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‘Hands Up’: Female Call Centre Workers’ Labour, Protest  
and Health in the Seoul Digital Industrial Complex, Korea



Kwanwook Kim

Faculty of Social Sciences and Health

Department of Anthropology

Durham University

2017

## Abstract

### ‘Hands Up’: Female Call Centre Workers’ Labour, Protest and Health in the Seoul Digital Industrial Complex, Korea

Kwanwook Kim

This paper is based on research into the lived experience of female call centre workers in South Korea. A call centre has become a representative field-site to investigate the suffering of female workers in Korea, having been likened to the ‘sweatshop of the 20th century’ because of its panopticon-like supervision, regimentation of time, repetitive work. In reality, the current lives of female call handlers in Seoul Digital Industrial Complex seems not to improve compared to the past lives of the factory girls of the textile industry in the 1970s and 80s at the same industrial area, called Guro Industrial Complex. It can be inferred particularly from the perspectives of ‘chemical employeeship’ (i.e. workers depending on chemicals including caffeine and cigarette to work longer and harder for securing one’s job) and ‘cultural gravity’ (i.e. workers following the cultural force operating to demand their body be docile and industrious)

In the context of Korean call centre industry, I have sought the worker’s reality of labour, protest and health through focusing on three different types of ‘hands up.’ The first ‘hands up’ describes that call handlers have to put one’s hands up to go to the toilet, which is humiliating to them and represents the unfair working condition. Secondly, the use of ‘hands up’ is a gesture of defiance of the first call centre labour union in Korea. I explored how hard it was physically and mentally to establish the collective resistance, but also observed the call handlers’ shrunken bodies or daunted mind could stretch out through the opportunity created by the labour union. Lastly, I found female call handlers’ ‘hands up’ gesture as a self-healing exercise, called ‘mompyeonggi undong’ meaning ‘stretching body exercise.’ This exercise helped the participants improve their health physically and mentally as well as elevating self-esteem.

‘Hands Up’: Female Call Centre Workers’ Labour, Protest  
and Health in the Seoul Digital Industrial Complex, Korea

Kwanwook Kim

This Thesis is submitted as a partial requirement for the Degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy, Department of Anthropology, Durham University 2017

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## Declaration

The contents of this thesis are produced solely for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy at Durham University and consist of the author's original individual contribution with appropriate recognition of any references being indicated throughout.

## Statement of Copyright

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## 1. The ‘Sick Smile’<sup>1</sup> of Korean call centre women

“One time after a meeting, my boss said in front of everyone, ‘I don’t think you’re suitable for this job.’ I felt humiliated, but I couldn’t quit because I needed the money. It is a hell without an exit.” (Quoted in “Young South Koreans call their country ‘hell’ and look for ways out.”)

*(The Washington Post (1 Feb 2016))*

‘*Heljoseon.*’ In contemporary Korea, this word often crops up people’s conversation and dominates the news media. It means ‘Hell Korea.’ This thesis attempts to comprehend why many Koreans currently perceive their country as a hell and how either they adapt to their hellish world or incorporate it into their lives. Hell might not be considered consonant with South Korea’s image abroad; the Korean wave, *hallyu* (韓流), hit Southeast Asia, China and Japan in the 2010s with dramas, fashion and K-pop (e.g. the singer Psy’s ‘Gangnam-style’ reaching 2.6 billion views on YouTube in July 2016); cutting edge electronic products by Samsung and LG are sold throughout the world. Koreans, however, are constantly exposed to anxiety-provoking news such as the corruption scandals of politicians and entrepreneurs, the chaotic strife between the ruling party and the opposition parties, the unpredictable relations with North Korea and the irrational and abusive political activities of reactionary far-right organisations in the South. In addition, many social indices in Korea such as the suicide rate, the national fertility rate, the elderly poverty rate and the occupational fatality rate are extremely poor, which demonstrate the reality, that is hidden behind the splendid image of a commercialised and confident Korean society. Through

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<sup>1</sup> “Sick smile” is referred from the title of a TV programme entitled “Are you happy now as a worker?: The sick smile, emotional labour” (*ilhaneun dangsin haengbokasimnikka: byeongdeun usum, gamjeong nodong*) of KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) on 21 May 2015 (retrieved on 25 July 2016 from [http://www.kbs.co.kr/special/vod\\_new/index.html](http://www.kbs.co.kr/special/vod_new/index.html)).

this thesis, I seek to unpack the other side of this Janus-faced reality by exploring the lived experience of one group of the most vulnerable employees, female call centre workers. This thesis also focuses on the smoking behaviour of female call centre workers, and it is significant in that it is the first in-depth study of Korean women's smoking behaviour in Korean society.

### 1.1. *Hwabyung*, anger (fire) disease of a female call handler<sup>2</sup>

In this thesis, I aim to describe the lives and labours of Korean female call handlers and their consequent health conditions. Particularly, I analyse their insecure employment situation in the wake of the neoliberalistic policies imposed after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The anecdote below about Ms Ok, a female call handler described by Ms Woo, the oldest (late-50s) and most experienced (nine years) call handler amongst my informants, is an exemplary introduction to what I explore throughout this thesis.

“Next to me is Ms Ok. She is 53 years-old. She was born in *Jeollado* (=a province in Southwestern Korea), has one son and one daughter. Her husband repeatedly had failed businesses and died from a traffic accident whilst in a drunken state. She lost her bank credit owing to a load of debt and looked like declaring bankruptcy in the end. I am not sure of her smoking habit, but certainly she is taking psychiatric medicine. Even though I have taught her several times, her call results are always very poor, but her patience is exemplary. She seems to depend on her church pastor a great deal. During every weekend, she works in a *Seolleongtang* (=stock soup of bone and stew meat) restaurant all night to serve orders. Although she often has

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, a call handler means an employee who is working in call centres, which are “specialised offices that are established by organisations in order to deliver a variety of services to customers over the telephone” (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2002).

hot flushing and redness on her face, she is sensible enough to sort out her emotions well. She makes *Nurunggi* (=crust of overcooked rice) from boiled rice that customers leave in the restaurant, bring it as refreshment. I enjoy eating it with her, but some colleagues mock her. What helps her with enduring all of the difficulty is her religion and typical disposition of *Jeollado*. Very rational she is to take medicine for controlling *hwabyung*.”

(Ms Woo, call handler, 25/04/15)

The dialogue above provides clues to important characteristics of Korean call centres: for example, relative easy employment regardless of age, low wages requiring additional jobs and/or overtime to make ends meet, a performance-based wage system, stressful call handling causing hot flushing, female call handlers’ smoking habits, and colleagues’ disdain. Most telling, however, is Ms Woo’s mention of one specific word, *hwabyung*. This is a well-known anger disease in Korea, having been categorised as a Korean culture-bound syndrome prior to 2013,<sup>3</sup> and has even been called the ‘illness of Korean-ness’ (Kim 2004). The word prompts me to appreciate the

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<sup>3</sup> *Hwabyung* means literally ‘anger (fire, 火 = *hwa*) disease (= *byung*)’, being categorised as a Korean culture-bound syndrome in DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV) with a group of symptoms: insomnia, fatigue, panic, feeling of impending death, dysphoric affect, indigestion, anorexia, dyspnea, palpitations, generalised aches and pains, and feeling of a mass in epigastrium (American Psychiatric Association 1994; Min 2009, 2013). Although *hwabyung* was excluded from DSM-V in 2013, it is still commonly mentioned among Korean people and still used as clinical terms in psychiatry and oriental medicine (Choi 2014). The most frequent symptoms are said to be ‘oppressive and heavy feeling in the chest, a feeling of a mass in the epigastrium or something hot pushing up in the chest, and a sensation of heat or hotness in the body’ (Lin 1983). The etiology of *hwabyung*, principally described by patients, is insidious and long-standing anger or anger-related negative reactions caused by unfair social power or psychosocial injustice. Many cases have to do with chronic familial conflicts between a housewife and her mother-in-law or husband; the victim, a housewife, is supposed to ‘suppress or inhibit one’s anger so as not to jeopardise peace in the family or harmonious social relationships’; it is noteworthy that women’s suppression and control of negative emotions have been strong social norms of behaviour in the Confucian culture of Korea (Min 2009). The character *hwa* means fire. In Chinese medicine since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the role of fire (火) has been emphasised as an internal pathogen. Korea adopted this rationale through sharing the Chinese textual tradition. In everyday Korean *hwabyung* comes from *ulhwa* that means “constrained fire” (Suh 2013). In 2001, the prevalence rate of *hwabyung* in middle-age Korean women was reportedly 4.95%; it was higher in women of low socioeconomic status, living in rural areas, smokers, drinkers, and amongst the divorced (Park et al. 2001).

interview contents not only as a list of personal characteristics but rather as something that possibly has to do with ‘culture-bound’ dispositions. It appears as if Ms Ok was managing her emotions well, enduring stressful and strenuous workloads and even colleagues’ mocking. Patience and assiduity are generally perceived as admirable virtues to follow, not only in Korea. Considering the Korean cultural context from which *hwabyung* emerged, however, the meaning of these virtues needs exploring. *Hwabyung* has been depicted as “the sickness of an oppressed society in which marginalised women find few means to express their desires and resentment” (Suh 2013). In Korea, people who are reportedly vulnerable to *hwabyung*, mostly housewives, are expected to suppress any reactive anger in order not to endanger harmonious family or social relationships (Min 2009). In Korean call centres, the objective of harmonious relationships is extended to customers and companies.



Figure 1.1 The actual picture of *cheongsimhwan* that Ms Woo showed me.

Ms Woo told me about Ms Ok because she received a gift from her. This was an oriental herbal medicine, *cheongsimhwan* (清心丸)<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1.1). Ms Ok sometimes took this herbal pill to calm down her anger, in other words, to control *hwabyung* since the pill, made in China, was very cheap and easy to get without prescription. Ms Ok presented it to Ms Woo ‘just in case’ to soothe reactive anger to others such as abusive customers and managers.

In fact, Ms Woo has also been suffering from definite symptoms of *hwabyung*: anxiety, frequent episodes of palpitations, insomnia, and particularly ‘talkativeness in spite of depressive mood’ (Min and Hong 2006). Consequently, she has been taking psychiatric

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<sup>4</sup> *Cheongsimhwan* (清心丸), a traditional pill composed of about 30 herbal medicine, has been prescribed to stabilise one’s mind by removing fire in meridian point over heart. In Korea, it was first introduced in 1613 in the oriental medicine textbook *Donguibogam* (=Principles and Practice of Eastern Medicine) (retrieved on 14 July 2016 from <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr>).

medicine as well as smoking. One thing to note here is that Ms Woo and Ms Ok have *hwabyung* not in their family but in the workplace. *Hwabyung* probably represents the reality of many Korean female call handlers. To paraphrase Min (2009); two call handlers' *hwabyung* could be described as requiring that their 'reactive anger, from managers, customers and even colleagues, must be suppressed so as not to jeopardise the profit of the company or relationships with customers'.

This thesis, however, is not aimed at researching *hwabyung* itself. The major symptoms of *hwabyung* such as hot flushing, palpitation, and epigastric discomfort are thought of through a bio-physiological perspective to be the results of stress and the reflexive reactions of the sympathetic autonomous nerve system (Byun 1994). Furthermore, it is unreasonable to jump to the conclusion that many of call handlers are having *hwabyung* because the call centres where reportedly about 400,000 workers are employed are diverse in their range of ages and educational levels (Kim 2013; Peuraimgyeongje 2016). Nevertheless, it is understandable if the ability to sort out one's negative emotion in the workplace is qualification or competency preferred by service sector companies. In addition, Koreans' common usage of fire as a metaphor for anger would encourage a person to repress their anger (like extinguishing a fire) as quickly as possible before the 'smoke from flame' becomes dangerous enough to cause personal suffocation (Min 2009); extinguishing it is considered more important than looking for why the fire (or anger) happens or who the arsonist is. These understandings correspond well with the expected role of all kinds of subordinates (i.e. women and employees). Consequently, the traditional explanation model of *hwabyung* based on the symbolic metaphor of fire, allied with the persistent influence of Confucianism, is likely to get accepted as an appropriate demeanour for female workers in the service sector.

The long-standing Korean cultural trope underpinning the essence of *hwabyung*, the belief that virtuous women curb their anger, has influenced female workers' labour and health in call centres

following with the massive influx of neoliberal politico-economic policies since 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. For this purpose, I will show the female call handler's body as the "existential ground of culture" (Csordas 1990) could follow the phenomenological perspective. From the ostensible physical strains and suffering of female workers to their body schema and embodied disposition to constrain their agency, I will argue that there has been a neoliberal metastasis of Korean patriarchal culture on the female labour force.

## 1.2. *Gabjil*, Confucianism and emotional labour in Korea

Traditional Korean Confucianism<sup>5</sup> plays a vital role in constituting *hwabyung* amongst Korean women. Confucianism can be explained as a detailed code of interpersonal behaviour rather than a religion (Fingarette 1998). The fundamental basis of Confucian ideology is that there are fixed and inviolate cosmic orders including social orders, and that peace and happiness can be attained only if people fit themselves into their proper social status and uphold the responsibilities of this

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<sup>5</sup> Confucianism, as developed about 2500 years ago by Confucius (551–479 BC), is described as "the secular as sacred" (Fingarette 1998). The sociologist Weber also described Confucianism as representing "a tremendous code of political maxims and rules of social propriety" (Weber 1964). The commands of 'propriety' are a basic concept of Confucianism, particularly concerning the essential 'three bonds' (*samgang*, 三綱) of lord-subject, father-son, and husband-wife (Rozman 1991b). In Korea, Confucianism traced back to King Se-Jong (1397-1450) of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) who had published the guidance of Confucian propriety of the three bonds (*samgang haengsildo*, 三綱行實圖) in 1431 and severely punished those who did not follow these rules. Korea is regarded as having become a Confucian society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Haboush 1991), undermining women's social position, reinforcing patriarchal authority in the family and consolidating aristocratic privilege in government. Although during Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) the notion of state Confucianism was eradicated, interpersonal values have been still influential in daily lives (Robinson 1991). Particularly, some Confucian lexicons regarding loyalty and service to the state continue to be infused into young male soldiers during their compulsory military duties. The reinforcement of loyalty in the army naturally extends to the worker's life in a company as well as the employment of a family metaphor such as that of a father's control over his sons (Janelli and Yim 1993).

status (Weber 1964:152-157). Confucianism's ultimate values are social harmony and hierarchical relationships and relevant interpersonal values are such as ancestor worship, respect for elders, filial piety, and the subordination of women (Robinson 1991). These are the basis of the principles that confer a moral obligation on women to endure hierarchical treatment and suppress anger. Meanwhile, apart from the influence of Confucianism, it could be suggested that women's subordination in the workplace compared to the managerial and supervisory positions of men seems to be understood as an element of cultural common sense (Geertz 1975) reflecting the long-standing gender hierarchy that exists outside the workplace (Ong 2010(1987); Walby 2013(1986)). In Korean culture, it has been reported that Confucian values in relation to the detailed codes of interpersonal behaviour are still deeply embedded in family relationships and gender roles (Park and Cho 1995).<sup>6</sup>

The underlying cultural implication of *hwabyung* could be described schematically: someone has authority to order or even humiliate others, while someone else, on the other hand, is supposed to obey the order or put up with the humiliation. In the Confucian context, the first 'someone' is expected to be older, a man, a lord and father or husband, while the second is younger, woman, subject and son or wife. The former's privilege, however, is bestowed under Confucianism's fundamental assumption that "human nature is good and that virtuous leadership can produce moral and diligent behaviour in others" (Rozman 1991b) or, in other words, "reciprocal benevolence downward and obedience upward" (Robinson 1991). Considering the capitalistic

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<sup>6</sup> Currently, while Korean society has been at least partly democratised and gender equality has been much improved, the detailed interpersonal codes of Confucianism still exist. This reality can be easily inferred from the result of an index measuring gender inequality, GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure). South Korean GEM is 61st amongst 109 countries in contrast to higher rank (9th) in its HDI (Human Development Index) in 2009 (UNDP 2009). In addition, Korean Women's lower socioeconomic status than men is reportedly related to a 'gender paradox,' that is, higher rates of morbidity and distress than men despite women's lower mortality (Chun et al. 2006). Son preference and selective female abortion also appear in Korea (Das Gupta et al. 2003; Chun et al. 2006; Chung and Gupta 2007). These results would seem to suggest that in accordance with the Confucian order, Korean women's status is still lower than men's.

market system, it can be inferred that the patriarch's right is transferred to an employer and customer who has the power or wealth to hire or pay, while the latter's right is to be an employee and seller. In this presumption, the basic expectation of the superior's benevolence might be weakened or even replaced by monetary payment. The situation could evoke the question, 'How can someone buy or pay to secure the privilege of demanding subordinate propriety?' Recently, this question has become a serious one in Korea. This has been so especially after one incident where there was an unreciprocated demand for obedience by a higher executive in a big company. The fact the executive in question was a woman helps put the power dynamics inscribed into high relief.



Figure 1.2 A picture about 'gabjil' controversy in Korea, captured from one news broadcast on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2015. The title says "Department store clerks' 'apology with kneeling down'...*Gabjil* controversy." It is of great humiliation for an adult to kneel down and apologise, since it is the act in Korea that children do when they are admonished by their parents when they make mistakes. (retrieved on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2015 from <http://www.hankookilbo.com>)

On 5 December 2014, Korea was shocked by the news known as 'nut rage' incident; Ms Cho, the vice president of Korean Air broke aviation safety regulations by ordering an airplane to return to the terminal while it was about to take off from New York to Incheon in South Korea in order to drop off one steward because he had served a pack of macadamia nuts unopened. The male crew member was forced to kneel down in front of her and be insulted by offensive words and

behaviours. The ‘nut rage’ incident ignited the ‘*gabjil*’ controversy in Korean society (cf. Figure 1.2). *Gabjil*,<sup>7</sup> disparaging undesirable behaviours (*jil*) of the person with more power (*gab*), simply means ‘being bossy’, but is intimately associated with a number of historical and cultural factors, in particular the patriarchal values deriving from Confucianism (Rozman 1991a; Janelli and Yim 1993; Kim 1997). The Korean Air example is perhaps particularly salient because of its obverse gender dynamics.

The debates about *gabjil* have been vitalised by concern over the surge of what is called the ‘emotional labour’ (= *gamjeong nodong*) industry and the subsequent suffering of employees. In Korea, ‘emotional labour’ is introduced as the labour requiring “one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others,” to quote from American sociologist Hochschild’s definition (Hochschild 2003(1983):7). Hochschild provides useful insights into capital’s recognition of the value of appropriating employees’ emotion skills, which, as a result, have come under close scrutiny: “to bring a hidden form of work out into the open” (Hochschild 1989:441)<sup>8</sup>. Alongside the expansion of service industries,

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<sup>7</sup> *Gabjil* is the combination of *gab* and *jil*. While *jil* is a suffix to add further meaning of disparaging undesirable behaviours, *gab* is originated from the ‘*gab-eul*’ relationship; ‘*gab*’ (甲) represents the person with more power and ‘*eul*’ (乙) is the subjugated. It comes from a legal terminology but at the moment used to explain any relationships such as boss/subordinate, men/women and landlord/tenant (retrieved on 14 July 2016 from <https://namu.wiki/w/갑과%20을>). A British journalist, Tudor explains ‘*gab*’ and ‘*eul*’ are ‘two of the most important words to know’ regarding business and daily life in Korea; he says ‘any person with the upper hand in a relationship is *gab* and the one who has to submit to *gab*’s whims is *eul*’ (Tudor 2014:90).

<sup>8</sup> Although Hochschild tries to highlight the current development of hidden form of work on the ‘human assembly line’ (Hochschild 1989), her simple typology of emotionality has been criticised, particularly the seemingly simplified and condensed dichotomies such as ‘true vs false’ self, ‘private vs public’ self, and ‘surface vs deep’ acting (Wouters 1989a, 1989b; Tolich 1993; Bolton and Boyd 2003). She is also criticised by for undervaluing the potential for employees’ resistance (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995) and overlooking the diversity of emotion management skills according to various situations (Bolton and Boyd 2003). Furthermore, Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson (2003:35) critically state that, in Hochschild’s discussion, the corporeal dimension is “conceptually retired.” In contrast to Hochschild, they insist that ‘corporeality’ must be considered with respect to emotional labour issues and suggest a new concept, ‘aesthetics labour,’ to ‘recuperate the embodied character of service work.’

the more feelings in the workplace have been governed by a corporation's profit motive, the more researchers have discussed organisational emotionality in Western society (Bolton and Boyd 2003; Wharton 2009) as well as Korea (Kim 2012). The relevant jobs are those such as retail sales clerks, waitresses, flight attendants, receptionists, call centre workers, nurses and most employees in hotels, pubs, and restaurants.

The number of Korean employees working in this field is estimated as almost 7.4 million. They constitute almost 41.8% of the full wage workers (Kim 2014). Before the concept of *gamjeong nodong* was introduced in Korea, emotional labour was perceived merely as the subsidiary duty of an employee in a service industry: to obey any order or put up with humiliation by managing one's facial and bodily display. As the service industry has expanded, commercial philosophies such as 'the customer always comes first', 'the customer is always right' and 'the customer is king' (*sonnimeun wangida*) gradually have become generalised. Therefore, customers' unduly discourteous behaviours result in service workers' suffering.

The National Human Rights Commission of Korea proposed guidelines on the proper working environment regarding emotional labour in 2011. The subsequent establishment of relevant guidelines<sup>9</sup> indirectly reveals how serious the emotional labour issue is regarded in Korea. The

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They contend that workers in service industries are increasingly seen 'not simply as software, but as hardware' since the corporations 'mould' them to portray the 'organisational aesthetics' (Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson 2003:41-44). In this regard, Kang (2003, 2010), in her book *The Managed Hand*, also propose another concept, 'body labour,' to explore embodied dimensions of emotional labour of body service workers in nail salon work.

<sup>9</sup> In the public domain the works regarding emotional labour until now include the following: Guidebook for the Improvement of Female Emotional Labourers (*yeoseong gamjeongnodongja ingwon gaeseon gaideubuk*) (2011) and Guidebook for Employers about Female Employees' Human Rights in the Field of Emotional Labour (*yeoseonggamjeongnodongja ingwongaideu silcheoneul wihan saeopju annaeseo*) (2011) by National Human Rights Commission of Korea (*gukgaingwonwiwonhoe*): Care Instructions on Call Centre Workers' Job Stress (*kolsenteo geullojaii jingmuseuteureseu gwallijichim*) and Prevention Guideline for Emotional Labour's Stress (*gamjeongnodonge ttareun jingmuseuteureseu yebangjichim*) by Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency (*hanguksaneobanijeonbogeongongdan*) (2011): Emotional Labourers' Human Rights

expression, “sick smile” (*byeongdeun usum*), the title of a TV programme reporting on emotional labour in Korea, also reveals the current reality of what it entails; employers impose a ‘smile’ on employees. Therefore, the employees have to smile despite customers being abusive. As a result, they are vulnerable to becoming ‘sick.’ In addition, emotional labour became the subject of a popular song. On 15 March 2016, a hip-hop album entitled ‘*gamjeong nodong*’ was released by the Korean rapper, Jerry.K (Figure 1.3). The title track, ‘Call Centre,’ describes one young female call handler’s distress from emotional labour, which listeners could easily sympathise with, since many young women have many things in common with the character in the lyric: difficulty in getting a job (“After graduation, her CV is worthless to get a job”), relatively easy employment in a call centre (“When nobody had interest in her CV, only a call centre accepted her”), and expectation that emotional labour would be less strenuous and stressful than physical labour (“She thought she wouldn’t undergo physical suffering, rather sitting on her seat and only keeping talking”). Particularly, the following lyric vividly evokes the emotional distress of the marginalised women who have few ways to express their anger but suffer from *hwabyung* (Suh 2013).



