and degrading conditions and all the determinism of poverty was to believe in the possibility of those other class relationships, glimpsed one night on a slow train to Seoul.

89 Joan Scott, 1988, p.146.
Conclusion

One Book

I am poor
And I am lonely
But I have one thing I treasure above all else
I have a book.

Whenever I am sad whenever I am happy
I draw my book from my warm chest
And unbeknownst to anyone
Gaze upon its pages
All day.

Whenever I look, look upon it my heart
Yearns for its endless everlasting lands
Even though it is frayed
The more threadbare it is
The greater, the sweeter it is to me.

I am poor and alone
But I have something I prize above all else
I have this book
Oh! I have happiness.

Kang Kyŏng-ae, Kŭmsŏng May 1924, volume 3.

In this intimate evocation of poverty and literature, the idea that literature and creativity are something worth fighting for is delicately rendered. This thesis has explained how the literature in Korea by and about factory girls is related to social struggles over literacy, knowledge, wages and sexuality. Throughout this thesis we have seen how the concerns of the first modern factory girls over low wages, dangerous conditions, sexual harassment and exposure to a ruthless labour market, echoed in the writings of working class women in 1970s and 80s South Korea.
Summary

This thesis has examined what the labour and literature of Korean working-class women, and the fictions created about them, can tell us about the social world of rapid industrialisation. In redeeming the literature of factory girls from obscurity we are re-acquainted with the violence of the development experience, with the extraordinary meeting of politics and literature in the 1920s and 30s and in the 1970s and 80s, and with the authors and characters themselves.

Beginning with the first mention of “factory girls” (yokong) in newspapers in 1919, this dissertation has examined the way that journalists in colonial Korea’s early modern newspapers wrote about working-class women as embodying the poverty and desperation of the times, a sign of the crisis in the old rural economy. Factory girls themselves wrote in to newspapers and magazines in these years, but how little they wrote, how small their influence on the issues that affected them reveals the poverty of their relations with social power. In the first part of this project I examined both their voice and their silence, and found that the ambivalent voice of the first working class women captured the industrial moment of the 1920s and 1930s when factory girls laboured at the intersection of feudalism and modernity and spoke in the language of both to analyse their predicament.
In the 1920s, when proletarian literature was becoming one of Korea’s leading literary formations, women working in textile and rubber factories were mounting campaigns to alleviate some of the worst abuses of colonial industrialisation. Factory girls formed unions, called strikes, and wrote in to newspapers and magazines to draw public attention to conditions in the new industries. Two of the most prominent strike demands by blue collar women in the 1920s and early 1930s were for higher wages and to end the sexual violence in the factories. Their concerns were taken up by authors of proletarian literature who wrote sexual violence in the factories as the centre of the experience of their working-class heroines.

Turning to works from the proletarian literature avant-garde of the 1920s and 30s, Chapter Two examined the representation of working class women in the proletarian literature movement (1925-35), where factory girls were depicted as sexual victims of a bourgeoning capitalist society, seduced by factory overseers and recruiters. I showed how these tales of seduction reproduced in fictional form the turmoil and crisis of a rapid industrialisation carried out by a coercive, imperialist state.

As colonial Korea shifted to a war footing and the labour movement went underground, factory girls for a period disappeared from literature. In the second half of this thesis I traced the re-emergence of working-class women as writers and activists in the 1970s and 1980s.
In contrast to the earlier proletarian heroines, in the factory autobiographies of the 1970s and 1980s women wrote of their own experience in metropolitan Seoul and the labour movement, and made working women the foremost subject of the social world of rapid industrialisation. Chapter Three demonstrated how factory girls in the 1970s constructed a labour movement and a literature with themselves as subject, an act that combined literary and political representation in a radical challenge to literature and to society. In Chapter Four I examined this literature for its accounts of the intimate effect of the class divide, as the authors use stories of their hard-won cultural literacy, and tales of class romance, to critique their society.

By connecting two distinct periods in Korean history – the 1920s and 30s and the 1970s and 80s – I have shown the changing portrayal of factory girls in literature, and charted the rise of working-class women authors. It is no coincidence that the 1920s and 30s and the 1970s and 80s should have produced our richest sources on the lives of female factory workers in Korea. These were the years when working class women gained the attention of their society through a militant union movement, and created a space for themselves in literature. This meeting of culture and politics in the works of ‘labour literature’ has given us unique accounts of the harrowing journey of industrialisation in Korea, and the lives and aspirations of the women caught up in it.
This thesis is also an important comparative case study in the history of the late industrialisers. It has argued that the break-neck speed of economic development and social change in the late industrialising economies has not allowed for a period of retrospection to count some of the terrible costs of the rapid industrialisation experience. It calls for a re-reading of the novels of the early proletarian literature experiment, and the factory girl autobiographies of the 1970s and 80s, as accounts of an intense historical experience that make up Korea’s distinct version of modernity.

Re-reading

The final argument of this thesis is for an historical evaluation of proletarian and labour literature that recognises what we are recovering in returning to these lost voices. What we can see in a history of proletarian/labour literature is the life and times of a counter-culture as it passes through a tumultuous industrial revolution into an emerging bourgeois democracy.

Two works from the proletarian/labour literature project have survived to become ‘classics’ for contemporary South Korean readers. One is from Chôn T’ae-il, whose diary is broadcast over the radio every Labour Day and whose own life and writings have entered history as a tragic tale. The other is the novel The Human Predicament, discussed in chapter two, which has been taught in girl’s high schools in South Korea since the late 1970s.¹
Proletarian literature may be evaluated as one narrative of the rapid industrialisation experience, that reflects the mutinous times and circumstances in which it was written. It is a voice that no longer enthralls. But rather than assigning a purely nostalgic value to proletarian literature, in this thesis I have been concerned with recording its illuminations on the life and work of those caught up in Korea’s industrial revolution. For it is through the literature of factory girls that we can return their individuality to them, and follow their gaze to examine the social world they inhabited and attempted through politics and writing to change.

In many ways re-reading these books is a painful reminder of the past. Their scope is confined to slum districts, railway stations and factories, and within their stories crises are “experienced, internalised, not observed.” In the process of re-reading it is possible to reflect on the distance between our times and circumstances, and that of the authors and their protagonists. They remind us how the freedom and possibilities of the present era in South Korea have been built upon the violent struggles and sacrifices for democratic rule of the 1980s and earlier, in a now hegemonic capitalist culture whose very ubiquity aids in the forgetting of how great and undemocratic were the sacrifices. As Marshall Berman noted of the European early modernist writers:

1 It is also a ‘classic’ in North Korea and has been translated into Russian.
[W]e can learn a great deal from the first modernists, not so much about their age as about our own. We have lost our grip on the contradictions that they had to grasp with all their strength, at every moment in their everyday lives, in order to live at all.\(^3\)

When reading the literature of proletarian women, we should remember that for these plebeian authors writing literature did not constitute the sum of their emancipatory activity, and nor should reading it make up them sum of their readers'. They made explicit the connections between the conditions of literary production, the emancipatory role literature can play both personally and socially, the joys of writing, and the haggard schedule a working woman must obey if she wants to publish anything. They remind us how ill-equipped they are to join the canon, membership of which is conditional of one's prose being swept clean of the writer's sweat and other evidence of exertion.

Rather than arguing they be awarded a place in the Korean literary canon as minority voices or anything else, I have attempted to show how powerfully they stand as they are, at the intersection of politics and literature. Ultimately these factory girls were writing literature not only to express their subjectivity, or to critique their social world, but to show how that world might be transformed.

\(^3\) Marshall Berman, 1983, p.36.
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