Figure 1.3 The hip-hop album of Korean rapper, Jerry.K entitled as ‘*gamjeong nodong*’ meaning ‘emotional labour.’ This album shows that emotional labour is often discussed not only in the academic field but also among ordinary citizens.

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Guidebook (*gamjeongnodongja ingwonsucheop*) by National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2012): Call Centre Workers’ Occupational Health Guideline (*kolsenteo jongsawon jigeopgeongang gaideurain*) by Ministry of Employment and Labour (*goyongnodongbu*) and Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency (2013): Guideline for Emotional Labour in the Public Area (*gonggongbumun gamjeongnodong gaideurain*) (2015): Act on Prevention of Emotional Labourers’ Rights (*gamjeongnodong jongsajai gwolliboho deunge gwanhan jorye*) by the Seoul Metropolitan Council (*seoulsi uihoe*) (2016).

“It was not easy at all that I talked with a smile all day long...Nobody asked my feeling. I got abused without any reason just because I thought I am a loser... I have to harden myself to endure against my feeling...Call anytime, I can smile. Call me, I can smile although you burst into a rage.” [translated by the researcher]

‘Nobody asks feeling,’ ‘Getting abused without reason,’ ‘Endure against feeling,’ and ‘Smile although confronting a raging person’; these depictions of a female call handler’s lived experience of emotional suffering are not significantly different from the situation whereby Korean women suffer from *hwabyung*. Notable in this album is the image on the album cover, the characters of *gamjeong nodong* drawn by ‘smoke.’ It seems like the explanatory model for the pathology of *hwabyung* in Korean oriental medicine, with anger symbolised as suppressed fire while its smoke congests the chest (Min 2009). From this perspective, it might be inferred that *hwabyung*, the longstanding byproduct of the traditional, subordinate gender role, has now transformed and extended into *gabjil* in the economic area, subsequently to become the academic subject described, sophisticatedly, as ‘emotional labour.’

### 1.3. Exploring ‘Hands Up’ amongst female call handlers

So why is the title of this thesis ‘Hands Up’? It is not a result of deductive research plans, but rather the inductive result of engagement in the field. During my one year’s fieldwork, I observed three different types of ‘Hands Up’ amongst female call handlers, indicating a gesture of ‘Humiliation’ (Chapter 6), ‘Protest’ (Chapter 7) and ‘Healing’ (Chapter 8), respectively. Although the subject (female call handlers) and the motion (stretching arms upward) are the same, they represent three different meanings: ‘Humiliation’ indicates that the female call handlers have to put their *hands up* to go to the toilet during the working time, a ‘humiliating’ practice that

epitomises the poor working conditions: ‘Protest’ represents the members of the ABC labour union, the first union of Korean call centres who collectively put their *hands up* to ‘protest’ the company’s unfair treatment and poor working conditions: ‘Healing’ reflects that small but growing numbers of call handlers put their *hands up* as one of the motions of a stretching exercise (*mompyeogi*) to ‘heal’ their bodily suffering themselves.



Figure 1.4 The poster of the ABC call centre labour union’s public assembly on 26 November 2015. During the fieldwork, the researcher joined these rallies with the ABC union and key informants.

In relation to the concept of ‘Hands Up,’ Figure 1.4 is an exemplary image to represent one aspect of what Korean female call handlers’ lived experience. As a poster to announce the ABC call centre labour union’s assembly, it shows the workers’ hands raised up to protest as well as angry faces, wearing their headsets and bandanas and chanting. However, for call centre workers, raising their hands up to protest and showing collective resistance in an assembly are unusual activities. Rather, many female call handlers are likely to internalise any anger from customers’

or managers’ abuse (i.e. the ‘humiliating’ hands up practices) or look for an alternative solution to relieve their anger through a stretching exercise (i.e. the practice of ‘healing’ hands up). What the call centre wants from them, at least inferring from what the media has represented, is not an angry face but a smiling face (and voice): in other words, a “sick smile” (i.e. not genuine). In the following chapters, I argue that all these are usual experiences of female call handlers, whether suppressing themselves or not.

Exploring the culturally embodied meaning of these particular types of hands up, I argue that a certain cultural force in Korea is dragging female call centre workers’ hands downward, wittingly or unwittingly. It can be the force that restricts workers’ basic rights for decent working

conditions, suppresses their reasonable complaints or collective resistance, and lets them become accustomed to shrunken (or daunted) body postures which characterise people in stressful situations. I call this force as ‘cultural gravity,’<sup>10</sup> since not only is it the gesture of hands up actually contrary to physical gravity, but also the symbolic meanings of hands up in Korean culture are always influential on the employee’s gesture. The direction of bodily motions of the suppressed workers as well as the victims of *hwabyung* and *gabjil* is often downward. It is in the same vein as traditional Confucianism where the expected demeanour of the younger, woman, subject, son and wife for the expression of loyalty and piety is ‘head down’ (never staring at the upper person’s eyes directly) and ‘back bent’ (the more bent, the more respect). I examine how this embodied demeanour is influenced by cultural gravity and what the results are in terms of human health or wellbeing.

#### 1.4. The outline of this thesis

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature about the global call centre industry, particularly British, Indian and Korean call centres. In addition, I introduce some of the health issues in the call centre (including my pilot study), including the use of legal and illegal chemicals (e.g. smoking tobacco and cannabis).

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<sup>10</sup> Originally, the concept of ‘cultural gravity’ is particularly utilised in the field of economic geography, which using the Newtonian gravity concept to describe the general mechanism of the “cultural impact on the geographic concentration and utilisation of human capital in a locality”; for example, a local culture can be “a pull factor for the inflows of immigrants” (Grosjean 2011; Tubadji and Nijkamp 2015). However, in this thesis, I use this concept from a different point of view; firstly, to explain the cultural force operating on the lower classes or vulnerable people and making them stiffen up in a shrunken or daunted posture (e.g. a bent back, backward chest and downward head) as if physical gravity were pulling the body down and secondly, the cultural force operating to restrict the vulnerable workers’ body to docile dispositions.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical concepts I use to analyse the lived experience of female call handlers. Initially, I argue the value of my notion of ‘chemical employeeship’ deriving from concepts of ‘biological citizenship’ and ‘pharmaceutical citizenship,’ and then show the necessity of a phenomenological approach to it. Next, I explain the basic concepts of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body and introduce Bourdieu, Csordas and Jackson’s different approaches to phenomenology and their possible implications for my research, particularly my concept of ‘cultural gravity.’ I also examine Goffman’s concepts of ‘performance’ and ‘interaction ritual’ to specify Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in the situation of the call centre.

Chapter 4 describes the methodological approach adopted for this thesis. I show the process that developed from a pilot study of a call centre in 2012 leading on to my main fieldwork period (2014.9~2015.8). I explain how I settled into the main field, the Seoul Digital Industrial Complex (SDIC) (*seoul dijiteol saneop danji*), contacted female call handlers and accessed the ABC call centre labour union. I consider and reflect on ethical dimensions of my research.

In Chapter 5, I explore the current situation of SDIC regarding the call centre industry and compare it with the past industrial complex (Guro Industrial Complex) (*guro saneop danji*) and its factory girls’ lives in the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, I introduce my first image of SDIC: stunning buildings and a big ashtray, a complex of heterogeneous spaces. Next, I explain why it is hard to access call handlers in SDIC, through my experiences, with a health and welfare centre and a labour union. Thirdly, I discuss the current implications of ‘The Statue of Woman of Export’ (*suchului yeoinsang*) and ‘The Workers’ Living Experience Centre in Guro Industrial Complex’ (*gulogongdan nodongja saenghwal cheheomgwan*) in SDIC. Lastly, I focus on the lived experience of the 1970s and 1980s factory girls’ bodily suffering and their subsequent ‘hands up’ in protest.

Chapter 6 describes ‘Hands Up’ in ‘Humiliation.’ Here I discuss the humiliating working conditions of the call centre in Korea through employees’ lived testimonies. Initially introducing

the reason many of the women with low job qualifications find it easy to get a job in the call centre, I describe the working environment - which has been called a 'modern sweatshop' - in detail. Next, I discuss the call handlers' health related behaviours (smoking, overeating) and diverse body suffering through current data and lived experience. Lastly, I examine different types of humiliation from abusive customers, managers (e.g. the 'toilet monitor'), and colleagues (e.g. bullying).

Chapter 7 presents the second form of 'Hands Up' in 'Protest.' I discuss the development and introduction of the first call centre labour union, the ABC call centre union, from the beginning stage protests (September 2012) through the stories of the union leader and its executives. I describe the rise of call centre issues in the media (call handlers' suffering and the news of a suicide). Then, I discuss the context for establishment of the first union from its socioeconomic background (the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and its aftermath) to individual personalities. Next, I explain the detailed progress of the union and its effects, particularly via the leader (Ms Jang)'s experience of struggling and suffering. In addition, I show the difficulty of being a union executive as a call handler through four executives' testimonies.

In Chapter 8, as the last kind of 'Hands Up' in 'Healing,' I discuss the ABC call centre union's weekly assembly of the 'stretching body exercise' (*mompyeogi undong*) and its effects on participants' health and labour union activities. Initially describing my first experience of attending the union's assembly, I briefly introduce the origin, characteristics, core value and detailed process of the exercise. Then I explain why the ABC call centre union started the exercise (e.g. sustainability of the union) and its benefits for individual participants as well as for the union itself. Lastly, I discuss the phenomenological meaning of the stretching body exercise.

The thesis concludes by drawing together the three different types of 'Hands Up' amongst female call handlers, as well as the 1970s and 1980s factory girls' hands up of protest, and re-evaluates the current issue of emotional labour. It summarises the reflections upon female call

handlers' labour and health from the perspective of phenomenology and emphasises the significance, in terms of cultural gravity, of workers' body posture.

## 2. Call Centres: Different Issues in Different Countries

There have been many research studies on the anthropology of labour. Since the debate on ‘the international division of labour’ began in the early 1980s (Fröbel et al. 1980; Nash and Fernández-Kelly 1983), discussions on the relation between the capital of developed countries and the cheap labour force of the underdeveloped countries were actively pursued in anthropology based on this new world system theory (e.g. “Anthropology and the global factory”) (Rothstein and Blim eds. 1992). In particular, anthropological studies on Asian countries rich in cheap labour are abundant: Malaysia (Ong 1987), Indonesia (Wolf 1992), South Korea (Kim 1990; Kim 1995), China (Lee 1998; Ngai 2005), Vietnam (Chae 2003) and Thailand (Pangsapa 2007). Moreover, as the cheap labour has been mainly provided by female workers, many of the research studies on the anthropology of labour have adopted the feminist viewpoint, for example, the life of female workers under the dual influence of capitalism and patriarchy (Ong 1987), the effects of gender in the productive sphere (Lee 1998), and the labour movement of female workers (Kim 1990; Kim 1995; Pangsapa 2007).

Previous anthropological studies have discussed the problem of production by low-cost labour in developing countries from the perspectives of gender, class and patriarchy. Recently, there have been various discussions about occupations that have lost the value of labour while exploiting labour forces that are emerging in developed countries today. In particular, Graeber argues that as the technology developed over time, the life of the worker and the working environment (e.g. the shortening of the working time) were also improved and the life of each individual had been improved accordingly. The author criticises this reality recasting it as an increase in the number of ancillary jobs that encourages all workers to work relentlessly, for example, dog-washers and all-night pizza deliverymen, which he calls “Bullshit Jobs”. He explains that there are five types of bullshit jobs, (1) flunkies, 2) goons, 3) duct tapers, 4) box tickers, and 5) task masters), in

modern capitalist societies, and call centre workers, my research target, are considered to belong to the goons. In this regard, ethnographic studies have also been conducted recently (e.g. on “organisational control as cultural practice,” Ahrens et al. 2007) on how organisational subcultures make workers more focused on work. There is a trend of various anthropological studies being conducted on labour in the newly emerging call centre industry as well.

In this chapter, I review specific issues revealed through research in British, Indian and Korean call centres. So why are these three countries selected? Except for Korea, which is my major research field, I chose Britain and India as the object of comparison since, first, the call centre industries have developed well in both countries and many research regarding various call centre issues have also been conducted. In the case of the UK, the call centre industry has developed with the advent of the information industry after the gradual fall of the heavy industry and manufacturing industry. There has also been relatively much discussion about the strict surveillance and payment evaluation system of the call centre as well as the employment of low-educated and low-waged women workers. In the case of India, the call centre industry has developed for foreign customers, particularly, in English-speaking countries (e.g. USA, UK) rather than domestic ones. Therefore, highly educated women who can speak formal English are employed and work mostly during the night. Indian call handlers are often subjected to various humiliating situations such as racial abuse from native English speakers, and thus many studies regarding abuse-related issues have been conducted. These diverse discussions help us not only to understand the overall characteristics of the call centre industry but also to better comprehend what is distinctive about Korean call centres, which are introduced in the results of my 2012 pilot study in Z call centre.

## 2.1. Electronic panopticon?: the surge of the UK call centre industry

“There are now nearly a million people working in call centres (in the UK), and the

number is going up every year. To put that in perspective, there were a million men down the pits at the peak of mining in the 1940s. If the miner was one of the iconic jobs of post-war Britain, then today, surely, the call centre worker is as good a symbol of the working class as any... , workers have to put their hands up to go to the toilet. Computers dictate the time and duration of breaks, with no flexibility whatsoever. Employees are under constant monitoring and surveillance, driving up stress levels.”

- quoted from '*CHAVS; The Demonization of the Working Class*' (Jones 2011:147)

The 'information age,' the dawn of high-tech capitalism, facilitated the establishment of infrastructure in many western countries: the 'information superhighway' linking together with the development of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) during the last decade of the twentieth century. It had lifestyle consequences such as the development of 'telework', 'home banking' and 'home shopping' as well as the creation of new kinds of office jobs such as data entry, word processing and telesales (Stanworth 1998). Alongside these trends, the call centre industry has grown massively worldwide since the 1990s and has become one of the largest employment generators in North America, western Europe, Australasia and India, particularly for women (Datamonitor 1998; Richardson and Marshall 1996; Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000; Breathnach 2000; Ramesh 2004; Taylor and Bain 2004). Even though the ICTs appear to promise an age of progressive transition, the general comments on the call centre industry are negative. Jones (2011:147) compares the demeaning conditions of call centre working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with work in the factories of the nineteenth century and the iconic 'working class' job of mining in post-war Britain, for what they symbolise about the portion of the working class today.

As Alvin Toffler foresaw in his book, *The Third Wave* (Toffler 1981), the effect of the information age on the female labour market is to perpetuate or even reinforce the long-standing division of labour in which women usually do the low-skilled, low-paid jobs such as telework and, in contrast, men take better jobs of higher status (Stanworth 1998). Call centres tend to be located and developed in 'less favoured regions' which attract industry because of the availability of quality but low wage labour, lower labour turn-over due to high levels of chronic

unemployment, and subsidised property rates (Richardson and Belt 2001; Warren 2011). It is estimated that around 70 % of the call centre workforce in the UK is made up of female employees (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2002). Belt (2002) describes call centre work as a “female job ghetto” owing to its lack of job satisfaction or potential for career progression. Hunt (2004) criticises call centres because of high stress levels job, employee burnout, high labour turn-over and restricted career paths, depicting call centre work nothing but a “career or stopgap” for women.

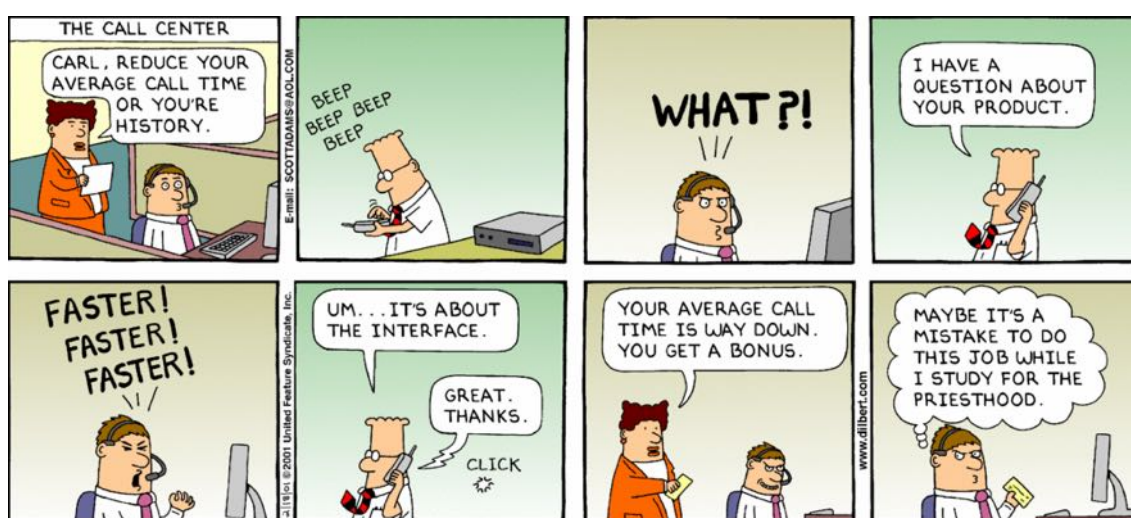
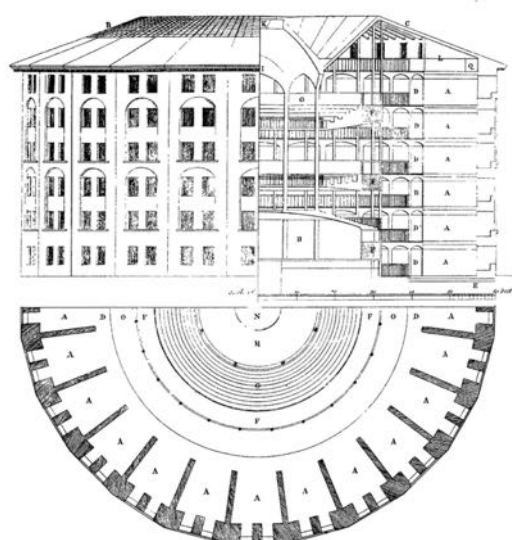


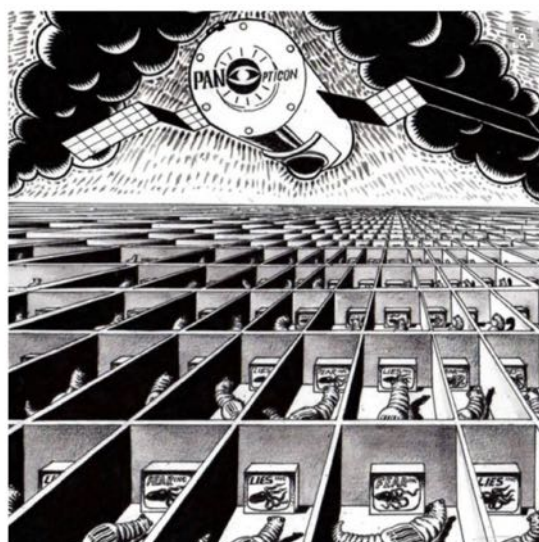
Figure 2.1 A cartoon (‘Dilbert’ by Scott Adams on 18 February 2001) about the monitoring control system of the call centre connected to PRP. It helps to understand how the computer monitoring system measuring call handling time even in seconds influences workers’ performance for better payment (retrieved on 23 August 2016 from [http://dilbert.com/search\\_results?terms=Call+Center](http://dilbert.com/search_results?terms=Call+Center)).

As the call centre industry has developed, researchers have compared the information age with the factory age (Burgess and Connell 2004). The main issue relates to shared characteristics of surveillance, control and resistance. Call centres have been described as “sweatshops of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”, “tomorrow’s dark satanic mills” and “battery farms” (Apostol 1996; Roncoroni 1997; Arkin 1997). All incoming calls are force-fed through ACD (Automatic Call Distributor) systems likened to an ‘unstoppable telephonic conveyor belt’ (Ferne and Metcalf 1998:8). Computer monitoring and measurement systems – advertised by one software manufacturer as “total control

made easy” – give the call centre supervisor the ultimate opportunity for control. The ACDs and computer systems enable fine grained but brutal performance-related pay (PRP) schemes operate to boost employees’ performance and cut unit labour costs (Fig 2.1). Fernie and Metcalf (1998:26) show the detailed PRP scheme of one call centre in the following Table 2.1. It shows how the centre can check call handling performance in seconds in order to score each worker for graded payments. For all these reasons, the call centre is therefore well described as the typical organisation to represent ‘Foucault’s application of Bentham’s Panopticon to the workplace’: that is, ‘Electronic Panopticon’ (Fernie and Metcalf 1998) (Figure 2.2).



1) Bentham’s Panopticon



2) Electronic Panopticon

Figure 2.2 The images of Panopticon. 1) Bentham’s Panopticon: In 1791 Jeremy Bentham, the English philosopher and social reformer designed the ideal prison called ‘Panopticon’ (pan = all, opticon = observed) in which all inmates are observed by a single watchman (retrieved on 9 August 2016 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panopticon>). Foucault explains the ‘gazing’ mechanism of Bentham’s Panopticon in his book, *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977). 2) Electronic Panopticon: the drawing represents how electronic machines (e.g. CCTV and computers) always observe people. It shows that although the people know they are being observed, they cannot see the observer (retrieved on 9 August 2016 from <https://kr.pinterest.com/pin/122019471123645626/>).

Key Objective		How Much?	By When?	To what standard?
<i>Performance Indicator</i>		<i>Calls answered within 15 seconds</i>	<i>Handling Time</i>	<i>Calls Logged</i>
Description	Score	%	Seconds	%
Exceptional	6	93.5-100	<170	90-100
Excellent	5	90-93.4	170-174	80-89
Good	4	86-89	175-179	70-79
Satisfactory	3	80-85	180-189	50-69
Disappointing	2	70-79	190-199	40-49
Unacceptable	1	<70	200+	<40

Table 2.1 The detailed PRP scheme of one call centre in the UK (quoted from Fernie and Metcalf (1998:26)).

Bain and Taylor (2000) argue against the ‘Electronic Panopticon’ model, however, since examples of employees’ resistance are emerging. For them, Bentham’s Panopticon is too simplistic a model to describe the call centre industry and they criticise Fernie and Metcalf for denying the possibility of workers’ resistance and ignore the complexities of the employment relationship and the labour process (ibid:16-17). They argue the call centre management system is not there to create obedient bodies *per se* but to attain more profit; not surveillance *per se* but control (ibid:5). In a case study of one multinational call centre in the UK with a very strict monitoring system, Bain and Taylor show how ‘like-minded workers’ identify with each other and forge collective resistance, through unionisation campaigns aimed at challenging the notion of ‘total control made easy.’ In their words, “the actual management of the employment relationship is far more problematic than the simplistic ‘total control’ perspective suggests. Secondly, the way in which the Panopticon operates is far from perfect. Thirdly, and most powerfully, is the fact that Telcorp [the multinational corporation they studied] has seen the emergence of patterns of collective resistance, particularly in the form of workplace trade union activity” (ibid:11).

In the UK in 2008 the PCS (Public and Commercial Services) Union published the ‘Call Centre

*Charter: a framework for workers' rights,*<sup>11</sup> indicating that collective resistance exists in the call centre industry of the UK. The existence of the trade unions in the call centres, however, cannot guarantee that call handlers are free from panopticon-like surveillance and exploitative environments. In 2001, the TUC (Trade Union Congress) of the UK set up a hotline to investigate workplace harassment in Britain's call centres. They found many centres "using bullying tactics to pressurise and intimidate employees". The BBC reported a "hotline flooded with call centre complaints." At that point, above 400,000 people worked in call centres in the UK and the TUC's hotline had recruited 400 calls in a week. Amongst the worst cases were a call centre where "staff were told the person who spent the most time in the toilet would be forced to wear a nappy," and another which managed a 'toilet book' according to how long employees spend there and ordered workers to 'put up their hands' for permission to go to the toilet (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1179444.stm>). In 2010 UNISON, Britain's second biggest union, conducted a follow-up survey in call centres and reported many employees were still "being treated like battery hens" and that it was "getting worse." Of the 3000 call centre workers surveyed, "the vast majority blamed stress on unrealistic targets (68%), poor management (66%) and more than half complained of bullying and harassment (53%)." Regarding toilet monitoring in the call centre the situation seems not to have changed much in 10 years, since some employees were allowed only eight minutes in total for their toilet breaks during an eight-hour shift (<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/call-centre-staff-facing-targets-228544>). Furthermore, contrary to the decent and fair pay demanded in

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<sup>11</sup> The Call Centre Charter is composed of key principles: 1) High local and national standards, 2) Call centre workplaces should be pleasant and safe environments - not factory-style production units, 3) Decent pay for all call centre workers, 4) A 35 hour Working Week, 5) Regular training by professionals available to all staff on a regular basis, 6) No deskilling or other civil service type LEAN management techniques, 7) All Health and Safety Regulations to be strictly enforced and monitored, 8) Through PCS staff should participate in all decisions affecting their employment, 9) No electronic surveillance without union approval, 10) Time and office space should be given for trade union work, 11) Right to representation and bargaining at all levels, 12) Work and family life balance, 13) For equality, no discrimination, 14) All staff should be encouraged to join a trade union, 15) Provide sufficient staffing levels to ensure (retrieved on 10 August 2016 from <http://www.pcs.org.uk/en/resources/call-centre-charter/call-centre-charter.cfm>).

the Call Centre Charter, it was reported in 2013 that the workers in the call centres had been “stuck in low paid jobs for a decade” resulting in a “lack of social mobility” (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/27/low-pay-lack-social-mobility>) [retrieved on 10 August 2016].

Considering these realities, it is worthwhile re-examining Bain and Taylor’s wholesale rebuttal of the notion of ‘electronic panopticon.’ Although they are correct in asserting that the call centre is not a prison and collective activities via the trade union exist, the well-known exploitative characteristics of the call centre industry, based on its strict electronic monitoring system, are still at work. Furthermore, organised labour has been weakening in the UK owing to ‘labour market restructuring’ with labour flexibility and the growth of ‘non-unionism’ in the regions (Martin, Sunley, and Wills 2012). Bain and Taylor do not consider unionisation from the perspective of gender although women are in a majority in call centres. For women, engagement in trade union work is arguably more demanding because of the complex negotiations with gendered discourses and treatments it requires. According to Franzway (2000), union work needs considerable commitment from women to overcome the obstacles and hostility of men as well as to deal with the heavy workload (additional to paid and domestic work) and emotional labour (based on general discourses of femininity such as the notion that ‘caring for others’ is a component of female work) involved.

Bain and Taylor argue that “so seductive is Foucault’s metaphor...it can seriously overestimate the scope and depth of management control” (2000:4). It is hard, though, to overestimate how ‘seductive’ the low income offered by a call centre might be for employees who have no alternatives. Some workers describe working in a call centre as “easy money” (Warren 2011) hence they give up any collective resistance and work patiently. From this perspective, Fernie and Metcalf’s statement about the call centre “where Bentham’s 1791 Panopticon was truly the vision of the future” is worth reconsidering (Fernie and Metcalf 1998:21). The PRP payment system makes employees aware they are under supervision in ‘seconds’ (e.g. ‘how many calls answered within 15 seconds’, ‘handling time within 170 seconds or over 200’). This is concrete evidence

that the control system, like the panopticon, is the vision of the future. Conclusively, even though the electronic monitoring system is still imperfect, it should be paid extra attention to since it is likely to be the essential foundation to develop a perfect control system for the labour force in the near future.

## 2.2. Cyber coolies or cyber professionals?: the internationalisation of the call centres and subsequent issues in India

While the UK-based debates in section 2.1 mainly focus on human resource management within the call centre, current anthropological research focuses on the internationalisation of call centre services. In this context, particularly in India, the call centre industry is called by a different name: the offshore call centre or more generally Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) (Figure 2.3). The notable word here is ‘outsourcing,’ which means the contracting of a specific business process to a third-party where there are a host of the ‘young, educated employees’ with relatively low wages who are computer literate with good typing skills and, most importantly, can speak the main customers’ language, primarily English (Ramesh 2004; Taylor and Bain 2005). The main country satisfying all of those criteria is India where after 1996 the BPO became one of the fastest growing industries (Basi 2009) such that now India is known as “the electronic housekeeper to the world” (Chengappa and Goyal 2002). In 2005, India accounted for 46% of all global outsourcing (Nasscom-McKinsey 2005).

As the BPO industry in India has flourished, in the UK voices of concern have been raised about ‘inexorable offshoring’ and subsequent ‘cataclysmic call centre job loss’ (Downey and Fenton 2007). A nationalistic rhetoric even questions whether this is ‘the revenge of colonial history’ in the UK (Taylor and Bain 2004). Meanwhile, Indian call handlers are described as the “cyber coolies” of BPO due to their characteristic labour insecurities and vulnerabilities (Ramesh

2004). Furthermore, the BPO industry in India is criticised for its dependence on forms of ‘linguistic imperialism, hegemony or cosmopolitanism’ (Sonntag 2009),<sup>12</sup> sometimes described as ‘colonial tongue’ (Nadeem 2011:55). Taylor and Bain (2005) report how Indian call centre workers are trained to ‘neutralise’ their English accent ‘tainted’ by their mother tongue and acquire ‘pure’ English. In addition to accent, voice, grammar and practical conversational training, Indian call centre workers are usually instructed to adopt western pseudonyms and to mask their location (Mirchandani 2004a; D’Cruz and Noronha 2008) in order to perform new persona that Nadeem (2011) calls ‘dead ringers’<sup>13</sup>; in other words, ‘Indian by day, American by night’ (Pal 2004).

Notwithstanding these practices, many Indian call handlers have experienced ‘customer-instigated racial abuse’ without any come-back in dealing with abusive callers (Nath 2011). While Indians suffered from racism typically tied to ‘visuality’ (e.g. skin colour) during the colonial period, with the advent of ICTs the racism is now shifting to ‘aurality’ through accent (Shome 2006). Furthermore, Indian workers are often exposed to ‘workplace bullying’ in call centres with an oppressive work regime. For example, managers often shout at or otherwise humiliate workers privately and publicly. Workers often feel tense and anxious with an uncomfortable atmosphere in call centres in consequence (D’Cruz and Noronha 2009; D’Cruz and Rayner 2013). Meanwhile, amongst Western or Western-trained managers, there are common understandings of Indian

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<sup>12</sup> Sonntag (2009) explains the phenomena of linguistic globalisation with three concepts: linguistic imperialism, linguistic hegemony and linguistic cosmopolitanism. ‘Linguistic imperialism’ means the dominance of English in the world and emphasises cultural inequalities between English and other languages (ibid:7). ‘Linguistic hegemony,’ in contrast to ‘linguistic imperialism,’ reveals the specific situation in India where the English language has been ‘indigenised’ via educational institutions and Indian civil society, resulting in Indian English becoming the ‘default language of prestige’ (ibid:11), not by coercion (imperialistic) but consent (hegemonic). ‘Linguistic cosmopolitanism’ emphasises the individual free agency to choose divergent cultural experiences including languages in ‘transnational interactions’ (ibid:15).

<sup>13</sup> ‘Dead ringer’ is a term used to describe a person who ‘strongly resembles another’ since workers are forced to relate to callers such that their “names and neutered accents, the workplace cultures and structures, the identities and lifestyles resemble those of their [callers’] country of origin” (ibid:9).

workers' propriety. Workers are regarded as having 'a meekness of disposition,'<sup>14</sup> a view which is principally related to racism, resulting in an oppressive regime, reflected in the comment by one manager, "You have to push them sometimes" (Nadeem 2011:140). Several means of Indian workers' resistance have been shown in transnational call centres (Mirchandani 2004b). One example is of workers utilising minor-strategies such as giving a 'hoax solution' or 'bluffing,' or irritating customers and working at their best only when they know a call is being recorded (ibid:186-193). Another is the establishment of a trade union, UNITES (Union of Information Technology Enabled Services Professionals) in 2005 (Taylor et al. 2008). However, there are limits to this resistance since workers' 'professional identity'<sup>15</sup> and 'material gains' could preclude any engagement with collective resistance and instead cause them to participate in the oppression (D'Cruz and Noronha 2009).

Meanwhile, others have written about the Indian call centre industry with respect to the 'politics of identity' of female workers. Above all, the gender issue in Indian call centres is quite different from Britain mainly because of the women workers' background. The majority of them are "educated and fun loving youngsters from urban middle class" (Ramesh 2004). As the 'soft skills' such as listening, comprehension, empathy, customer service and persuasion skills have been increasingly demanded, the Indian call centre labour force has become feminised. In 2006 over 80% were women comprising mainly young (20-25) and unmarried women (McMillin 2006). Since many female workers are college students in the daytime and working on night shifts, the Indian call centre is called "an air-conditioned college" (Basi 2009:13). The call centre offers

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the managers say that "Indians by nature are kind of submissive," "Culturally, they're very into hierarchy," "You don't raise your voice in front of adults, elders, teacher," "They're bright and articulate, but – sorry if this sounds racist- they have a tendency to say yes a lot" (Nadeem 2011:139, 145).

<sup>15</sup> D'Cruz and Noronha (2009) show that amongst Indian workers, professional identity is considered as the symbol of social status combined with upward mobility; 'Professionalism' is understood as "superior cognitive abilities, advanced qualifications and a sense of responsibility and commitment to work."

Indian women the chance to work in ‘a financially rewarding and liberal environment’ with men, one in which “they virtually emigrate to other parts of the world” (ibid:13). Through this ‘virtual migration,’ female workers can formulate transnational identities (ibid:31).

With regard to the female employees’ identity formation in a global company, Basi (2009) argues that Indian female call handlers perceive the surveillance system differently from British workers. In Indian call centres, the workers do not necessarily interpret the system – the so called ‘electronic panopticon’ - as unfavourable. First, surveillance can mitigate any possible nepotism and guarantee performance based reward. Second, the strict control system can provide a good way of assuaging the suspicious feelings of the workers’ parents who consider that transnational call centres corrupt their daughters by introducing Western culture (ibid:49-50). Third, the call centre is a place for Indian women to escape from conservative Indian society, in other words, ‘the societal panopticon’ (ibid:145), so that they are likely to be oblivious to the surveillance within the centre. In contrast to the concept of panopticon, Basi (2009:143-145) suggests the notion of ‘synopticon,’ or the watcher becoming the watched (like celebrities in the eyes of the public), represents the experience of Indian workers. She argues that the bigger and newer buildings of multinational call centres often attract attention from outside and the gaze also focuses on female workers wearing ‘modern, fashionable, cosmopolitan’ clothing<sup>16</sup> (ibid:116) and commuting at night (ibid:144). Thus, the workers become the watched by the local people, particularly the lower classes who cannot access the centres.

Nonetheless, the image of female call centre workers is not always positive. Above all, in India the night shift employment of women is associated with bad character since there are still

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<sup>16</sup> Freeman’s ethnographic research of female staff in Barbados’ American informatics company - entitled “High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy”- argues that the particular clothing of female workers (e.g. “the boldly adorned skirt suits and polished high heels”) is integral to formation of class identity (Freeman 2000). In this perspective, she emphasises the notion of ‘Pink Collar’ - which is initially coined to describe service work’s feminisation (Howe 1977) - since the informatics workers’ appearance, especially ‘high heels’ in this context is essential to ‘distinguish’ them from the factory workers and ‘blur’ the differences with female clerical workers.

gendered notions of a woman's place (e.g. not going out at night). Alongside the frequent media message of that the call centre industry is 'a den of sex and sin' (Joseph 2006), the call centres are often understood as 'containers of moral decay and sexual impropriety' (Patel 2006). Patel insists that the Indian culture of "sexing nightscape" is deeply combined with 'mobility-morality narratives' about women resulting in female night shift workers in call centres risking their reputations and ruining their marital opportunities (ibid:58-61). Nadeem (2011) in his recent book "*Dead Ringers*" shows the westernised working culture of an Indian call centre as a series of parties which is not quite reconcilable with Indian social life. As the turn-over rate in the call centre industry is extremely high (25-40% per year) owing to the stressful and strenuous night shift work, in addition to the relatively high salary and bonuses, the companies provide opportunities for fun and non-monetary incentives such as "packets of cigarettes, taking them out drinking" (ibid:55). Partying is now accepted as a necessary motivational tool in BPO culture. Nadeem even points out that "Little (union) organizing was actually accomplished, as workers were more interested in the alcohol than the union charter" (ibid:56).

As the BPO industry in India has developed, research has focused on electronic monitoring, racial abuse and gendering of the call centres but little has been done on workers' health. This is surprising since many call centre workers suffer from ill health. There are a host of basic physical stresses reported (eye problems such as soreness, dryness and blurred vision, headache, digestive disorders, throat pain, croakiness of voice, irritating cough) to BOSS syndrome (Burn Out Stress Syndrome) and sleep disorders, particularly sleep deprivation resulting in 'fatigue, depression, impaired vigilance and a predisposition to infections (Sudhashree, Rohith, and Shrinivas 2005; Bhuyar et al. 2008; Raja and Bhasin 2014). As the western clock time becomes the 'globalised time' in Indian call centre, the 'night shift' (or 'graveyard shift' or 'UK-USA shift') workers' circadian rhythms are disturbed (Patel 2006). Amongst them, one thing academics have carelessly ignored are the unhealthy food habits ('a chip-and-Coke culture') and addictions. Above all, call

centre employees' tobacco dependence becomes a challenging issue<sup>17</sup> (Mishra et al. 2010) and women workers are reported to be accustomed to resorting to “boozing, night partying, and smoking”<sup>18</sup> (Dube et al. 2012). Regarding addiction, Nadeem's statement below is worthy of note.

“The politically disabling conditions of work - particularly the stress of the graveyard shift, long hours, and an intense work pace - are assuaged not through collective organisation but by the individualised consumption of stimulants to stay alert. The sweet, milky tea that workers imbibe at all hours has a historical antecedent in industrialising England...*The thin columns of cigarette smoke rising from India's technology parks*, moreover, are *symbols of the underside of the digital revolution*, just as the black clouds of soot bellowing from factory smokestacks stood for the pernicious effects of the Industrial Revolution...The irony is that rather than seeing them as necessary evils in a topsy-turvy work culture, the stimulants and junk food of the global “24-hour society” are extolled as emblems of choice in the postmodern apotheosis of the consumer-citizen.”

(Nadeem 2011:48-49) (emphasis added)

Nadeem problematises the workers' easy resort to stimulants and choice. These choices have extended to illegal drugs. In 2008, it was reported in the media that Indian call centre workers used drugs to ‘keep them awake’ while talking to British customers.<sup>19</sup> Substance abuse is a hidden aspect of the call centre industry in India. Allegedly around 30% of night shift workers rely on

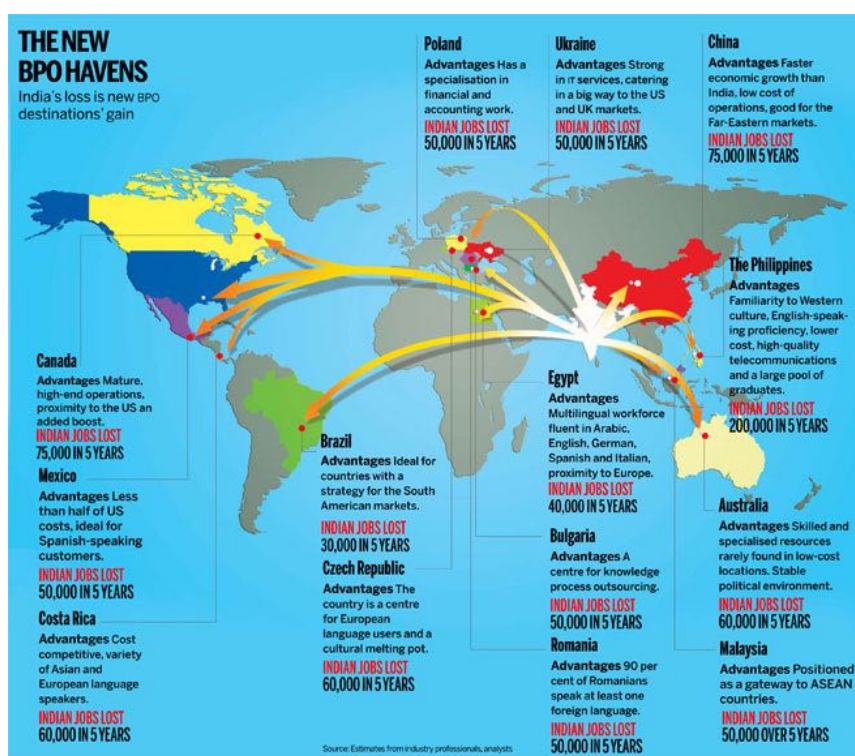
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<sup>17</sup> Mishra et al. (2010) report that tobacco use in India is more extensive amongst male workers (49.5%) than female workers (7.9%). Amongst them, cigarette smoking is seen amongst 39% men and 5.5% women employees. Comparing with the general cigarette smoking rate in India (men 32.7%, women 1.4%), it is relatively high.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding female smoking, one Indian female call centre worker says “Girls smoking in the open wasn't common before, but this is normal at a call centre. Here you'll see every girl smoking. They tend to stay away from the family. Society's changing” (requoted from Nadeem (2011:64)).

<sup>19</sup> Reportedly more than a quarter of call centre employees are ‘hooked’ on drugs, primarily cannabis (generally only 4.1% of Indian people use it) (retrieved on 15 August 2016 from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1023947/The-Indian-centre-workers-turn-drugs-stay-awake-night-shift.html>).

medicines including an over the counter medicine (e.g. ‘Spasmo-Proxyvon’)<sup>20</sup>, prescription medicines (e.g. ‘Nitrosun’)<sup>21</sup> and drug, ‘doping,’ meaning *ganja* (Indian cannabis) “very prevalent in the call centre” (Sandhu 2008:166). Regardless of whether the young employees in Indian BPO industry are cyber coolies or cyber professionals, there is a ‘physical and psychic cost’ for them becoming a vector for the diffusion of individualised chemicals behind the scenes (ibid:158-172).



1) ‘The new BPO havens’

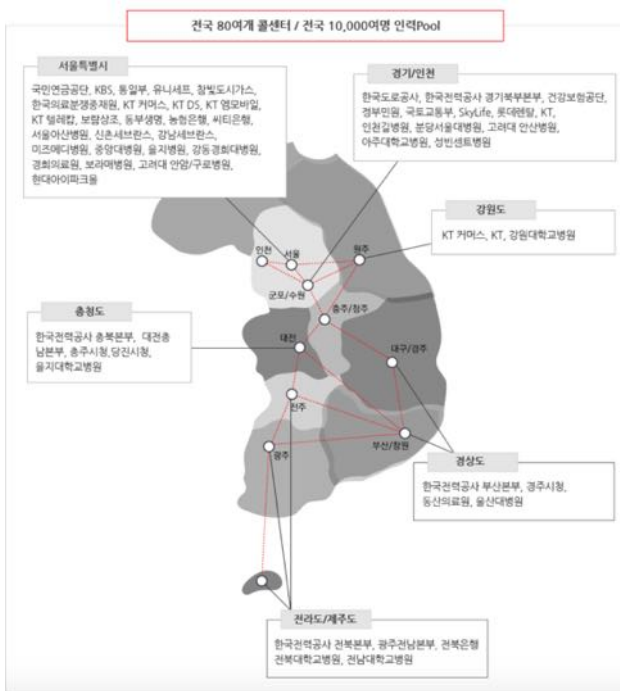
(retrieved on 8 August 2016 from <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/bpo-industry-call-centre-culture-dying-in-india/1/258032.html>)

<sup>20</sup> Spasmo-Proxyvon capsule contains three drugs: dextro-proxyphene (opiod pain killer), paracetamol and dicyclomine. Dicyclomine belongs to antispasmodic and anticholinergic class of medicine and primarily acts by relieving the smooth muscle tightening of the gastrointestinal tract, prescribed for irritable bowel syndrome (retrieved on 15 August 2016 from <http://www.medindia.net/drug-price/dextropropoxyphene-combination/spasmo-proxyvon.htm>). The drug is a famous pain killer in India and is much reported for its high addictiveness and subsequent fatal cases (Raghava et al. 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Nitrosun contains Nitrozepam which is a hypnotic benzodiazepam, prescribed for insomnia. It affects a certain brain chemical (GABA) and results in sleepiness and relaxation (retrieved on 15 August 2016 from <http://www.medindia.net/drug-price/nitrazepam/nitrosun-10-mg.htm>).



2) “Ireland. The call centre of Europe”: Industrial Development Agency advertisement of Ireland as location for pan-European call centres (ref: Breathnach (2000)).



3) The 80 branches map of one of the biggest call centres in South Korea. It reveals that BPO industry in South Korea has developed inside the country. (retrieved on 8 August 2016 from <http://www.ktis.co.kr/v2/html/business/contact.html>)

Figure 2.3 Three different maps of the call centre industries. 1) and 2) show the trends of internationalisation of the call centres: near-shoring and off-shoring, respectively. Especially, the map 1) shows the recent change of the BPO havens in the world from India to Philippines etc. In contrast, the call centre branches map of one company in South Korea shows the Korean call centre industry’s characteristics: outsourcing ‘within’ the country.

### 2.3. Smile and smoke: emotional labour and chemical employee-ship in Korean call centres

Most research on the call centre industry is about English-speaking countries (e.g. the UK and India) and thus the related topics concern ‘cyber coolies,’ ‘language imperialism’ and ‘colonial tongue.’ However, in Korea, owing to the limited familiarity with English as a non-English speaking country, the outsourcing of call centres has developed ‘within’ the country from central capital cities to regions (especially where people have a good command of standard Korean without a dialect accent) (Figure 2.3). Consequently, ‘racial abuse’ and ‘night shifting’ are not issues in the call centre industry in Korea and high-level language skills with qualification levels that Indian call handlers usually have are normally not required by the industry. Instead, the major issue for Korean call centres, as discussed in Chapter 1 regarding *Hwa-byung* (= anger or fire disease) and *Gabjil* (‘being bossy’), is encapsulated in the idea of ‘emotional labour’ particularly in relation to abusive customers.

UK	KOREA	INDIA
Electronic Panopticon Collective Resistance	Emotional Labour Abusive Customer	Language Imperialism Racial Abuse Virtual Migration Night Shift
Low wage	Low Wage	High Wage
Local People	Low Educated Women (20s~40s)	Urban Educated Young
70% Female (2002)	98% Female (2009)	80% Female (2006)

Figure 2.4 Comparison of the major call centre issues and situations between the UK, Korea and India

Figure 2.4 summarises the main call centre characteristics in the UK, Korea and India. The major difference between Korean call centre workers and Indian employees are the wage and educational levels; Korean call centres usually do not request high-educational levels so the wage is relatively low (Kim 2013; Song 2014). Additionally, the Korean call centres overwhelmingly hire women (almost 98% of the employees) compared to other countries.<sup>22</sup> Those basic characteristics of Korean call handlers are very much related to the fact that call centre research has been largely focused on ‘emotional labour’: the prejudice or stigma attached to low socio-economic class combined with a traditional Confucian gender role is likely to make female call handlers vulnerable to customers’ abuse.

Above all, service sector companies in Korea, including call centres, demand the expression of specific emotional virtues (e.g. “friendliness,” “politeness,” “pleasantness”) from employees during their selection process, training and employment (Yoon, Kim, and Kim 2000). Female call centre workers are a typical example of this. The call centres prefer to employ ‘young single women between the ages of 20 and 27’ having ‘a friendly, tender, charming voice’ (Jung 2005). Park argues that common notions of emotional labour in Korea are based on deep gender discrimination. She criticises the argument that women do emotional labour better than men since women are born with biologically determined characteristics of “patience, calmness, solicitude and tenderness” (Park 2006). She also insists that this kind of gender discriminative approach regards female emotional labour as trifling and unprofessional work. Yet, Korean female call centre workers are reportedly exposed to the poor environment and endure all of the emotional stress as well as physical suffering by themselves due to the strict organisational norms to control their emotional expressions; the norms are based on the commercial philosophy, “the customer is king.” The workers even describe themselves using the metaphor “cannon fodder” (*chongalbaji*)

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<sup>22</sup> While British call centre workers comprise about 70 % women (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2002) and Indian 80% (McMillin 2006), Korean call centres are composed of almost all women (98%) (National Human Rights Commission of Korea 2008).

(Shin 2009). Song (2014) also shows that the high turn-over rate of the call centre industry in Korea is caused mainly by the stressful and strenuous emotional labour with ‘dual discrimination’ based on gender and irregular employment.

As indicated above, the main approach used in call centre research in Korea has been Hochschild’s (2003(1983)) concept of ‘Emotional Labour.’ This trend is quite different from the call centre related researches in Britain that principally deal with the company’s monitoring and payment system as well as the workers’ collective resistance. Consequently, the social responses to those research results and subsequent solutions are different from each other. In Korea, many guidebooks for female employees of emotional labour are published mainly in the public domain (e.g. the National Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Employment and Labour and the Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency) but they carry no legally binding force (see Figure 2.5). The guidelines, however, only consider the abusive behaviour female employees receive from customers. The suggestion is made that employers prepare guidelines of how employees can best handle their clients. The abuse inherent in the employer-employee relationship, however, is consistently ignored.



Figure 2.5 The four cartoon images of the customers’ abuse toward female workers in “The Guidebook for Employers about Female Employees’ Human Rights in the field of Emotional Labour” published by National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2011). The notable thing here is that all of the female workers are looking down, bending their upper bodies so as not to have eye contact with abusive customers.

As female emotional labour issues attracted interest in Korean society, many researches regarding the workers' health status have been conducted. One of the issues that particularly attracted my attention is the higher smoking rate of female call centre workers (26%) (Kumcheon County 2013) compared to the general female adult rate (7.4%) (Statistics Korea 2014). Although there are other prominent health problems of female call centre workers such as high rates of depression (27.1%) and musculoskeletal diseases (31.3%) (Kumcheon County 2013), the female smoking of call handlers is worthy of note not only because it is primarily contradictory to Korean traditional patriarchal values deriving from Confucianism (Ko 2003), but also because recently, despite active tobacco control policies and stigmatised views towards female smoking, the increase in female smoking rates, especially amongst adolescents and young adult girls, is not only an issue for call centres, but for the whole society, particularly connected to general health inequality (Kim and et al. 2012)<sup>23</sup>.

In 2012, the smoking rate in Korea was 43.3 per cent for adult men and 7.4 per cent for adult women. In the case of men, there was a gradual decline (from 63.3 per cent in 1998 to 43.3 per cent in 2012) due to the implementation of aggressive tobacco policies (Statistics Korea 2014). Recently, the government has been actively pursuing tobacco policies, for example, increasing the price of cigarettes by 80 per cent from January 2015 and adding smoking warning pictures to cigarette packets from January 2017. Nevertheless, researchers on health equity are worried that 'inverse care law' ("the availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the need of the population served") is

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<sup>23</sup> In the twenty first century, smoking rates were increasing amongst women in many (but not all) parts of the world and women's smoking rates reached a quarter of men's smoking rates globally (WHO 2001). In response, the WHO took the initiative titled "Gender, women, and the tobacco epidemic" to bring attention to women's smoking (WHO 2010). These international efforts were partly prompted because international tobacco companies had been aggressively seducing potential customers like women and adolescents, particularly in underdeveloped countries with low levels of public health care and few tobacco regulations (Stebbins 1990, 2001). Korean women were amongst the chief targets of international tobacco companies in East Asia (Lee et al. 2009). Meanwhile, the relatively low female smoking rates in East Asia (WHO 2013) compared to western countries are intimately associated with the patriarchal values deriving from Confucianism (Ko 2003; Tsai et al. 2008; Hermalin and Lowry 2012).

underway in this reality (Tudor Hart 1971:405). In other words, although the overall smoking rate is on the decline, the decrease in the smoking rate of the high-income class is greater than that of the low-income class, resulting in a gradual widening class differential in smoking rates (Ministry of Health and Welfare and Korea Centers for Disease Control & Prevention 2013). This trend is also occurring among female smokers, who have low smoking rates and are not properly measured (Khang and Cho 2006; Kim and et al. 2012). In reality, the relatively high smoking rate of female call centre workers is seen as evidence of the inequality in the smoking rate amongst women, which is an important example of the continuing spread of smoking behaviour amongst low-wage female workers in Korean society (Kim 2013). In terms of women's public health regarding smoking in South Korea, the most challenging issue is the difficulty in ascertaining women's smoking rates exactly because of the reluctance of women to disclose their smoking status ("hidden female smokers") (Jung-Choi, Khang, and Cho 2012). This is mainly due to the fact that the negative perception of female smoking is still widespread in Korean society (Ko 2003).

Previously, the smoking rate of female call centre workers was reported as 26 per cent (Kumcheon County 2013); this can easily be dismissed as not very high. In other words, 74 per cent of call centre workers are non-smokers, so it could be perceived that smoking is not a problem for all of the workers. If we refer to the fact that the under-reporting is about 50 per cent among all female smokers (Jung-Choi, Khang, and Cho 2012), however, the smoking rate of female workers at the call centre may be much higher than measured and the prospective figures are not at all negligible. Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 6, it should be taken into account that there is a difference in the smoking rates measured by the questionnaire and given by actual call centre workers (see Table 6.2). In particular, in the case of the Z call centre where I conducted the pilot study, the measured smoking rate was 37 per cent, that is, 185 of the 500 female employees were smokers. I noted my surprise at the time in my field note: "I have never seen so many female smokers at the same time".

Moreover, although few companies have a dedicated smoking room for female workers, this is not the case for call centres (Chapter 6.3.4). This is very important since the long-standing social stigma about female smokers can be transmitted to a specific job such as a call centre worker. Furthermore,

the stigma can be transmitted to the social class who are mainly employed in such jobs: the low socioeconomic class. In other words, regardless of whether or not the actual person smokes, a call centre worker can be looked at negatively. Graham highlights that smoking acts as a “class signifier” beyond what is unhealthy, which helps to sustain and regenerate the social stigma on certain classes or groups (Graham 2012). People may not think that it is strange for a female call centre worker to smoke. As a result, they can already be considered as morally polluted.

Furthermore, as noted above in Indian call centres, Korean female call handlers’ smoking might not be confined to the Korean situation, but could be the same as Indian workers’ “individualised consumption of stimulants to stay alert” (Nadeem 2011:48) so that smoking as a ‘legal addiction’ (Baer, Singer, and Susser 2003:143-168) could be a “symbol of the underside of the digital revolution” amongst female workers who might extoll it “as emblems of choice in the postmodern apotheosis of the consumer-citizen” (Nadeem *ibid*:49) or the “torch of freedom” for suppressed women (Amos and Haglund 2000).

In 2012, as an assistant qualitative researcher in an anti-smoking research team of “Seoul City’s Health Equality Project,” I undertook pilot research in Z, the call centre of a major international corporation (about 500 workers employed: 97% female, 3% male) in Seoul for five months in order to demonstrate likely pathways whereby women from low SES (socioeconomic status) groups become chronic smokers. This research (Kim 2013) demonstrated that the high smoking rate (35.2%) amongst female call centre workers was closely connected to their low SES (especially, their generally low educational level) with cigarettes being used<sup>24</sup> as a ‘working drug’

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<sup>24</sup> The common benefits of smoking that the female call handlers expressed can be categorised as 1) stress relief, 2) conviviality and 3) taking a break. First of all, female workers used cigarettes as a tool for relieving emotional stresses provoked by customers. Since the call centre workers were often exposed to customers’ complaints, irrational demands and verbal abuse, and needed something effective to relieve their stress quickly. Cigarettes were likely to be chosen as a tool for this purpose, at least by current smokers and ex-smokers. Second, smoking worked as a social contact lubricant amongst female workers who smoke. The smoking area was preferred to the common room as a place for social contact by women who smoked because managers often visited the latter to inspect who was taking a break during work time. ‘Smoking together’ gave chances for conviviality with other workers

(Krogh 1992)<sup>25</sup>. The catch here is that stigma towards female smokers was easily managed and manipulated by the managers to better exploit the labour force to increase productivity and efficiency and profit whilst hiding their actual abhorrence of female smoking. In practice, the company guaranteed women workers the right to smoke and provided an easily accessible smoking area during working hours since, based on the manager's experience, allowing smoking breaks during work time was more efficient in terms of the company's profits than attempting to ban smoking would have been.

The use of cigarettes amongst female call handlers in Z can be understood by the idea of the 'politics of pollution' in relation to the female body in Korea. 'Outside' the call centre, female smoking is still likely to be frowned on because of the 'purity' of women's womb for future babies (Ko 2003; Kim 2015). In contrast, 'within' the centre, the general politics of pollution is temporarily suspended. Thus, following the notion of Douglas, the call centre itself is 'the boundary of pollution' (Douglas 2010(1966)). When the centre's pursuit of profits interlock with the workers' financial vulnerability, the traditional politics of pollution operating, which value the 'body to conceive,' yield right-of-way to the need for the 'body to labour' (Kim 2015). The

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as well as to share job-related complaints and helpful tips. Lastly, workers took advantage of smoking for unofficial break times. Since there were no official breaks except for lunch and dinner, workers went to the smoking area for a break as well as for smoking and chatting. However, no employees spent more than 4 minutes in the smoking area because of the physical and electronic surveillance systems in place and the need for workers to earn bonuses based on number of calls answered (Kim 2013).

<sup>25</sup> In terms of working and smoking, Mintz (1985:186) argued that in the 19th century, during the period of the Industrial Revolution, tobacco was one of the "drug foods" (in which category, sugar, coffee, tea, and chocolate were also included) and was used to temporarily relieve workers' suffering from physical stress and hunger (Mintz 1985). Courtwright (2001) also showed that, historically, elites had taken advantage of cigarettes to soothe and exploit the working class as well as making profits itself and gathering tax (Courtwright 2001). Some anthropologists, in developing the subdiscipline of Critical Medical Anthropology, argued that tobacco helped to control the working classes "by providing brief chemical respite from the grinding pressures and boredom of capitalist production" (Baer et al. 1997:124). These perspectives, relating smoking to labour, could be relevant to female workers, because of service work's feminisation across the world (i.e. 'Pink collar' jobs such as informatics and telemarketers) (Howe 1977; Freeman 2000) since there will be more possibilities for female workers to control their emotional job stresses by depending on drug foods including tobacco.

‘politics of foetal protection,’ however, is strongly operating in Korean society outside the call centre so that the female call handlers who smoke cannot avoid internal conflicts but rather feel guilty from “how mothers-to-be should think, feel, and act” (Oaks 2001). In other words, female smoking does not necessarily reject ‘ordered systems’ in a call centre, it can confuse or contradict the order outside a centre - just like shoes “on the dining-table” (Douglas 2010(1966):37). Thus, women who smoke look ‘pure’ only when they are in the call centre out of social gaze. The notable point here is which order is most powerful in the call centre; the smoking women can be pure only if they work enough to satisfy the company interest (Figure 2.6).



Figure 2.6 The Z call centre outdoor smoking area in the corner of car park behind the building. It is located in a blind spot, avoiding customers’ attention. The smoking women are facing the wall as if they do not want to show their faces; they might be standing on the ‘boundary of pollution’ or in the middle of ‘ordered system.’ The certain thing is they should hasten to smoke and return to ‘work’ (taken by the researcher in 2012 during the pilot research) (gradation pattern added to the picture).

Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 have traced how, with the development of ICTs and the subsequent call centre or BPO industry, the top-priority of the capitalist ordered-system has become to effectively boost the performance of workers at low cost. In Korea, this approach competes with traditional gender roles (e.g. ‘body to conceive’ and ‘foetal protection’). The usage of diverse

stimulants from legal substance abuse (alcoholic drinks, smoking, tea or coffee, medicine) and illegal drugs (e.g. cannabis) amongst Indian call centre workers and the smoking practice of Korean female call centre employees can be understood in the same contextual frame: the workers' dependence on chemicals (Figure 2.7). 'Drug foods' (Mintz 1985) and 'labour enhancers' (Jankowiak and Bradburd 1996) are age-old strategies to exploit the workforce by both employers and employees (Courtwright 2001). However, the recent phenomenon of the call handlers' chemical dependence has different features in South Korea at least since it connects to a delicate incentive systems backed up by electronic monitoring and happens in the world-wide economic context of insecure employment. Considering these aspects, I argue that current chemical use can be described as 'chemical employee-ship.'<sup>26</sup> This, I think, is a more powerful explanation for the way call centre life can be understood than the emotional labour concept, and I shall go on to explore this concept further in Chapter 3.

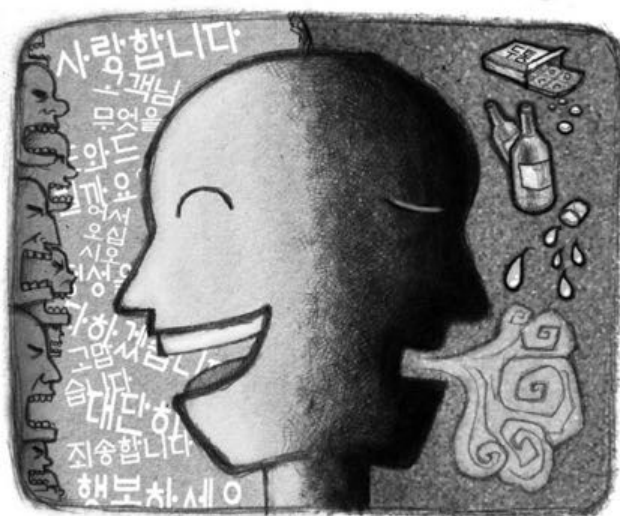


Figure 2.7 A Goffman-esque cartoon image of emotional labour. It can be described as “Smile and Smoke”; in front of hostile customers, the worker shows a smile on their face, but in backstage, he or she looks dependent on chemicals such as medicine, drinks and possibly smoking (retrieved on 15 August 2016 from <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/column/496316.html>).

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<sup>26</sup> The detailed theoretical discussions will be in Chapter 3.1

## 2.4. Conclusion: a call from call centres

In this chapter, I have reviewed specific issues revealed through research in British, Indian and Korean call centres. Alongside the development of Information Communication Technologies, the call centre industry has become ‘called’ one of the iconic jobs of high-tech capitalism. What attracts my attention, however, is not the ostensible aspects but the underside of this industry; what we have seen referred to as ‘sweatshops of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,’ ‘tomorrow’s dark satanic mills,’ ‘battery farms’ and the ‘electronic panopticon’ in the UK, and a job of ‘the electronic housekeeper to the world’ or ‘cyber coolies’ and ‘a den of sex and sin’ in India. In Korea, the call centres seem to share many of the negative characteristics of both British and Indian call centre industries: for example, poor working conditions (intensive workloads with relatively low wage, strict surveillance systems like a panopticon) and customers’ frequent abuse (not the racial abuse experienced in India but rather based on a gender and socioeconomic status gap). Particularly, Korean call centre handlers are likely to face the prejudice or stigma attached to their low socio-economic position combined with a traditional Confucian gender role. Nonetheless, for them, due to their insecure employment situation, the call centres are ‘the last bastion of the female underdog’ (Kim 2013:28).

From this review of current researches on the call centre industries, I focus on two components of this underside. First, as Nadeem (2011:48) insists, the ‘politically disabling’ conditions of work (i.e. intensive and restless workloads with long hours) are often alleviated not through collective resistance but by individualised tactics such as consumption of unhealthy foods, addictive chemicals, and prescribed medicines (Figure 2.7). These phenomena, which I describe as ‘chemical employeeship,’ need to be better illuminated, not simply considered as the inevitable byproducts of ICTs’ development and depoliticised workers. Second, as Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson (2003:35) emphasise, when it comes to call centre working, the corporeal dimension is

likely to be conceptually abandoned or regarded as ‘surface acting,’ based on Hochschild (2003(1983))’s notion of ‘emotional labour’ (cf. Chapter 1.2). The call centre labour is done/seen/supervised by a physical ‘body,’ whether it is emotional labour or not. However, ‘emotional labour’ - centred approaches to call centre issues have been limited in their success at disclosing high-tech capitalism’s new system of exploitation. Instead, the theory tends to frame the overriding issues as one of emotional conflicts between customers and workers while overlooking the latter’s poor working conditions and health problems.

In order to take these problems into account, in Chapter 3, I shall go on to consider how we can better analyse workers’ lives and experiences through the notion of chemical employeeship, emphasising a phenomenological perspective, mainly based on Merleau-Ponty (2012(1962))’s ‘Phenomenology of the Body.’

### 3. Body as Field-note: the Core of Labour and Health

Before describing the detailed results of my fieldwork in Korean call centres in the following chapters, this section of my thesis provides further theoretical discussions with respect to ‘cultural gravity’ (Chapter 1.3) and ‘chemical employeeship’ (Chapter 2.3). These concepts will offer the foundation to understand how the cultural force of traditional patriarchal gender roles, underpinning the essence of *hwabyung* - the belief that virtuous women curb their anger - has been affecting female workers’ labour and health in Korea in the context of insecure employment conditions associated with neoliberal economic polities. In addition, these concepts will provide analytical frames for grasping the essence of what (and how and why) employees have endured and suffered. As this thesis researches labour and health by investigating individuals’ lives and experiences of suffering, the ‘body’ will be at the centre of its theoretical arguments, particularly based on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective of the body.

First of all, in section 3.1, I argue the value of the notion of ‘chemical employeeship’ deriving from concepts of ‘biological citizenship’ and ‘pharmaceutical citizenship,’ and then show the necessity of a phenomenological approach toward concerning what chemical employeeship means. In section 3.2, I explain the basic concepts of Merleau-Ponty (2012(1962))’s phenomenology of the body (including body schema and motor intentionality) and then further discuss ‘embodied’ subjectivity, ‘inter-corporeal’ subjectivity (with Goffman (2005(1967))’s theories) as well as Jackson (1983, 1996)’s notion of ‘lived metaphor.’ Then, I compare Merleau-Ponty’s notion of body schema with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus in order to examine the descriptive concept of ‘cultural gravity.’ In section 3.3, I conclude this chapter by championing the body as field-note.

### 3.1. Drugging employees? Chemical employeeship and phenomenology

#### 3.1.1. “Let’s take a medicine”: origin of the idea of chemical employeeship

“Let’s take a medicine!” (*yang-meok-ja*) was the most memorable sentence that I heard during my pilot research period in 2012. One of the male manual workers in an electrical manufacturing company, in his late 40s said that he shouted “Let’s take a medicine!” to other colleagues when he wanted to take a ‘smoking’ break (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Welfare and Health 2012:404). For him, a cigarette was understood as medication since whenever he became tired physically, smoking “automatically” crossed his mind to relieve his fatigue and then he continued to use it regularly on time like medication. His colleagues who smoked shared this understanding and joined the cigarette-medication time. The president of the company abhorred smoking, but he allowed manual workers to smoke, even providing them with an open and cozy smoking area resembling a pavilion (Figure 3.1). However, he completely forbade smoking amongst the white collar male workers and, instead, gave male smokers extra pay for abstinence (about £30 per month). During the pilot study in 2012, I found that Z call centre managed a similar strategy for female smoker-workers. Like the electrical manufacturing company providing a smoking area only for manual workers, Z call centre prepared an accessible balcony smoking area next to the office in a building (Figure 3.1) and thus the cigarette was used as a ‘working drug’ (see Chapter 2.3). Thus, a cigarette was considered or at least allowed as an effective and inevitable substance to endure strenuous work amongst manual employees who smoked, as well as the employer, regardless of one’s taste. In other words, the most essential concern was the consistent ‘workforce’ and whatever was necessary to ‘fuel’ it.



Figure 3.1 Pictures of smoking areas. The left image is the smoking area of the electrical manufacturing company (the round blue bin is an ashtray). The right image is a balcony smoking area in Z call centre. Both smoking areas were provided by employers to boost employees' performance.

The use of chemicals with respect to labour is not limited to smoking. In the 1970s and 80s in Korea, the high-dose caffeine medicine (e.g. 'Timing') was very commonly used amongst young female factory girls to keep awake during extra work and all-night work time (see Figure 5.29 & 5.30 in Chapter 5). Just like the pure caffeine pills often used by students and workers (e.g. long-distance truck drivers) in other countries, during the industrial developing period in 1970s and 80s Korea, caffeine spread along with "clocks and work discipline, allowing workers to be on time and alert in a world where bodily rhythms are not necessarily synchronised with work hours" (Anderson 2003:159). It was reported that the factory girls took these pills as if it was a 'nutritional supplement' and then became addicted to the drug, half-willingly and half reluctantly (further details in Chapter 5.4.2.2 'Chemicals to survive'). The factory girls' use of caffeine seemed to be in accordance with the representative norm of Confucianism for women, 'obedience' which was likely to be converted into industriousness. Meanwhile, in contrast to caffeine, female smoking is still a highly stigmatised activity in Korea, running counter to traditional Confucianism.

Besides smoking and caffeine, there have been other fatigue reliefs as working drugs in Korea.

Figure 3.2 shows most famous chemicals: first, ‘Bacchus-D’ (*bakkaseu di*)<sup>27</sup>, the most representative and longstanding fatigue relief (see 1)), second, ‘Condition (Lady)’<sup>28</sup> and ‘*jeonggwanjang 369*,’<sup>29</sup> famous drinks for a hangover (see 2) and 3)), and last, ‘Nico-Zero’ and ‘NeKa,’ the very first and last drinks for smokers in Korea<sup>30</sup> (see 4)). ‘Bacchus-D,’ named after the Roman god (Bacchus) of wine and agriculture, has been the most popular fatigue relief drink in Korea since the mid-1960s. The advertisement for it in the late 1970s (Figure 3.2) reveals what Korean society (and companies) at that time wanted from workers. The advertising copy contains “Vigorous construction site” (*himchan geonseolui hyeonjang*), “New Korean who does one’s best with work” (*jasinui ile choeseoneul dahaneun sae hangugin*) and “At the site of precious sweat, Bacchus is there” (*sojunghan ttamui hyeonjangeneun bagkaseuga issseubnida*). It shows that ‘tireless industriousness’ was the most admirable disposition of an employee and Bacchus had been developed in this environment. While the advertisements for Bacchus in the late 1970s used the image of blue collar workers, the adverts for drinks to cure a hangover - ‘Condition (Lady)’ and ‘*jeonggwanjang 369*’ - in 2016 interestingly shows white collar employees. The ads indirectly show the Korean assumption that alcohol drunk by office workers during a company dinner is an extension of work and thus ‘not drunk’ or ‘less hangover’ can be understood as a

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<sup>27</sup> Bacchus is a non-carbonated energy drink, first launched in 1963. It has been called Bacchus-F before a change in formula in the 1990s, after which it was known as Bacchus-D to note the increased amount of taurine in the product (2000mg). Bacchus-D contains ingredients in 100ml; taurine (2000mg), inositol (50mg), niacin (=Vit B3, 20mg), thiamine (=Vit B1, 5mg), riboflavin (=Vit B2, 5mg), pyridoxine (=Vit B6, 5mg), anhydrous caffeine (30mg), caffeine sodium benzoate (60mg) (retrieved on 6 Sep 2016 from <http://www.bacchusd.com/main.jsp>).

<sup>28</sup> Condition launched in 1992, creating a new market for anti-hangover drink in Korea. Since its launch, Condition has kept the leading position as ‘No.1 anti-hangover drink in Korea’ for about 20 years. It contains fruit extract of *hovenia dulcis* which shows hepato-protective effects and glutathione, taurine with other natural herbal extracts (retrieved on 6 Sep 2016 from [https://www.cjp.co.kr/front2012\\_en/products/majorProducts.asp?po\\_nav=2\\_3](https://www.cjp.co.kr/front2012_en/products/majorProducts.asp?po_nav=2_3)).

<sup>29</sup> *jeonggwanjang 369* is an anti-hangover drink launched in 2016. It contains red ginseng and 20 other ingredients (retrieved on 6 Sep 2016 from <http://369drink.net>).

<sup>30</sup> ‘Nico-Zero’ and ‘NeKa’ were launched in 1997. Main ingredients include white radish, quince, peach, mint, and eucalyptus, which aimed to quench thirst and loosen sputum. Neither drinks are produced now.

positive disposition of employees including female workers.

In addition to alcohol, smoking seemed to be regarded as an inevitable part of the work culture amongst male employees in Korea in the 1990s, since in 1997 even drinks intended for smokers such as 'Nico-Zero' and 'NeKa' were launched. Considering the high male adult smoking rate at that time (72.2% (aged 20-24), 77.5% (aged 25-44), 68.7% (aged 45-64) in 1995) (Khang and Cho 2006), the launch of the drinks might be understandable. The catch, however, is that the advertisement (Figure 3.2 (4)) specifically states that this is a product for '20s to 30s male workers' (*jikjangnamseong*). It becomes more understandable in the context of the history of cigarette supply in Korea from the 1950s to late 1990s. After independence from Japanese colonialism in 1945, the Korean government owned the national tobacco company (*hanguk-dambae-insam-gongsa*) until it was sold and changed into a private company, KT&G, in 2000 in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Due to adult males' high smoking rates and state ownership, the cigarette packet was used as an important tool for national propaganda as well as tax revenues (Gang 2011). Additionally, tobacco was provided to conscripted male soldiers from 1949 to 1981, regardless of whether they smoked or not, followed by tobacco vouchers from 1982 to 2008. Considering the compulsory military service of adult males in Korea and the high smoking rates of male soldiers (78.1% in 1994 and 47.2% in 2010) (Kim 2011), as well as the deep influence of military culture (e.g. loyalty) on general work culture in Korea (Janelli and Yim 1993), it might not be excessive to suppose that, during that period, smoking was considered so inevitable for young male adults in a workplace that even drinks for smokers were to be expected.

1)

2)

3)

4)

<p><b>흡연자용 음료 개발</b></p> <p>동원산업은 9일 흡연자용 음료인 「니코제로」(사진)를 개발, 판매에 나섰다.</p> <p>이 음료는 무·모과·복숭아 등을 원료로 사용, 니코틴 제거 및 거담 작용이 뛰어나다고 회사측은 밝혔다. 같은 캔당 700원</p>	<p><b>목보호 음료 '네카'시판</b></p> <p>LG생활건강은 3일 20~30대 직장남성을 위한 목보호 기능성 음료 「네카」(사진)를 선보였다.</p> <p>목에 좋다는 모과와 배, 박하, 유칼립투스를 함유한 이 음료의 소비자가격은 캔(242ml)당 700원.</p>
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Figure 3.2 Various commercial advertisements of substances aimed at the workforce in Korea

### 3.1.2. What does the notion of chemical employeeship mean?

Beginning from one anecdote (“Let’s take a medicine!”), what caught my attention was how many chemicals were used, provided and sold with respect to the workforce. In this regard, I paid attention to the historical fact that drug foods had been effective agencies for propagating trade or increasing the extent and intensity of labour during European economic expansion ever since Europeans came into contact with new foods (e.g. tobacco, chocolate, tea, coffee, coca) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Jankowiak and Bradburd 1996, 2003).<sup>31</sup> Non-European people, however, appreciated the labour enhancing effects of drugs and used them prior to European contact (Courtwright 2001:137-138). The thing Jankowiak and Bradburd (2003:24) argue is that European economic expansion ‘greatly intensified the relationship of drugs to labour’ by spurring workers to produce ‘under constraints of time and cost.’ However, my research suggests that what matters to companies with respect to drug foods is to sustain maximum workforce performance regardless of whatever it costs workers’ bodies; that is, drug foods help employees “work longer and harder than they could have without the drug” (ibid).

Meanwhile, the use of drug foods as a labour enhancer seems to be not only based on their pharmacological properties, but also connected to cultural preconceptions. Burke (1996:152-153) shows that in Zimbabwe in 1940s and 1950s European colonists encouraged Africans to buy and drink ‘tea’ as a labour enhancer to get a better job, because white colonists had a preconception of ‘lazy and indolent African labourers.’ In relation to this, Africans in Zimbabwe were stirred up to use Western ‘soap’ to clean their ‘dirtiness’ and keep healthy in order to secure a job (ibid:151-

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<sup>31</sup> Jankowiak and Bradburd (2003:3-4) argue the process of European expansion with drugs took three stages. First, during the early stage, drugs helped to draw indigenous people into relations of ‘dependency of European trade partners.’ Second, during the later period of contact, drugs were provided in order to ‘increase the amount or the intensity of labour.’ Finally, drugs shifted from depressants (e.g. alcohol, opium, and marijuana), being used to ‘overcome the drudgery of long and hard physical work’ and its ‘pain and discomfort,’ to stimulants (e.g. caffeine and nicotine), which guaranteed ‘a more sober and alert workforce.’

153). In contrast to this, industrial employers of the United States in the early twentieth century seemed to give up their moral prejudice amongst male smokers (i.e. “loose in their morals,” “very apt to be untruthful”) and accepted their employees’ smoking habit on the shop floor in order to secure their workforce (Wood 2011). In the same vein, during the Second World War in Canada, female smokers were accepted as war workers to replace the reduced male workforce, even though before the war these women had avoided smoking in the workplace in order not to get fired because of their socially undesirable habit (Cook 2012:246-247) (Figure 3.3). This story is quite similar to what I observed in Z call centre with respect to female call handlers’ smoking in the centre.



Figure 3.3 The Canadian woman, Veronica Foster, known as "Ronnie, the Bren Gun Girl" during the second world war. She was a popular war worker in a gun manufacturing plant. The picture clearly shows that female worker’s smoking was not banned at that period (retrieved on 12 September 2016 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veronica\\_Foster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veronica_Foster))

As we saw in Chapter 2, drug foods as labour enhancers have a lot in common. In their background, the employees are requested to have a specific ‘disposition,’ directly connected to securing employment. Angrosino (2003:116), through examining the capitalist development of the Trinidad sugar industry, points out that “the profit motive of the owners came to colour all decisions about the disposition of its workforce.” Tracking the drug foods’ shift from ganja (marijuana) - traditional Indian drug food- to rum, a primary product of the mechanised sugar industry, he effectively shows that the planters tried to create a ‘captive’ consumer class and labourer in a cycle of debt and obligation to work for its profit (ibid:102, 116). Thus, the core

disposition that matters to employers appears to be whatever assures a consistent supply of workers for financial profit regardless of other considerations such as morality, cleanliness, health, ethnicity and gender.

Yet, in this line of inquiry, what kinds of disposition do the call centre employers in Korea expect of their female employees? What I observed during the 2012 pilot study regarding workers' smoking habits was that employees' productivity (e.g. effectively managing emotions even if depending on smoking) is a more fundamental requirement than adhering to general cultural norms attached to Korean women (e.g. not to smoke). Furthermore, female workers' smoking is not necessarily understood with regard to labour enhancement or drug foods, rather biomedical authorities are likely to reduce it to a personal unhealthy or addictive habit, particularly their concerns about passive smoking and its harmful effects on the foetus. In a way, the splendid achievements of biomedicine, ironically, seem to make the longstanding relationship between labour and drug foods unseen or even ignored in the workplace. Nonetheless, I will not engage in debates over the utility of smoking itself. Instead, approaching the call centre issue through the lens of 'drug foods,' I ultimately examine what kinds of disposition the employer requests of female call handlers.

In this context, the notion of 'chemical employeeship'<sup>32</sup> represents the current employment situation in which employees are required to have a certain disposition to work longer and harder with the help of any chemicals that they access, to increase the employers' profit. Paraphrasing Wacquant (2010)'s statement about neoliberal states being 'restricted workfare and expansive prisonfare,' chemical employeeship can be stated as 'restricted labour welfare' and 'expansive drugfare.' The idea of this concept is motivated by Petryna's 'biological citizenship' (Petryna

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<sup>32</sup> The reason I choose the word 'chemical' to refer drug foods is to avoid any possible prejudice and to sound neutral (e.g. 'drug' may imply illegal aspects). Additionally, 'chemical' seems to show the characteristics of drug foods to stimulate or relax the body through specific mechanisms compared to the word 'substance.' I want to emphasise the actual benefits of drug foods with respect to labour.

2004). While she researched the politics of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster-exposed populations in Ukraine during a time of a harsh market transition (1992-1997), she observed that a citizenship was not a birthright at all but something to demand and that “the injured biology of a population has become the basis for social membership and for staking claims to citizenship” (ibid:261). She calls this ‘biological citizenship.’ In the same vein, Ecks (2005) introduces ‘pharmaceutical citizenship’ as one form of biological citizenship regarding antidepressant marketing and its promise of demarginalisation in India. He shows that mainly through medical marketing in India, an effective antidepressant treatment has become understood as demarginalising suffering individuals. He looks at those for “whom taking of medicines becomes a practice of becoming a full citizen,” thus ‘pharmaceutical citizenship’ (ibid:241), as a process of reintegration into society.

Following on from the concepts of biological citizenship and pharmaceutical citizenship, the situation of female call centre workers in Korea, whose smoking rates are high, could be described as chemical employeeship, defined as the exhausted biology of workers, being chemically boosted, which has become both the basis for employment and for staking claims to payment. In fact, as I introduced in Chapter 1.1, ‘taking medication’ to manage one’s stress in the call centre is perceived as ‘very rational,’ whether it is Oriental herbal medicine for Ms Ok or psychiatric medicine and smoking for Ms Woo.

In his concept of pharmaceutical citizenship, Ecks sought to highlight the duality of rights and obligations between the citizen and the government regarding the supply and demand of drugs. That is, he emphasises that drugs play a constitutive role in changing from a ‘not-yet-citizen patient’ to ‘a full citizen patient’ (Ibid., 241). Compared to this approach by Ecks, there is no observable stipulation between the Korean call centres and their female employees regarding the direct obligations and rights of both parties regarding the use of drugs, including smoking, at work. In terms of the tobacco policy on a national level, not smoking cigarettes to maintain one’s health can be considered as a ‘duty’ as a citizen. Even if the right to work (Article 32 (1) of the

Constitution) and the duty to work (Article 32 (2) of the Constitution) in Korea are inscribed in the Constitution,<sup>33</sup> in reality, employment and labour are directly under the negotiation of the rights and duties of the enterprise within the framework of the legal standard defined by the state with the rights and duties of the workers.

Just as Petryna states that ‘biology’ (e.g. “biological ties”, “scientific know-how”) (2004:255, 262) became the standard when the nuclear disaster-exposed Chernobyl residents demanded citizenship, the standard today when the people in Korea discuss the rights and obligations of work is ‘neoliberalism’. Following Petryna’s argument (Ibid., 261), it is not a birthright for Korean citizens to request the ‘right to work’, that is, ‘employeeeship’. The current high unemployment rate in Korea is evidence of this (further details in Chapter 7.2.1). Under neo-liberal policies, citizenship to request the right to work is governed not by the government, but by the decisions of companies. Labour flexibility is a representative example. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the rights and duties of labour, it seems to be more appropriate to express ‘citizenship’ in Korean society as ‘employeeeship’. In other words, the advantage of shifting from the concept of ‘citizenship’ to ‘employeeeship’ is to emphasise the reality of the Korean government that the powers of employment and dismissal are stronger than those of the government. Østergaard (2016) states that the “occupational citizenship” of the conflict should take into account citizens’ duties prior to the rights of workers, taking as an example the strike of health workers in Burkina Faso in 2012. On the other hand, in the case of Korea, Korea is in a position to place more emphasis on the ‘duties’ of workers (in accordance with the needs of the company), rather than claiming ‘rights’ (especially rights to work) as citizens. I propose to refer to this situation with the newly

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<sup>33</sup> In the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, Article 32 (1) states that “All citizens shall have the right to work. The State shall endeavor to promote the employment of workers and to guarantee optimum wages through social and economic means and shall enforce a minimum wage system under the conditions as prescribed by Act”. Article 32 (2) states that “All citizens shall have the duty to work. The State shall prescribe by Act the extent and conditions of the duty to work in conformity with democratic principles”. (Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2017 from <http://www.law.go.kr>).

developed concept of ‘chemical employeeship’.

Current workers in Korea must prove their superior ability to gain labour rights. The introduction of the neoliberal policies after the 1997 Asian financial crisis (see details in Chapter 7.2.1) – such as legalising a massive layoff and temporary work agencies – probably contributed to the spread of using drugs at work. It was due to the fact that the key to changing to full citizen-as-employee status from not-yet-citizen employee status is the ability to achieve the desired goal steadily without complaint; therefore, this results in a ‘voluntary’ use of ancillary means to endure the mental and physical overload. Among today’s female call centre workers, the use of drugs, such as cigarettes, at work represents a reality in which they depend on individualised solutions rather than organising collective resistance against unfair labour demands (cf. Nadeem (2011:48)). Therefore, through the concept of chemical employeeship, I aim to counter the societal illusion, which makes the use of each chemical simply a personal choice, and to emphasise that this is a kind of invisible tax that the company is exploiting through the workers’ bodies.

There are another several points I want to emphasise with the notion of chemical employeeship. First of all, the core of labour is a body. Whatever the types of labour are classified into (e.g. physical, mental and emotional), all of them are conducted through the worker’s body. This is not to refer to Descartes’s body-mind dualism, but, quite the opposite, to support the perspective that physical, biological body is not detachable from mind and emotion. Thus, to maximise the efficiency of any kind of labour, the body is mediated by the chemicals activated through it. Second, the substances used in a workplace, whether it is called an addiction or personal preference, are not just a matter of the person, but are deeply connected to social, cultural and economic dimensions. I will elaborate on this throughout the remainder of this thesis.

Third, I want to argue that the addiction model, the biomedical perspective on some chemical use, can ‘depoliticise’ employees who depend on drug foods to secure jobs (Singer and Baer 1995:27-28). Furthermore, the accessibility and effectiveness of drug foods can also depoliticise the users. As mentioned in Chapter 2.2, young employees in Indian call centres are more likely to

depend on individualised consumption of stimulants or alcohol to assuage their stress than collective resistance through an organising union (Nadeem 2011:48-56). Regarding female smoking, Doyal (1995:195) suggests that “cigarettes represent a paradox for all women smokers...like tranquillisers, they offer women the *illusion of power* over their emotions” (emphasis added). Thus, it might be said that employees who use drug foods have freedom to use chemicals but become depoliticised.

Last, ‘chemical employeeship’ spotlights the employer’s perspective of drug foods with respect to profit-making. Pioneering research by Jankowiak and Bradburd (1996; 2003) about the active supply of drug foods to exploit the aboriginal workforce provides an illuminating lesson on this. Even though time has passed and medical and legal understanding of drug foods has changed, the characteristics of these foods as labour enhancers still seem to be recognised by employers. The exemplary case (mentioned in Chapter 2.3) of the provision of a nearby smoking area for female employees in Korean call centres, is contradictory to the negative norms about female smoking in Korea. Thus, the notion of chemical employeeship illuminates the way employers prefer employees who exhaust themselves, boosted by drug foods. It is as if the docile disposition is a ‘symbolic tax’ (Bourdieu 1977:95) implicitly charged by companies to secure employees’ labour.

### 3.1.3. Grasping ‘lived experience’: the necessity of phenomenological approaches

In the previous section, I explained the origin and meaning of chemical employeeship. However, this thesis is not about chemicals themselves, but is rather about the employees using them as working drugs. I aim to figure out how employees perceive and adapt to the dispositions required of workers to sustain their employment. In this sense, drug foods are a departure point and vehicle to arrive at deeper understanding of them. In order to grasp the employees’ perspectives, in the following chapters, I pay attention to the ‘lived experience’ of female call centre workers. In phenomenology, ‘lived experience’ does not mean simple experience, but “pre-reflective,

subjective human experience as it is lived” (Carel 2016:2).<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty particularly emphasises ‘the primacy of perception’ over reflective and analytic thought for the study of the essences of consciousness (Marshall 2008:55). Quoting a well-known phenomenological expression by Husserl, to grasp the lived experience it is necessary to ‘bracket’ or set aside any theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematising (Jackson 1996:2, 10). Merleau-Ponty clearly shows the meaning of ‘lived’ in his *Phenomenology of Perception* when he describes that:

“It is the goal of a philosophy that aspires to be an “exact science,” but it is also an account of “lived” space, “lived” time, and the “lived” world. It is the attempt to provide *a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations* that the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer of that experience.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):lxx) (emphasis added)

It is because of the ‘ambiguity’ of the benefits of smoking that I used Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological explanation of lived experience. During my pilot and main fieldwork, I realised that perspectives about possible benefits of smoking differ between ‘conceived perception’ (e.g. biomedical understanding of nicotine addiction) and ‘lived perception’ (e.g. a smoker’s subjective experience) (Marshall 2008:55). Biomedically, smoking is defined as nicotine addiction mediated by brain neurochemistry (Jarvis 2004). The typical effects smokers report such as calming down stress and working more effectively is explained as alleviating

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<sup>34</sup> In phenomenology, the expression ‘lived experience’ is often found. Particularly, Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, often uses the French adjective, *vécu*, which can be translated as ‘lived’ or ‘experienced’ depending on the context. Donald A. Landes, translating Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* in 2012, explains that Merleau-Ponty indicated that the nuance of *vivre*, a verbal form of *vécu*, can be explained explicitly using German verbs *leben* and *erleben*. (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):xlx). ‘*leben*’ means “to simply live” and ‘*erleben*’ means “to experience a world (by a subject).” The latter is often associated with *vécu* (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):528). Thus, ‘lived experience’ from the perspective of phenomenology can be understood as subjective experience of a world rather than simple experience.

‘nicotine withdrawal symptoms’ (e.g. irritability, restlessness, feeling miserable, impaired concentration, increased appetite, cravings for cigarettes) (ibid:278). However, the specific symptoms are not difficult to observe amongst employees working in exploited and oppressive environments. Thus, instead of ignoring smoker’s subjective smoking experience by the logic of ‘nicotine withdrawal symptom,’ one could meaningfully speak of the ‘life-induced withdrawal symptom’ of smokers easily obscured by the theoretical elaborations of medicine. ‘Life-induced withdrawal symptoms’ can be explained as uncomfortable symptoms through everyday life struggles that people feel an impulse to alleviate quickly by smoking. In this context, these symptoms can be inferred from early statements about what people had expected from smoking, particularly when there had been no clear medical reports on harmful effects of smoking. A popular press article below is a good resource from which to suggest that ‘worry, overpressure and exhaustion’ belong to ‘life-induced withdrawal symptoms.’

“Whatever be its merits or demerits, one thing is certain – namely, that there is an ever-increasing subjection to the influence of this narcotic, whose soothing powers are requisitioned to counteract the evil effects of the *worry, overpressure and exhaustion* which characterise the age in which we live.”

– 1889 the New York Times, (quoted in Goodman (2005:119-120)) (emphasis added)

With regard to drug use issues, there are exemplary ethnographies dealing with lived experience. Garcia (2008) shows well the ‘elegiac’ nature of Hispanos’ heroin addiction in New Mexico. She describes her work as ‘critical phenomenology of heroin addiction’ (ibid:720). For Hispanos who had lost their ancestral lands through successive colonial encounters, heroin was regarded as a remedy for the pain - “Heroin cures everything” - accompanying the past of loss and displacement (ibid:725). Hispanic addicts in New Mexico considered the endless cycle<sup>35</sup> of

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<sup>35</sup> While Garcia shows the embodied complexity of heroin addiction amongst Hispanos, notably, she gives extra attention to that one female addict’s life which tragically coincided with the nature of addictive drug’s chronicity. Garcia (2008:722) explains that “In the context of addiction, chronicity as

suffering could be only escaped by heroin, however temporarily. There are other ethnographies looking at addiction from the perspective of users by bracketing biomedical logics. Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) explain the lives of homeless heroin injectors in San Francisco through their new concept, 'lumpen abuse.' They analyse the illegal substance 'abuse' of the homeless not from biomedical perspective but from the broader view that their everyday suffering and drug use were politically structured phenomena encompassing multiple 'abusive' relationships (ibid:16). Biehl (2007) shows that in 1990s in Brazil many poor homeless people were exposed to the danger of HIV ("To have HIV...is like not having money," "the risk is hunger" (ibid:37, 64)). Biehl asserts that the only accessible and available exit from the marginalised social milieu for them was a 'drug' (ibid:403). Knight (2015) researches the sufferings of addicted pregnant women living in daily rent hotels in San Francisco. She analyses their repetitive craving for drugs as not simply due to drug withdrawal symptoms but as 'temporal constraint' (i.e. 'addict time'), which pushes them to do more sex work combining with 'hotel time' (paying \$35-60 per day for a room) (ibid:70-76). She also describes their ordinary self-medication with stimulants and substances, not as illegal drug abuse but as 'street psychiatric practices' so as to keep themselves productive. For example, one woman explains that 'speed' (methamphetamine) helps her to calm down and feel sociable, unlike 'crack' (cocaine), but crack keeps her staying tough enough to manage her desperate daily life (e.g. fighting on crack) (ibid:129).

With respect to labour and chemical use, Pine (2008), in her book *Working Hard, Drinking Hard*, shows the different routes of labour exploitation. She explores the symbolic violence of stigmatising Honduran alcohol drinking by the government, media, companies and Hondurans themselves, which contributes to exploiting the cheap workforce. Pine emphasises that 'drunk' is

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knowledge and practice has become the ground for a new form of melancholic subjectivity, one that recasts a long-standing ethos of Hispano suffering into a succession of recurring institutional interactions." Her interest is the coincidence between chronicity of drug addiction and the endless cycle of life suffering of the marginalised. This recognition is quite relevant to my understanding that nicotine withdrawal symptoms are similar to life-induced withdrawal symptoms.

not the same as the medical term alcoholic, but refers to a certain cultural identity of those who deserve to be treated as uncivilised enough to be exploited (ibid:85-96). In the frame of symbolic violence, poor, undisciplined, violent and sexualised natives who indulge in drinking should be grateful for the international companies – maquiladora – who employ them (ibid:140-149). In her research, alcohol is not directly used to boost labour performance. Nonetheless, through subjectivity formation by symbolic violence, alcohol engages in the structural mechanism of labour exploitation of the Honduran working class. At this point, it is worthwhile to refer to Angrosino’s insight about drug foods based on his research on aboriginal people’s consumption of rum and marijuana in Trinidad, as below.

“Exploited and oppressed people would seem to have a fundamental psychological need to compensate for their misery by relying on resources (including drug foods) that either *chemically* or by means of *spiritual, historical, or cultural resonance made them feel better about themselves.*” (Angrosino 2003:116) (emphasis added)

Angrosino points out that, in Trinidad, drug foods work not by directly improving workforce performance, but by compensating for one’s misery through means that go beyond mere chemical action. Likewise, frequent alcohol drinking amongst Honduran workers can be understood not only as the result of individual chemical dependence but also the historical cycles of poverty due to subsequent colonial exploitations. The catch here is ambiguity. Namely, resonance can happen by several means. Therefore, grasping the ‘lived experience’ of subjects is essential to understanding chemical employeeship, particularly to figure out the required and adaptive dispositions of workers to sustain their employment.

### 3.2. Body as a field-note: from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of body

“I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather *I am my body.*”  
(Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):151) (emphasis added)

In this sector, I examine a relevant theory to help to understand the ‘lived experience’ of the female call handlers’ labour and health, particularly their embodied dispositions. In this regard, I focus on the ‘body’ concept, based on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body. Quoted above, Merleau-Ponty considered the ‘body’ as central to the subject of perception. The main insight from his philosophy is that the body is not an object of ‘my thinking,’ but it is a ‘totality of lived significations’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):155). Examining his phenomenological perspective, I show that body is inseparable from mind and the world; that body is not only the centre of perception, but also the starting point for change.

#### 3.2.1. Body schema and motor intentionality: the foundation of Merleau-Ponty’s idea

Merleau-Ponty says that phenomenology is the ‘study of essences’ such as the essence of perception or of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):lxx). This methodology was ‘describing,’ not ‘explaining or analyzing’ (ibid:lxxi); that is, to return to ‘the things themselves’ or ‘a world prior to knowledge’ (ibid:lxxii). As explained elaborately by Jackson (1996:2) it is an attempt to describe consciousness in its ‘lived immediacy,’ before it is subject to ‘theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing.’ This phenomenological perspective is well-known as the ‘phenomenological epoch’ or ‘bracketing’, following the notions of Husserl, the founder of twentieth-century phenomenological philosophy (Macann 1993). In general, this has been particularly utilised in many qualitative studies under the heading of ‘the phenomenological research method,’ which is often understood as aiming for ‘fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a

phenomenon as it is concretely lived' (Finlay 2009:6). In the anthropological arena, for almost thirty years, it has been broadly deployed mainly due to its great potential for anthropologists to grasp 'life as lived,' particularly regarding the issues of 'embodiment' (Desjarlais and Throop 2011). Phenomenological approaches, however, have faced many critiques of which the most pressing is that they are likely to 'ignore the political and socioeconomic determinants of life' (ibid:95). The critique is often combined with the notion of 'naïve subjectivism' (Jackson 1996:23). From the perspective of Marxism, phenomenology is criticised for its 'reassertion of subjectivity,' while the origin of Marxism is 'the attack upon subjectivity' (e.g. "The Ego is a product, not an agent") (Wartofsky 1977:133, 137). However, as Desjarlais and Throop (2011:95) point out, many of the critiques are based on 'too simplistic and homogenizing' views of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty should have been exempted from the critique; he had already provided a firm solution to anthropologists, 'the body as a field-note' (Wacquant 1995:73).

"As Marx said, history does not walk on its head; but neither does it think with its feet. Or better, it is not for us to worry about either its "head" or its "feet," but rather *its body*."  
- In *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):lxxxiii) (emphasis added)

"the problems of knowing what is the subject of the State, of war, etc., are exactly of the same type as the problem of knowing what is the subject of perception: one will not clear up the philosophy of history except by working out the *problem of perception*."  
- In *The Visible and Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968:196) (emphasis added)

"The *perceived world* is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth."  
- In *The Primacy of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1964:13) (emphasis added)

Faced with the criticism, the main concern of phenomenological approaches is "how one can recognise the presence of the social and historical within human consciousness, recognise forms of self-deception and distortion, without devaluing local claims to knowledge?" (Good 1994:62).

Merleau-Ponty, in this sense, shows how his phenomenology could overcome Marxist criticisms of its lack of consideration of broader political and structural forces. As quoted above, he considers that solving the problem of ‘perception’ from the view of ‘body’ is a fundamental route to grasping many political and socioeconomic problems. Most of all, he suggests the ‘body’ is the ‘point of view upon the world’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):73). This idea derives from previous philosophical conflicts between ‘rationalism’ and ‘empiricism’ (ibid:54-60); he describes the conflicts as that “the living body became an exterior without an interior, subjectivity became an interior without an exterior, that is, an impartial spectator” (ibid:56). He develops the body as something that is ‘conscious,’ in other words, ‘incarnate consciousness’ (Marshall 2008:60) or ‘embodied subject’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):53).

Merleau-Ponty declares, “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):151). The ‘I’ in this sentence is who is ‘thinking.’ Thus, he insists that my thinking is not in front of my body. He expresses it more explicitly as follows; “Motricity<sup>36</sup> is thus not, as it were, a servant of consciousness” (ibid:140). Here, he not only resists Descartes’ mind-body dichotomy, but insists on ‘the intentionality of the body’ (ibid:139); that is, ‘motor intentionality’ (ibid:113), meaning that the body itself has a motor power. Right here, Merleau-Ponty says his famous quote, “Consciousness is originally not an “I think that,” but rather an “I can”” (ibid:139). It means that a person in the ‘conscious’ state is not necessarily ‘thinking’, but rather his/her body itself is intentionally moving in situated space. This conceptualisation of motor intentionality is regarded as the one of the most significant contributions of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of the body (e.g. Dolezal (2015:21)).

With respect to the notion of motor intentionality, Merleau-Ponty suggests that our motor intentionality is guided by ‘body schema.’ He defines it not as just a summary of our bodily

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Motricity’ is translated from French word *motricité*, which means ‘motor function, motor activity, and the power or faculty of movement’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):1).

experience but the 'global awareness of my posture in the inter-sensory world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):102) and 'a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world' (ibid:103). Merleau-Ponty considers this a crucial component of perception. Considering the process of an action, it is evoked when a body faces a certain situation, subsequently, sensing it, grasping its signification, and then moving. Here, the manner in which a body senses and moves is influenced by 'body schema.' In this sense, Merleau-Ponty thinks a person perceives a world through his/her body schema and makes significations in a world. He gives a familiar example of a candle light. If the light of candle had burned one child, the child would be reluctant to touch it. Then the light of a candle is not the 'pure quale'<sup>37</sup> for the child but 'inhabited by a sense' that gives it a 'signification' (ibid:52). Thus, Merleau-Ponty insists that there is no pure quale and every sensing of quale has its signification. As a result, 'sensing always includes a reference to the body' (ibid:52), i.e. the 'body schema.' The child's hand itself knows where to move in front of a candle.

In addition, the notion of body schema is crucial to figure out his understanding of the relationship between body and consciousness, consequently habit. With regard to this, Merleau-Ponty says, "Consciousness is being toward the thing through the *intermediary* of the body" (ibid:140) (emphasis added). It means that consciousness cannot arise without the intermediary of the body, whereas the body can move without the mediation of consciousness. Following Merleau-Ponty's expression, the body is not a servant of consciousness, rather its master. It is connected to his understanding of habit. He considers habit not as 'a form of knowledge nor an automatic reflex, but 'knowledge in our hands, which is only given through a bodily effort' (ibid:145). He thus thinks of forming a habit as the 'reworking and renewal of the body schema' (ibid:143). His insight has many implications for understanding the disposition of female call centre workers, particularly when considered together with another statement, viz. "our body is

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<sup>37</sup> 'quale,' in philosophy, means "a quality or property as perceived or experienced by a person." (retrieved on 2th Oct 2016 from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/quale>).

not an object for an “I think”: it is a totality of lived significations that moves toward its equilibrium” (ibid:155). Following this line, the bodies of female call handlers are a totality of lived significations. In other words, their routine or job-related behaviours in workplaces would be the body schema which is the consequences of the accumulation of knowledge or significations in their bodies. Their dispositions and related behaviours such as patience, assiduity or meekness, suppressing their reasonable anger and resistance – all preferable to employers – result in the negative or even humiliating significations sensed by their bodies becoming absorbed into them as body schema. Thus, call handlers’ bodies can sense and move without any consciousness just as if ‘the candle’s light once burnt them.’ The equilibrium, at this point, that their bodies are moving toward is probably not ‘Hands Up’ (i.e. resisting, being exposed to humiliation), but rather ‘Hands Down’ (i.e. endurance, suppression). These workers’ dispositions might be the same as the disposition anticipated or formed by chemical employeeship (e.g. stretching out one’s hand towards a cigarette, not towards employers). Therefore, it can be said that during the fieldwork the body of the worker itself is a crucial field-note.

### 3.2.2. Subjectivity as embodied and inter-corporeal

#### 3.2.2.1. Embodied subjectivity

“I can only understand the function of the living body by accomplishing it and to the extent that I am a body that rises up toward the world.”

(Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):78)

During the main fieldwork, there was an unforgettable opportunity to recognise my own ‘body schema.’ When I joined the ABC call centre union’s street rally on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2015 (see the details in Chapter 4.6.2), I felt awkward and could sense that my body was afraid of chanting

together and putting my hands up while sensing the glances of passers-by and the stares of nearby policemen. My body was almost out of order. Just as Merleau-Ponty states above, I could only understand my 'living' body through 'accomplishing' it. Regarding the issue of subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the importance of 'body' (i.e. "I am my body"). To him, subjectivity means basically 'embodied' (or 'incarnated') subjectivity. The notions of 'body schema,' motricity and motor intentionality show his perspective well.

Meanwhile, there are similar discussions to approach the subjectivity issue principally from the perspective of 'motricity' - related embodiment. First of all, regarding gender aspects, Young (1980) discusses feminine body comportment, particularly, a 'feminine style of throwing' from the perspective of phenomenology. Young insists that so-called 'feminine' body comportment and movement are not a natural or eternal 'feminine essence,' but influenced by the 'situatedness' of woman's actual bodily movement and orientation to the space and world (ibid:139). Later, Evans (2006) examines girls' low participation rates in physical education ("I'd feel ashamed") and suggests it could result from double pressure of the 'fear of masculinization' and 'inhibited intentionality' (ibid:554). Keat (1982) suggests that masculine body posture and movement comes from 'closing off one's body to the rejected domains of emotional experience (e.g. feelings of weakness and helplessness).

Wacquant (1995) examine the bodily labour of professional boxers in an American metropolis. He describes how becoming an adept fighter is not by 'conscious transfer of information, but 'embodiment of the mental and corporeal schemata immanent in pugilistic practice' (ibid:72). He suggests the notion of 'body work,' defining it as 'imprinting into the bodily schema of the fighter postural sets, patterns of movement, and subjective emotional-cognitive states' (ibid:73). Notably, he points out that the boxer embodies not only the technique, but also 'a sacrificial giving of oneself to the game,' in other words, 'the unconscious fit between his habitus and the game' (ibid:88). That is, boxers are willing to take risks, including, potentially, facing death. Wacquant (ibid:87) emphasises that this dread of being hurt is often allayed not by consciousness, but by

‘the consuming routine of the workout’ to the extent that acceptance of the stakes become ‘lodged deep within one’s body.’ His insight into the boxer’s body work may be relevant to the lived experience of call centre workers. Just as he describes the boxer becoming a ‘fighting machine’ in the gym, a ‘social factory’ (ibid:70), the call handler can be said to become a ‘talking machine’ in the centre, a modern sweatshop. In the call centre, the consuming workloads of repetitive service calls could help the call handler allay possible emotional damage by the customer’s abuse; in other words, she or he gets to have ‘machinic subjectivity’ (Vora 2010:35).

### 3.2.2.2. Intercorporeal Subjectivity

“*One’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within and forms a system with it*”

(Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):209) (emphasis added)

Although phenomenology is often criticised for its alleged theories of naïve subjectivism, phenomenology is not just a philosophy of the subject, rather of subjectivity (Jackson 1996:23-26). Subjectivity, in effect, reaches beyond the self and includes social selves, becoming a matter of ‘intersubjectivity’ (ibid:26). Merleau-Ponty, in the above quote, explains the human character of intersubjectivity briefly and clearly by comparing one’s body being in the world with presence of the heart in the organism. His emphasis shares Heidegger’s notion of “In-der-Welt-Sein,” namely, ‘Being-in-the-world’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):lxxviii);

“phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the *intersection of my experiences with those of others* through a sort of *gearing into each other.*”

(Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):lxxxiv) (emphasis added)

Like the above, Merleau-Ponty considers the inevitable inter-relationship with others, through gearing into each other, that is, fitting each other 'in the act' (ibid:496). For him, experience is inter-experience and thus intersubjectivity is in effect a matter of inter-corporeality. Furthermore, comparing intersubjectivity with Heidegger's notion, he emphasises that "we are in and toward the world and not merely in the world" (ibid:483); not 'Being-in-the-world (*être dans le monde*),' rather 'Being-in-and-toward-the-world (*être au monde*)' (ibid:xlix). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he ends it with a quote from Saint-Exupéry's *Flight to Arras* (1942); "Man is a knot of relations, and relations alone count for man" (ibid:483). For him, man is already in the phenomenal world which is 'pregnant of signification' (ibid:453) and thus he states "my signification is outside of myself" (ibid:482). In addition, our body has its motor intentionality 'toward' the signification of the world. Beneath every act, he thinks, is an 'operative intentionality already at work' prior to every judgement (ibid:453). In this sense, Merleau-Ponty states that our body is not 'in' space, but 'inhabits' space (ibid:140).

Goffman's concepts of 'performance' (Goffman 1990(1959)) and 'interaction ritual' (Goffman 2005(1967)) are useful adjuncts to Merleau-Ponty's theory of intercorporeality. First of all, Goffman provides very detailed explanations about interactive performance. Second, Goffman focuses on the reason why people pursue interaction rituals with respect to negative emotions such as embarrassment and shame (Scheff, Phillips, and Kincaid 2015). Neither issue is dealt with sufficiently in Merleau-Ponty's works. Goffman primarily focuses on self-presentation in the situation of 'one another's immediate physical presence' (Goffman 1990(1959):15). He emphasises the neglected aspect of the microstructures of embodied interaction. The central concept is 'face-to-face interaction.' For Goffman, "to study face-saving is to study the traffic rules of social interaction" (Goffman 2005(1967):12).<sup>38</sup> Here, 'face' is a metaphorical concept

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<sup>38</sup> Manning (2013:78, 79) explains that in Goffman's work on social interaction four distinct background assumptions can be discerned. First, interacting persons should display 'situational propriety.' Second, interacting persons should estimate the proper level of 'involvement' for an

which means ‘an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes’ or ‘the positive social value a effectively claims during a particular contact’ (ibid:5); for example, ‘glances, gestures, positionings, and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation’ (ibid:1, 2). What I want to point out here is Goffman’s emphasis on ‘body idiom’ as below.

“when individuals come into one another’s immediate presence in circumstances where no spoken communication is called for, they none the less inevitably engage one another in communication of a sort, for in all situations, significance is ascribed to certain matters that are not necessarily connected with particular verbal communications. These comprise bodily appearance and personal acts...Although an individual can stop talking, he cannot stop communicating through his *body idiom*: he must say either the right or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing.”

- Goffman (1966:33-35) (emphasis added)

Goffman explains that people cannot stop communicating through their body idiom regardless of whether they are talking or not. In other words, individuals are always in a specific situation which “itself makes its demands that they feel impelled to follow” (Collins 2014:17). In the call centre, for instance, workers have to be vigilant about the working environment and continue to act following the appropriate and required body idiom. Meanwhile, the idiom is not only a rule to keep but also the window for communicating with others. To follow Merleau-Ponty’s expression, it is ‘perceptual syntax’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):38). The body idiom is the grammar for perceiving the structure of the world. Because of this, Merleau-Ponty argues that the structure of the world cannot be fully grasped by consciousness alone, but rather understood by the ‘lived body’ (Dolezal 2015b:12, 13).

With regard to face-to-face interaction, Goffman considers interaction as ‘ritual’ since through the interactive acts ‘the actor shows how worthy he/she is of respect or how worthy he/she feels

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encounter. Third, interacting persons should be ‘accessible’ to every ratified participant. Last, interacting persons should display ‘civil inattention’ to strangers.

others are of it' (Goffman 2005(1967):19). For Goffman, thus, the self is in part 'a ceremonial thing, a sacred object' which must be treated with ritual care such as deference and demeanour practices (ibid:91). In other words, "One's face...is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to sustain it is therefore a ritual one" (ibid:19). Goffman implies that emotions, particularly embarrassment and shame, play an essential role in self-presentation and interaction rituals (Langman 2000:329-333). Most of all, people are not able to completely free themselves from these negative feelings since our body is visible, namely, a 'seen body' (Dolezal 2015:34). Goffman insists that keeping the mode of behaviour is to protect its sanctity and also to avoid embarrassment or shame. For Goffman, "embarrassment is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behaviour but part of this orderly behaviour itself" (Goffman 2005(1967):111). Feelings of embarrassment are, for Goffman, 'emotional dues' to an occasion or 'social tax' (Hochschild 2003(1983):229, 225). At this point, Goffman might differ with Merleau-Ponty from the perspective of 'relations.' Although both understand the human nature of intercorporeality, Goffman considers that people follow body idioms to protect the sanctity of face and feelings; in contrast, following Saint-Exupéry, in *Phenomenology of Perception* ("Man is a knot of relations, and relations alone count for man" (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):483)), Merleau-Ponty seems to regard 'relations' themselves as meaningful to man.

### 3.2.2.3. Lived metaphor for capturing 'lived experience' and grasping subjectivity

Now, my question is how to grasp embodied and intercorporeal subjectivity. It can be the same question as how to research 'lived experience.' Merleau-Ponty (2004(1948):39) says that at first sight the world of perception 'seems to be the one we know best of all,' but claims this is 'a delusion,' followed by our fascination with objects or our current projects. Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the fundamental and inextricable 'ambiguity' of our lived experience, embodied experience and our Being-in-the-world (Landes

2013:20), even stating “ambiguity is essential to human existence” (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):172). In this context, he evaluates the achievement of modern art as being the rediscovery of ‘our forgotten lived experience’ (Merleau-Ponty 2004(1948):39). He particularly admires Cézanne’s painting because of his attempt to ‘capture lived perception’ by rejecting classical doctrine (e.g. distinguishing between outline and colour) (ibid:51). Cézanne attempted to ‘capture a temporally *thick* experience’ (Landes 2013:248) (emphasis added). From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, the adjective ‘thick’ can be interpreted as ‘full of significations’ in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):53).

Instead of artists’ paintings, I prefer Jackson’s phenomenological concept, ‘lived metaphor’ in order to capture ‘lived experience.’ Basically, Jackson thinks that, in all human societies, analogical modes of understanding are pervasive, meaning the search for ‘metaphorical correspondences which link personal, social and natural bodies’ (Jackson 1983:127). Just as for Merleau-Ponty (2012(1962):408) our body is the resource of ‘all the expressive operations’ (quoted below). Jackson pays attention to the correlation between poetic metaphor and embodiment; “the human body is assimilated to the landscape, and the sexual and geomorphological images of the poem have exact parallels in the worldviews already referred to” (Jackson 1983:129).

“*Our body*, insofar as it moves itself, that is, insofar as it is inseparable from a perspective and is this very perspective brought into existence, is the condition of possibility not merely of the geometrical synthesis, but also of *all the expressive operations* and all of the acquisitions that constitute the cultural world.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):408)

However, he argues that metaphor should be comprehended non-dualistically, that is, not as a ‘rhetorical synthesis of two terms’ (e.g. subject and object) but a ‘true interdependency of mind and body’ (Jackson 1983:132; 1989:142). As metaphor can reveal a sensed totality of life, he considers that ‘lived’ metaphor can capture ‘lived’ experience like Cézanne’s paintings; namely,

“a lived poetics of intersubjective life” (Persson 2010:805). Jackson suggests that the ‘lived metaphor’ could be an appropriate phenomenological method to bracket any theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematising:

“This shift from standing outside or above to situating oneself elsewhere within the field of inquiry implies a shift from an emphasis on *explanatory models* to *lived metaphors*. While models impose connections *on experience*, metaphors evoke and mediate connections *within experience*.”

(Jackson 1996:9) (emphasis added)

My musings about the notion of lived metaphor begin with necessity of figuring out key informants’ expressions depicting their suffering. Expressions we shall encounter in the course of this thesis include “disposable battery” (*ilhoeyong baeteoli*) (Chapter 6.3.1), “dirty mouth” (*deoleoun ib*) (Chapter 6.4.1), and “a grilled dry squid on the fire” (*bulpan wi maleun ojingeo*) (Chapter 7.4.1). All these metaphoric expressions capture daily sufferings ‘thickly’ like painting or poetry, and can be understood through the significations they transfer within their particular cultural milieu.

### 3.2.3. The relationship of body schema and habitus to cultural gravity

My idea of ‘cultural gravity’ began with having attended the stretching exercise (*mompyeogi*) assembly of ABC call centre union during my fieldwork (Chapter 8). If I had not had the opportunity to exercise together, laugh together, and heal physical pains, I would not have even thought up such a concept. The exercise was a very inspiring ‘inter-corporeal’ experience. After having joined the group for seven months, I realised that our body is one of the best field-notes and then was able to pay extra attention to the meaning of body posture and the practical effect of its movement. Thus, I recognised there were three different types of ‘Hands Up’ amongst

female call centre workers, indicating 'Humiliation' (Chapter 6), 'Protest' (Chapter 7) and 'Healing' (Chapter8), respectively. In this section, in order to explain my descriptive idea - cultural gravity - I compare Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'body schema' with Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus.'

As previously discussed in Chapter 3.2.1, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the importance of 'body' (i.e. "I am my body") with his insightful notion of 'body schema' as well as motricity and motor intentionality. His notion of body schema as a 'global awareness of my posture in the inter-sensory world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):102) provides many insightful perspectives with which understand the motricity of informants during the fieldwork. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty is not an anthropologist but a philosopher, and did not necessarily develop an anthropological agenda regarding body schema. In the field of social science, Mauss (1973(1935)), in '*Techniques of the body*,' was one of the first to argue that body techniques are determined biologically, psychologically, and sociologically (Lock and Farquhar 2007:22). Particularly, Mauss's notion of 'habitus' of the body (e.g. "Each society has its own special habits") (Mauss *ibid*:71-73) later profoundly influenced Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' (Lock and Farquhar *ibid*:7).

Since one of my main research aims is to figure out how employees perceive and adapt to the required dispositions of workers (e.g. docile, assiduous, industrious) to sustain their employment, Bourdieu's notion of habitus – often briefly defined as 'a system of dispositions' (Bourdieu 1977:72, 214) – is highly relevant. Bourdieu's philosophy of the social, rejecting the 'dualities' (e.g. of body and mind, and subject and object) in particular draws directly from phenomenology including Merleau-Ponty (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:19, 20). Wacquant, known as a student and collaborator of Bourdieu, explains this aspect as below.

"He (Bourdieu) builds in particular on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea of the intrinsic corporeality of the preobjective contact between subject and world in order to restore the body as the source of practical intentionality, as the fount of intersubjective meaning grounded in the preobjective level of experience. His is a structural sociology that

incorporates a phenomenology of the “antepredicative unity of the world and our life” by treating the socialized body, not as an object, but as the repository of a generative, creative capacity to understand, as the bearer of a form of “kinetic knowledge” endowed with a structuring potency”

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:20) (original emphasis)

In this statement, Bourdieu seems to not only recognise Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality and motricity, but also considers the ‘creative capacity’ of the socialised body. However, Jackson (1996:21-22), known as a phenomenological anthropologist, criticises Bourdieu’s notion of habitus for excluding ‘autonomous subjects from the anonymous labyrinths of culture.’

“By dismissing the subject, Bourdieu...would deprive us of the very site where life is lived, meanings are made, will is exercised, reflection takes place, consciousness finds expression, determinations take effect, and habits are formed or broken... Behind Bourdieu’s...refusal to admit the knowing subject to discourse is a refusal to give issues of existential power the same value as issues of political power. Questions of coping with life or finding meaning in the face of suffering are rated less imperative than questions of social domination and distinction.”

(Jackson 1996:22)

Jackson’s criticism of Bourdieu seems justified. When it comes to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, he defines it as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 1977:72). In his definition, ‘structure’ is essential of habitus as if autonomous and creative activities are, in the end, stuck in ongoing structuring cycles. To Bourdieu, habitus is structured by ‘an anonymous, pervasive pedagogic action’ (ibid:87) and also an ‘endless capacity to engender products (e.g. thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions)’ (ibid:95). Thus, he argues that “the conditioned and conditional freedom it (habitus) secures” is “remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty” (ibid:95). Given these descriptions, like Jackson argues above, it is difficult to find any ‘existential power’ in people’s habitus. Jackson,

by contrast, illuminates the lived experience of ‘mundane rituals,’ (e.g. trivia, superstitions, obsessional habits) which, often dismissed, could be a means of changing and regulating the experience of historical or physical events when people are not able to change the events (Jackson 2005:94-95). Resisting undue abstraction in anthropological research, championing ‘radical empiricism,’ he also focuses on the specific - even seemingly trivial - embodied character of lived experience such as lighting a fire (see Jackson (1989:134-135)).

Nonetheless, the notable thing in Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is that he further discusses intercorporeality related to Merleau-Ponty’s ‘body schema’ by introducing the notion of ‘body *hexis*.’ Bourdieu describes body *hexis* as “political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*” (original emphasis) (Bourdieu 1977:93-94). He clearly points out that body *hexis* as embodied disposition influences ‘feeling’ and ‘thinking.’ Particularly, his subsequent explanation about detailed gestures and movements of Kabyle male and female bodies that he had observed during his Algeria fieldwork (1958-60) is noteworthy.

“The oppositions which mythico-ritual logic makes between the male and the female and which organize the whole system of values reappear, for example, in the gestures and movements of the body, in the form of the opposition between the straight and the bent, or between assurance and restraint...The manly man stands up straight and honours the person he approaches or wishes to welcome by looking him right in the eyes...Conversely, a woman is expected to walk with a slight stoop, looking down, keeping her eyes on the spot where she will next put her foot.... *In short, the specifically feminine virtue, modesty, restraint, reserve, orients the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, the inside, the house, whereas male excellence, nif, is asserted in movement upwards, outwards, towards other men.*”

(Bourdieu 1977:94) (emphasis added)

Here Bourdieu emphasises embodied subjectivity between men and women. Namely, the

Kabyle female body should orient ‘downwards, inside’ while the male ‘upwards, outwards.’ This insightful description of gendered motricity has many implications for understanding female call centre workers’ motricity (e.g. hands up) related to employeeship.

Meanwhile, Csordas (1990), an anthropologist following the line of ‘cultural phenomenology’ (Desjarlais and Throop 2011:93), uses both Bourdieu’s habitus concept (for practice) and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the preobjective (for perception) in order to analyse ‘embodied’ experience of ritual language and ritual healing in charismatic religious assemblies. Csordas argues that embodied selves’ perception and practice seem to be ‘mentalistic (subjective) and behaviouristic (objective) but are, in effect, both ‘indeterminate’ following Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu’s notions, respectively (Csordas 1990:34-39). Thus, Csordas rejects the long-standing dualities (subject and object, mind and body) and champions the notion of embodiment for the analysis of culture and history. Notwithstanding his well-balanced argument based on fieldwork, the essential perspective that Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu share: motricity, namely body schema and body *hexis*, is missing. As Warnier puts it,

“phenomenological anthropology has tended to concern itself less with ‘the body’ (anatomo-physiological or bodily schema), let alone motricity, but with meanings and representations attached to the body...whereas Mauss, Schilder, and to a great extent Merleau-Ponty, had insisted on *motion, motor habits, movements and dynamics*, ‘the body’ of the years 1980 to 2000 has become very much a *static body, displayed, manipulated, gendered*, but certainly not the ‘incarnated subject’ dear to Merleau-Ponty.”

(Warnier 2001:8) (emphasis added)

Warnier criticises phenomenological anthropologists such as Csordas for focusing on ‘meaning and representations’ of the body while ignoring the ‘moving and perceiving subject’ (ibid:20). Thus, he suggests a ‘praxeological ethnography’ to research the patterns of subjectivation by motricity in a material culture (ibid:17). Warnier’s argument has implications for grasping the

lived experience of female call centre workers' motricity (e.g. hands up) related to employeeship alongside Bourdieu's insightful description of gendered motricity of Kabyle people. Thus, when I examine three different types of 'hands up' amongst female call handlers with Merleau-Ponty's notion of body schema, I analyse not merely meanings of hands up, but also sensori-motricity and subjectivation, particularly, with respect to the stretching exercise. In other words, I aim not only to look for the cultural/symbolic meanings of the gesture of hands up and its influence of female motricity in a workplace, but also to examine what they learn from actual body stretching and then what kinds of change regarding emotion and health they experience.

The concept of 'cultural gravity' introduced in Chapter 1.3 has many significations from the perspectives of history, culture and emotion; what we might term 'historio-culturo-emotional physics.' Through this concept of cultural gravity, I aim to highlight the 'dynamics' of our body as if the physical body always moves under the influence of gravity. For instance, in a call centre, the resistance toward employers needs the courage to 'physically' raise one's hands, open one's mouth and breath out through one's vocal cords. In this thesis, I use this concept when I explain the cultural force operating on the lower classes or vulnerable people, particularly making them stiffen up in a shrunken posture such as a bent back, backward chest and downward head as if physical gravity were pulling the body down. Then, in the context of cultural gravity, culture itself has a physical power as a reality; the power to give a person pain.

Regarding the forthcoming discussion on the concept of 'cultural gravity', 'class' appears as a basic concept. The meaning of 'class' in Korea – usually expressed as 'socioeconomic status' (SES) in the academic sphere – is mainly understood according to educational level (middle school or less, high school, and college or higher), occupation (non-manual, manual and others) and family income (cf. Khang, Lynch, and Kaplan 2004; Khang and Kim 2005; Khang, Yun, and Lynch 2008). It is different from the meaning of the word 'class' which used to be applied in the context of 'class struggle' or 'the identity of working class' (cf. Kim 1997), rather closer to a descriptive word to reveal one's actual SES in Korean society. The usual barometers of class are

family income, education and occupation. In Korea, these three criteria are closely connected to each other, that is, the level of education depends heavily on the income of one's family, and the type of occupation relies heavily on one's level of education. A parent's wealth ensures their children's high level of education, which subsequently guarantees a good job for them, and in this way the children will be able to maintain their parents' high social status. For example, Goo and Kim (2015) found that the family income determines the academic achievement in Korea; high school graduates from high-income families have a 17 per cent higher entry rate into four-year college courses even if they have the same grade as the students from low-income households. Furthermore, 'Korean Social Trends 2016' reveals that over 50 per cent of Korean people found the intra-generational and inter-generational upward mobility negative. In particular, those with low household income levels felt more negative about the possibility of social mobility in Korea. From these perspectives, it is an undeniable fact that call centre workers belong to the low class of Korean society as they are engaged in the service industry (manual occupation) and receive low wages due to having a relatively low educational level.



Figure 3.4 A cartoon illustrated in local newspaper (*daejeonilbo*) in Korea to represent 'gabjil' (= 'being bossy') controversy in Korean society. The notable thing is that the 'bossy' person stands upright with chest forward and chin up while the 'powerless' person kneels down with back bent and head down. Whereas vulnerable people suffer from cultural gravity, powerful people are upheld by it. (retrieved on 25 July 2016 from [http://www.daejeonilbo.com/news/newsitem.asp?pk\\_no=1152029](http://www.daejeonilbo.com/news/newsitem.asp?pk_no=1152029))

### 3.3. Conclusion: vitality of phenomenology

In this Chapter, I have discussed the concepts of ‘chemical employeeship,’ the body and subjectivity, and ‘cultural gravity.’ From the historical aspects of western countries’ colonial expansion through drug foods (e.g. tobacco, chocolate, tea, coffee, and alcohol) as labour enhancers to ethnographic researches of drug users’ lived experiences, I show what kinds of dispositions employers have requested of employees. One of the most admirable dispositions may have been ‘tireless industriousness.’ Then, I describe ‘chemical employeeship’ as the exhausted biology of workers, being chemically boosted, which has become the basis for employment and for staking claims to payment. Here, chemical employeeship shows that whatever the types of labour are classified into (e.g. physical, mental and emotional), all of them are conducted through the worker’s body. In this thesis, I aim to show how female call handlers perceive and adapt to the dispositions required of workers to sustain their employment. Therefore, I focus on grasping their lived experiences in call centres by focusing on their body, particularly exploring the three types of ‘hands up’ (indicating ‘humiliation,’ ‘protest’ and ‘healing’) they express.

With respect to the body issue, I examine Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of body. For Merleau-Ponty, the ‘body’ is central to the subject of perception, not an object of thinking. Especially, his emphasis on body schema or motor intentionality is pivotal to understanding embodied and intercorporeal subjectivity. Additionally, Bourdieu’s notion of body hexis related to one’s gendered habitus (female body orients ‘downward and inside’ versus male body ‘upward and outwards’) has implications for understanding female call handlers’ motricity in work places. In this context, I call the cultural force operating to restrict the vulnerable workers’ body to docile dispositions as ‘cultural gravity,’ which can be termed ‘historico-culturo-emotional physics.’ It reflects not only how culture has the physical power to make people sick, but also that whereas vulnerable people (e.g. ‘*eul*’ in Korea) suffer from the cultural gravity, powerful people (e.g. ‘*gab*’) are upheld by it.

For Merleau-Ponty, motricity is not a servant of consciousness, rather a master. Following him, knowing or thinking the meaning of certain actions is not enough to cause one's body to move; that is, before thinking, the body is moving towards a world following its schema. In other words, this is an embodied disposition. In the following chapters, I approach the lived experiences of female call handlers through this phenomenological understanding. Call handlers, for instance, can 'think' both how humiliating it is to put their hands up to request a toilet break during work time and how can show complaint and disagreement to companies. Nonetheless, 'conscious thinking' does not always precede motricity. The default setting is a body moving downwards, i.e. toward the monitors and keyboards or chemicals (cigarette, tea and candy). At this point, drug foods intervene to sustain their workforce regardless of whether their body is exhausted or sick. Thus, chemical employeeship seems to imply 'hands down' and a untiring workforce bound by cultural gravity. In the following chapters, from this theoretical understanding, I explore the detailed fieldwork experiences in Korean call centres that I accomplished through my body. I show how my body like those of the workers can also be a most useful field-note.

## 4. 'Being (T)Here': From the Pilot to Main research journey

This chapter documents the methodology of my ethnographic research journey from a pilot study to main fieldwork. It is a record from February 2012 when I first engaged with a smoking cessation clinic for female smokers in a Korean call centre to August 2015 when I finished my main period of fieldwork. Here, alongside research details (persons, organisations, places and dates), personal challenges and epistemological transformations (which could be summarised as 'from a positivist physician to phenomenological anthropologist') will be provided. Since my longstanding identity as a doctor<sup>39</sup> has often come into conflict with my anthropologist's identity, and the inner conflict has affected the whole research, it is impossible to explain my results properly without depicting these personal experiences.

In section 4.1, I reflect on the positionality of a Korean ethnographer in Korea. In section 4.2, I relate my pilot study experience and discuss pre-fieldwork reflections on this positionality. In section 4.3, I explain the main field site (Seoul Digital Industrial Complex) and my reasons for choosing it. In section 4.4, I describe the process of engaging in the field. I then outline the whole fieldwork period by dividing it into three phases: the three routes to accessing informants; field observation, and the people and organisations I met; relevant documentary film with my research and practicing exercises with workers. In section 4.5 and 4.6, I discuss the ethical considerations and reflection of positionality within two routes ('awakening talks' and 'bodily practice').

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<sup>39</sup> After graduating from medical school in Feb 2003, I worked in a hospital for about ten years in South Korea. As a family medicine doctor, I devoted the majority of my time to smoking cessation and also published two self-help books relating to smoking behaviours (Kim 2010, 2015).

#### 4.1. 'Being There?' or 'Being Here, again?'

“If classic ethnography's vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the *self-absorbed Self* to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other.”

(Rosaldo 1993:7) (emphasis added)

My ethnography results from a translation of my first written text, fieldnotes (c.f. Crapanzano (1986:51)), but these fieldnotes were of different kinds: texts, reports, pictures, recording and my 'body' as well. My body during the fieldwork - particularly attending the stretching exercise assembly of the ABC call centre union - has changed physically and subsequently 'incarnate consciousness' as well (Marshall 2008:60). During the early period of my fieldwork, however, I appeared to perform a sort of 'plausible field persona' in order to undergo the *rite de passage* of becoming an anthropologist. I made every effort to 'immerse' myself in the field site and I believed that I was successful. It was not long before I realised that I was acting as if I was "Being There" as a foreign ethnographer (Watson 1999). My identity as a PhD student of an overseas University and one-year outside Korea allowed me to delude myself that I was some kind of outsider. In addition, I seemed to be obsessive about becoming an impartial observer since I thought I, as a Korean, might become too empathetic to Korean people and their situations and hence overinterpret them. However, I soon realised that this was my illusion. For me, Korea as a field site, was not 'there' but, rather, 'here': that is, my fieldwork was not 'being there,' but 'being here, again.' Above all, in the field site, I was 'seen' as a definite Korean, not as an outsider. However often I reminded myself that I was 'being there' as an impartial witness, from the perspectives of other Koreans, I was seen as just being in Korea, here, again. Thus, in my ethnography, I attempt to "write myself" in while "eschewing the role of impartial witness" (Knight 2015:28).

These reflections came from taking into account the effect of my personality and my presence

as a researcher on what is being investigated. In call centres, as I informed my whole identities, I was not only a researcher but also an example of a Korean male professional (a doctor) with a high education level (a PhD student of an overseas University). How then might female call handlers react when being with me? They might have realised their relatively low social and economic status. However, I came to recognise the importance of an ethnographer's 'reflexivity.' For ethnographic research, Davies points out, the issue of reflexivity is particularly salient since "involvement of the ethnographer in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close" (2008:4). Meanwhile, I also considered Rosaldo's advice that these days there are tendencies to be too reflexive to become "the self-absorbed Self" resulting in losing sight of the Other (1993:7).

My confusion regarding the ambiguity of being 'there' or 'here' is related to a fundamental question in ethnography; that of 'the partiality of cultural truths' (Clifford 1986:6). Clifford (ibid:7) argues that "Ethnographic truths are...inherently partial – committed and incomplete." For him, though, the character of ethnographic truth is not a limitation of an ethnographer, rather an inherent strength. If an ethnographer builds a 'rigorous sense of partiality,' s/he can achieve 'political and epistemological self consciousness' and avoid ethnographic self-absorption (ibid:7). Wolcott also advises ethnographers "not to deny bias or pretend to suppress it, but to recognise and harness it" as 'the art of fieldwork' (2001:165). Therefore, instead of trying to hide any problems under a label of 'objectivity' (Agar 1980:41), throughout my fieldwork, I focused on "not simply observing but recognising when something of (potential) significance has been observed" (Wolcott 2001:162). This approach is based on the denial of the ideology of 'observer-observed' as below.

"Because post-modern ethnography privileges "discourse" over "text," it foregrounds dialogue as opposed to monologue, and emphasises the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendental observer. In fact, it *rejects the ideology of "observer-observed," there being nothing*

*observed and no one who is observer. There is instead the mutual, dialogical production of a discourse, of a story of sorts*"

(Tyler 1986:126) (emphasis added)

Following Tyler's argument, my ethnography focuses on 'mutual and dialogical production' while avoiding the performance of any artificial or intentional field-persona. This understanding recognises the essence of our 'Being-in-and-toward-the world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):xlix) (discussed in Chapter 3.2.2.2). With respect to the research on human 'being,' Merleau-Ponty explicitly emphasises that human being is not a mere object of scientific investigation.

*"I am not the result or the intertwining of multiple causalities that determine my body or my "psyche"; I cannot think of myself as a part of the world, like the simple object of biology, psychology, and sociology; I cannot enclose myself within the universe of science."*

(Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):lxxi, lxxii) (emphasis added)

Following Merleau-Ponty, culture is neither a 'scientific object' to be described or a 'unified corpus of symbols and meanings' that can be clearly interpreted (Clifford 1986:18-19). Rather, Clifford emphasises, culture is always 'relational' (ibid:15). Thus, he suggests that if cultures are not 'prefigured visually as objects' it is possible to think of a "cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances" (ibid:12). With respect to this, Jackson, focusing on the human's character of intersubjectivity, suggests "to study the self is to forget the self; and to forget the self is to be enlightened by others" (1998:14).

For me, in order to attain this goal, it was necessary to explore my subjectivity, which should be a sounding board to the interplay with informants' voices. My subjectivity, in my late 30s, as a male doctor and a father of two children, has been constituted of various lived experiences including many historical events in Korea from 1980s to 2010s,<sup>40</sup> personal histories of growing

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<sup>40</sup> For example, I experienced the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, five presidential elections (1992, 1997,

up<sup>41</sup>, medical histories of family members and relatives<sup>42</sup>, political issues regarding medical issues while being a medical school student (e.g. the reform movement of the national health insurance and the separation of dispensing and prescribing function) and ten years' experience as a doctor in Korea. All of these lived experiences in Korea must have influenced my interactions with informants. Thus, I was not an outsider who was literally 'being there,' rather I could share many things to be able to sympathise with their sufferings.

During the early phase of my fieldwork, I was afraid of only achieving a partiality of truths that I would find from female call handlers, due to the limitations of my identities. In addition, I wondered if my research was 'anthropologically vulturing' the lives of socially vulnerable people (Knight 2015:26). These considerations resulted from my experience of the pilot study in 2012, when I conducted research while fulfilling the role of an outreach smoking cessation doctor for female call handlers who smoked. From this, I realised that to be an effective researcher, I needed to operate free of the expectations of a medical identity. One of the biggest differences between my pilot study and main fieldwork can be represented thus; while female call handlers I met during the pilot study avoided me in order to hide their smoking, the call handlers I met during the main fieldwork offered me a cigarette to smoke together. This taught to follow the improvisations available to each situation. The whole process of interplay between myself and my informants was essential to achieve the 'anthropological triangle' (a moral-affective, epistemological and ontological vector (Faubion 2009:156)) by interrogating holistically my

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2002, 2007, 2012), many small and big democracy movements and several international sports events held in Korea (the 1986 Asia Olympic Games, the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games and the 2002 World Cup)).

<sup>41</sup> During my childhood and adolescence, I experienced the strong patriarchal characters of my grandfather and father, sudden financial difficulties due to the bankruptcy of my father and uncle during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and being brought up mainly by a devoted grandmother due to both parents working for a living.

<sup>42</sup> My family members and relatives suffered from diverse diseases; for example, grandfather's rectal cancer, grandmother's Alzheimer's dementia, father's duodenal and bile ductal cancers, mother's thyroid cancer, myoma and diabetes, aunt's lung cancer, uncle's stroke and his wife's pancreatic cancer.

moral feeling, my perception of every situation, and the meaning of my existence within the field site; that is, balancing on the border between 'Being There' and 'Being Here, again,' abbreviated as 'Being (T)Here.'

#### 4.2. Pilot journey to a call centre in 2012

In preparation for my main fieldwork in 2014 - 2015, I took part in interdisciplinary research on "Seoul City's Health Equity Project" as an assistant qualitative researcher in an anti-smoking research team from February to November 2012. The character of the pilot research was different from my main fieldwork in terms of research questions and researcher's identity. My question, at that moment, was very simple; "Why do they (female call handlers) smoke a lot?" Later, when conducting the main fieldwork, it changed into "What forms of life are here?" In 2012, I was a postgraduate in a Masters course in the Anthropology department at Seoul National University while working in a hospital. As a member of the large project, I had the opportunity to access Z call centre, one of the major call centres in Seoul where about 500 workers were employed (97% female). Z call centre was selected as a field site for the anti-smoking research of the Health Equity Project since the centre had contacted a public healthcare centre asking for a visiting consultant of smoking cessation because of the high smoking rate amongst female employees. During the five months' visiting period, my official identity in Z call centre was as a visiting doctor offering smoking cessation consultations rather than a postgraduate in Anthropology, even though I was allowed by the company to conduct formal interviews with workers. It was because the research team aimed to develop an effective tailored smoking cessation programme to reduce call centre female workers' smoking rates.



Figure 4.1 The pictures of the pilot research in Z call centre. The first image shows the smoking cessation counselling place with pieces of equipment (e.g. carbon monoxide measuring instrument). The second image shows female workers walking to the outdoor smoking area. The red arrows point to the smoking area. The third image is of the outdoor smoking area.

During this pilot journey, I regularly visited the centre twice a week (for two hour periods) for five months and settled into a common room to counsel smokers (Figure 4.1). Concurrently, I could observe the outside smoking areas, workers' smoking situations and their general working conditions and patterns in the call centre. I formally interviewed 34 participants (32 smokers/ two non-smokers, 33 female/ one male) and submitted the final research report in November 2012 to Seoul City's Health Equity Project team (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Welfare and Health 2012). As a result of the study, I was able to measure actual female workers' smoking rates in this call centre (about 35.2%, 5 times higher than an average female adult smoking rate in Korea of 7.4% in 2012) and understand the basic reasons for their high smoking rates and why they continued to smoke (e.g. for a 'working drug'; see Chapter 2.3 for details) (Kim 2013).

During these five months I conducted 'overt research'. The main reason for this was that the call centre excluded outside researchers, so any research projects within it could be accepted by the company only through official requests, something that was also likely to be granted only for research that seemed to be of direct benefit to a company. For this reason, I was able to access the call centre only with the official identity of a consultant doctor, which inevitably put me in the position where the call centre female workers treated me as a fastidious and abstinent, non-

smoking doctor.

The experience of positionality as a doctor amongst female call centre workers gave me some time for self-reflection about how to approach female call centre workers for my main fieldwork. The most important insight was that ‘non-smoking male doctor’ himself made smoking women feel uncomfortable or sometimes shameful. Just my being there caused them to confront the social stigma attached to women smoking in Korea, which they could temporarily forget while staying in what one of them styled a “smoker’s heaven.” Indeed, one of the frequently visiting consultees confessed to me why she had not visited me for a while. She said that she had avoided me in the call centre since she had begun to smoke again. Even just glancing at me from a distance made her feel ashamed. After this unforgettable anecdote, I decided that during my main field research I would have to be very cautious about meeting informants as a doctor giving medical counselling.

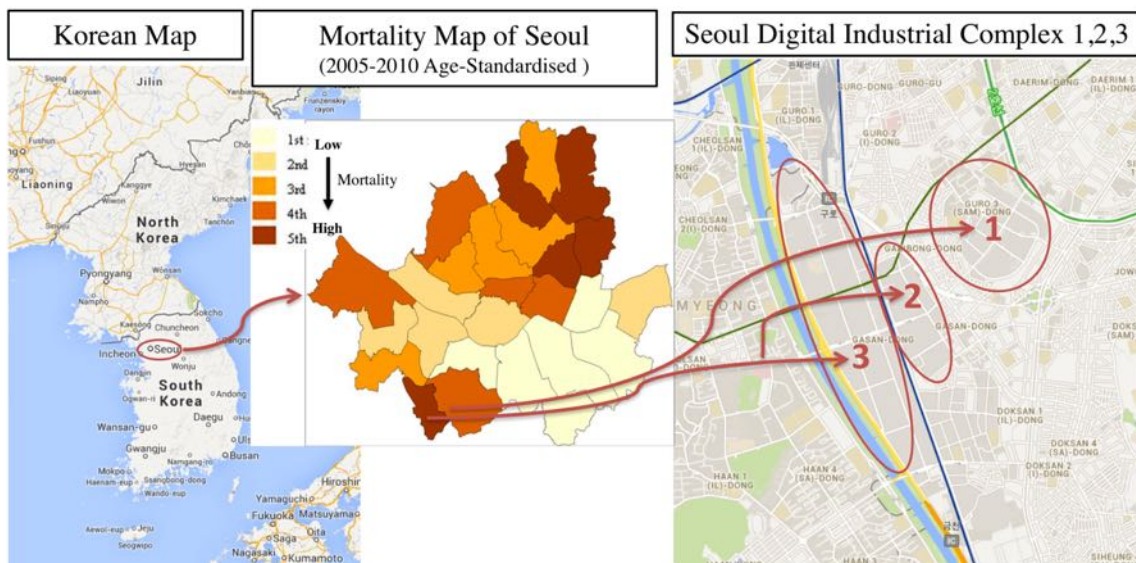


Figure 4.2 The map of Seoul Digital Industrial Complex and Mortality Map of Seoul (referred from Seoul Metropolitan Office of Welfare and Health (2012:44)). The distance from the west end of SDIC 3 to the east end of SDIC 1 is about one hour’s walk for me at a normal pace.

Meanwhile, participating in research on “Seoul City’s Health Equity Project” also allowed me to meet other specialists working in the fields of Social Epidemiology, Public Mental Health, Maternal and Child Health, and to recognise that health indicators of Seoul City revealed the unequal situation accorded by one’s socio-economic status and where one lives in Seoul. The mortality rate of the area known as Seoul Digital Industrial Complex (hereinafter ‘SDIC’) was higher than elsewhere (Figure 4.2). This fact influenced me to settle on SDIC as my main research field site. Nevertheless, I remained imprisoned by two narrow epistemological frames through which I perceived female workers’ smoking behaviour; One was blind faith in statistical inequality indexes, another was to discuss smoking issues only in the frame of ‘health’ (i.e. from a medical perspective). That is, I had been gazing at female workers’ lives through the lens of so-called ‘scientific’ medical knowledge.

### 4.3. Settling down for my main fieldwork

As well as the statistical inequalities (Figure 4.2), my interest in SDIC was sparked from the astonishment I felt when I heard about some of the poor working conditions endured by a call centre worker there in 2012, during my pilot study. No windows to let in normal light, no humidifiers and a manager’s order not to drink refreshments to avoid frequent toilet trips. After having been told about it, I considered that SDIC might be a suitable site for ethnographic enquiry.

SDIC is still often called ‘*guro-gongdan*’ which means an industrial complex (*gongdan*) at *guro* (= town name) in Seoul. Guro Industrial Complex (hereinafter ‘GIC’) was renamed ‘Seoul Digital Industrial Complex’ (*seoul-dijiteol-saneop-danji*) in December 1998 in accordance with a national strategy to develop cutting-edge information and communications industries. During 1964 GIC became the first national exporting industrial complex in Korea, producing labour-intensive goods (e.g. wigs, shoes, clothes and electronics) via a low-paid but highly productive and well-disciplined young female labour force (figuratively called ‘industrial soldiers’

(*saneobyeokgun*) (Kim 1997)) who mostly migrated to urban centres from rural areas. It came to be regarded as a symbol of the Korean economic miracle and is still the largest national industrial complex in terms of numbers employed (153,000 in 2012) (Seoul Museum of History 2015).



Figure 4.3 The movie poster and some scenes of ‘*Guro Arirang*’ in 1989. This film by Jong-won Park depicts the story of factory girls in a sewing factory in GIC. It shows factory girls’ daily suffering in harsh working environments and their collective protest. ‘*Arirang*’ is a famous Korean folk song describing the deep sorrow of a woman abandoned by her loved one. Then, ‘*Guro Arirang*’ describes factory girls’ sorrowful lives, particularly whom facing their colleague’s death. The synopsis shows this fact well; “Cried, cried in pain to soothe your soul stained with dirty oil,” “This is unfair, unfair! If you (a beloved friend) have to leave (die), please clean your dirty oil stained fingernails before leaving.” (retrieved on 18 October 2016 from [http://www.cine21.com/movie/info/?movie\\_id=6891](http://www.cine21.com/movie/info/?movie_id=6891))

The Guro area also came to be seen as a symbol of the Korean labour movement after the first Korean labour union's solidarity strike in June 1984. At that time, the Korean politico-historical background and many workers' unbearable experiences became twin subjects of Korean movies such as '*Guro Arirang*' (1989) (Figure 4.3) and novels such as '*oettan-bang*'<sup>43</sup> ('a Solitary Room') (1995). In May 2013, the local government built a museum here to record and inform the public about Guro workers' life histories, especially the daily sufferings of young female workers in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, though the name and exterior appearances have changed, this industrial park is still reported to contain many "sweatshops" characterised by low wage and long hours labours and high rates of irregular workers (80.4% amongst the 20s and 30s workers) (Guro Workers' Welfare Centre 2013).

Added to this historical background, there were two original reasons to select this as a research site, both concerned with public health. Most importantly, the mortality rate in the region where the SDIC 2 and 3 (Figure 4.2) is located was one of the highest in Seoul (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Welfare and Health 2012). Secondly, key indicators of female employees' health such as the incidence of depression, musculo-skeletal diseases and smoking rates were reported to be almost double those of the general female adult population. Notably, female employees, particularly those working in call centres, had the highest rates of depression (27.1%), muscular skeletal diseases (31.3%) and smoking (26.0%) in SDIC 2 and 3 (Kumcheon County 2013). Furthermore, recent research had demonstrated that accessible public health centres are what Guro workers demand most (Guro Workers' Welfare Centre 2013). In short, SDIC was an appropriate place in which to research female workers' health status in regard to working conditions and its effects of contemporary socioeconomic and national policy changes. In addition,

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<sup>43</sup> '*oettan-bang*' is a best-selling Korean novel written by Gyeongsuk Sin, who actually worked as a factory girl in the GIC in the 1980s. The novel is about one young girl's working experience in a sewing factory, living in a honeycomb-like tiny rental house, depicted as 'a solitary room (= *oettan-bang*)' in the novel. The novel became famous since it was reported that the story was almost entirely based on the novelist's real experience.

recent health surveys indicated that workers in the complex lived with ill health, both physically and mentally. Therefore, I based myself in this monumental industrial area in late September 2014 and started exploring its highways and byways for about one year.

## 4.4. Engaging with the field

### 4.4.1. Overall sketch of fieldwork

It took a total of 11 months (26th Sep 2014 to 31st Aug 2015) to fulfil my main field research in SDIC, Seoul. The journey can be broadly outlined in three phases. I have called them ‘Walking in the city,’ ‘Being with workers’ and ‘Practicing exercise together.’ The details of each phase are arranged schematically in Figure 4.4 and 4.5. These decisions might seem like advanced planning with a linear progression from one logical level to the next. However, it is only a retrospective scheme. At the time, each step resulted inductively from my ceaseless efforts to meet as wide a range and large a number of female call centre workers as possible. This involved a series of hardships and frustrations.

<b>Phase</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> phase</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> phase</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> phase</b>
Period	Sep 2014 ~ Jan 2015	Feb 2015 ~ May 2015	June 2015 ~ Aug 2015
Main Theme	<i>‘Walking in the city’</i>	<i>‘Being with workers’</i>	<i>‘Practicing exercise together’</i>
Details	* Gathering information (historical data, pictures)  * Visiting relevant organisations and the representatives in SDIC	* Establishing Rapport with the ABC call centre labour union  * Doing formal interviews with female workers in call centres	* Continuing formal interviews  * Actively joining the MPG exercise with call centre labourers

Figure 4.4 The three phases of the main field research

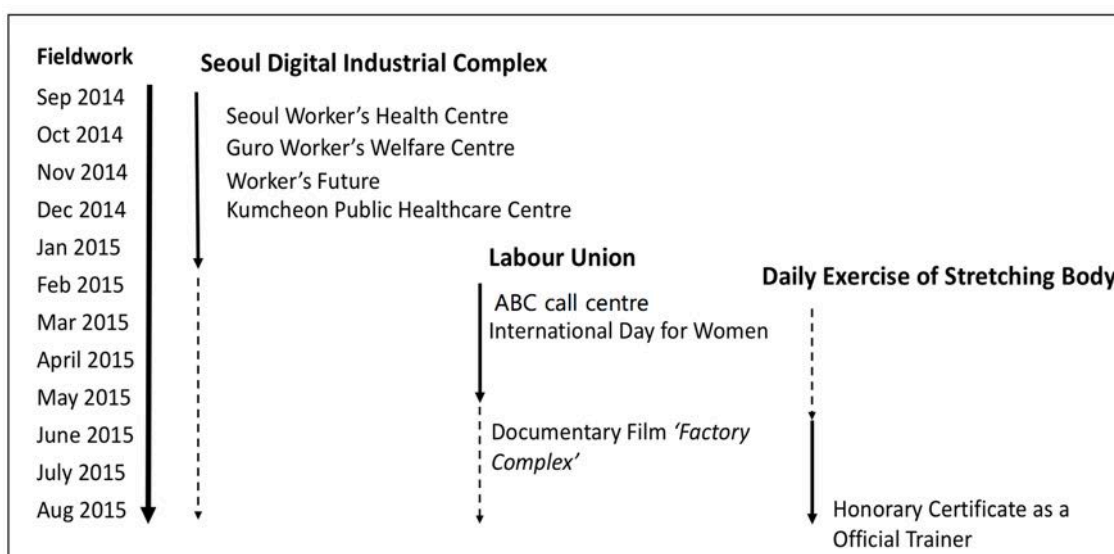


Figure 4.5 The summary of the main field research in Seoul in 2014-15

'Walking in the city' is the title I give to the first phase of my fieldwork. Soon after I arrived in Seoul at the end of September 2014, I focused on meeting as many relevant organisations and their representatives in SDIC as possible to establish a bridgehead for meeting with female call centre workers. The examples are the Seoul Worker's Health Centre, Guro Worker's Welfare Centre, Worker's Future and Kumcheon Public Healthcare Centre (further details in Chapter 5.2). During the early period, however, to keep walking in the SDIC alone was an inevitable choice because of the difficulty of meeting female call centre workers in this industrial area. Not just walking, rather I collected much visual information through my camera lens and attempted to experience the atmosphere of commuting in SDIC (Figure 4.6). For me, SDIC was big enough to spend several months walking along the labyrinth of streets and amongst its overwhelmingly huge buildings. One of the signs vitalising my walking was the presence of cigarette butts. I visited many smoking areas in and out of the factory buildings, observed workers' smoking and took pictures of diverse ashtrays in SDIC which were full of cigarette butts.

Almost every attempt to meet female call centre workers through official routes ended in failure. Even though I was introduced by the Kumcheon public healthcare centre and the Seoul Worker's Healthcare Centre in SDIC 3, managers in charge of nearby call centres showed disapproval of

my research with their female workers. From my pilot experience, bartering my medical knowledge for the access to a call centre could have been a practical option. However, since I also had recognised the possible demerits of it, I struggled to access call centres only as a researcher (although I did not hide my career as a doctor). During the initial stage of fieldwork planning, I had planned to work in a call centre. But in the end, I concluded it was inadequate because working as a researcher would have been unacceptable to call centre managers and would be unlikely to establish strong relationships with workers. I thus gave up attempting to work in a call centre at an early stage of fieldwork and spent all my energy continuously promoting my research and contacting potential interviewees.



Figure 4.6 The pictures of streets in SDIC 1 (middle) and 2 (left) and a path to smoking area of in SDIC 3 (right). The three long steel columns (left) are memorial sculptures in front of a shopping mall to symbolise the chimney of past factories in GIC. The middle picture shows the scene of leaving work in the evening. The right one is an entrance of a smoking area located on a rooftop. A big cylindrical ashtray is seen outside the door of the emergency exit. All the buildings in the pictures are huge and multi-storey factory buildings where many call centre companies are located.

In this period, while accompanying the visiting healthcare team of Seoul Workers' Healthcare Centre, I had a chance to talk to a psychology counsellor who regularly worked with female workers in a large call centre employing about 500 workers located in SDIC 1. Through the counsellor and visiting healthcare team I indirectly heard of female workers' distress. I also did participant observation three times at the outreach welfare and healthcare counselling session held monthly by the Seoul Worker's Health Centre and the Guro Worker's Welfare Centre at two subway stations in SDIC 1 and 3.

'Being with Workers' - phase 2 - began around February 2015, and was the stage of actually meeting call centre workers. There were three main contact routes. First was to place a recruitment notice on the bulletin boards of the multi-storey factory buildings in SDIC in which call centres took occupancy (Figure 4.7). To put up a notice was not difficult, but finding call centres amongst the huge factory buildings in SDIC was extremely hard. It was impossible to distinguish call centres by their company names. In SDIC a call centre officially categorised as a service sector cannot reside here with the tax benefits deriving from the Industrial Sites and Development Act<sup>44</sup>. Plausible non-service sector names reveal attempts to evade the intention of the Act for tax benefits. Thus, I could not find call centres from the official name lists. Fortunately, in 2012, the Kumcheon Public Healthcare Centre in SDIC 3 had carried out a health status survey of female workers including female call centre employees. With the help of the health centre officer in charge of the survey, I was able to contact a chief staff member of the survey agent who had

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<sup>44</sup> According to 'the Guro Industrial Complex Improvement Plan of 1997,' SDIC was planned in order to develop high tech companies, venture firms, fashion design companies, and companies in knowledge industries. Those relevant companies located in SDIC can have benefits of 'reduction or exemption of tax and share in expenditure' (Article 45 of Industrial Sites and Development Act) from the State or local governments. Here, knowledge industries mean "any industry that can contribute to the creation of high value added knowledge services with creative mental activities on the basis of knowledge in the specialised fields of a computer software development business, a research and development business, an engineering services business, etc." (Article 2.2 of Industrial Sites and Development Act). Call centre companies are not relevant to the categories of the Act. Therefore, the call centre companies in SDIC generally branded themselves like high tech companies by using certain words; for example, 'tech,' 'technology,' 'net,' 'network,' 'system.'

interviewed the workers. She explained that at that time they also had no idea of where the call centres were in SDIC and then had no choice but to directly contact every possible company to check whether they were call centres or not. After getting the genuine call centre lists from this person, I could start placing a recruitment notice entitled “Female call centre workers’ experiences about working and health” in appropriate spots in buildings.



Figure 4.7 My recruitment notice on the bulletin-boards of the multi-storey factory buildings in SDIC.

The second route for recruiting was online promotion. During the fieldwork, I had an opportunity to present my research in the Anthropology department at Seoul National University. Here I discussed the on-going difficulties of meeting female call centre workers and one Masters course female student recommended an online website where only female subscribers were allowed to log-in and where they communicated with each other anonymously. The student often read call centre workers’ distressing stories on this website. Thus, with this student’s help, I put a notice up in the online community which was the same as the offline one. This method was fairly effective. It became a great conduit to contact female call centre workers from diverse places and companies. The reason why the website was the more comfortable route for workers seemed to

be that they could read the announcement and then apply for interviews out of public view. However, there were also people who called me just out of curiosity and then did not appear when we arranged to meet.

The final route was through the labour union of a call centre. In South Korea, there are allegedly about 400,000 call centre workers but only two call centres have labour unions. The first labour union was organised at ABC call centre in 13<sup>th</sup> Sep 2012, a second union subsequently formed in DEF call centre in 13<sup>th</sup> Feb 2013. I contacted the labour union of ABC call centre. At the beginning, I had less interest in ABC labour union since it was located in a neighbouring district to SDIC, not in the SDIC itself. Furthermore, I was told that because there were few call centre labour unions at that time, the ABC union had been being investigated by many researchers and the workers were feeling a bit of tired of repetitive surveys. Therefore, I did not want to bother them again with my fieldwork. However, I changed my mind after hearing from a researcher in Wonjin Institute of Environment and Health (*nodong-hwangyeong-geongang-yeonguso*), one of the major research centres in Korea in the field of Occupational Health and Safety. I had visited the Wonjin Institute to ask how to access female call centre workers and was introduced to the staff member who had the most research experience about female ‘emotional labour,’ including call centre workers. She recommended meeting the leader of the ABC union. She explained that the majority of companies outsource call centre services and as a result there are several very large call centre specialised companies in Seoul which are subcontracted to a diverse range of companies. The ABC call centre is an example. ABC company (the contractor) established its call centre in 2007 and outsourced the service to three subcontractors (it changed into two subcontractors in January 2015), all well-known major call centre companies with lots of further subcontracts with various companies in SDIC as well. Therefore, I expected that by investigating the ABC call centre through the labour union I could indirectly understand the management style of the call centres in SDIC.

‘Practicing exercise together’ began on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2015, when I met members of the labour

union of ABC call centre through an introduction by the research staff member of the Wonjin Institute. This encounter was not only the opportunity to meet call centre workers but also became a trigger to phase 3 of my fieldwork. After the first meeting, I tried to attend as many activities of the union as possible to establish rapport with union members. I participated in union rallies many times as well as the union conferences. Additionally, I regularly joined in the ‘Daily Exercise of Stretching Body’ (*mompyeogi saenghwarundong*) (hereinafter ‘MPG exercise’) managed by the union every Thursday from 7 pm to 9 pm. Although my attendance at this exercise was primarily to promote friendship, I observed first hand that call centre workers improved their health through this activity. I also got relief from chronic right shoulder pain diagnosed as a frozen shoulder. After sharing the effectiveness of the exercise with call centre workers, I researched more about the exercise including its origin, background, development and principles. As a result, when I finished my fieldwork at the end of August 2015, I was awarded an ‘Honorary Certificate of an Official Trainer’ at the National Summer Camp of ‘MPG exercise’ Official Trainers.

In summary, my main fieldwork has been led by what people and field situations have afforded. Figure 4.7 shows the progress with three solid lines (stable period) and dotted lines (transitory period). In Korea, as an overt researcher, it was not at all easy to find, access, meet and get close to female call centre workers. I spent almost four months on the street in SDIC without any interviews with female call centre workers at all. Only through three routes, 1) an offline notice, 2) an online notice, and 3) meeting with a labour union was I able to progress my research. Workers exist almost everywhere in the field, but they exist nowhere when looking for them. This difficulty might indirectly reveal their realities. In the following sections, I describe the details of the three phases including people, places, organisations and the MPG exercise.

#### 4.4.2. Walking in the city, Seoul Digital Industrial Complex 1, 2 and 3

Walking and walking again was what I had done for first four months in SDIC. At that period,

even though it was an unavoidable choice, it was a great time to ‘attune’ myself to the field while walking (Lee and Ingold 2006:67). Here I describe what I observed and felt by walking in the field and why it was a good way to get information about SDIC.



Figure 4.8 A picture of the information map of SDIC installed in front of the exit of an underground station (Guro Digital Complex station) in SDIC 1.

SDIC is divided into three sectors, SIDC 1, 2 and 3 (Figure 4.8). SIDC 1 and 3 are filled with many tall buildings covered with rectangular windowpanes that replace the factories of the past. In contrast, SDIC 2 is still mainly composed of ‘honeycomb’ like small lodging houses (circled area in Figure 4.8). This was the residential area in the 1970s and 1980s of young factory girls who had mostly come from countryside. Today, this area is filled with immigrant workers (primarily Korean Chinese) looking for cheap rooms to rent. The only thing that has changed is the people living there. However, the western part of SDIC 2 has been reconstructed as a huge shopping mall sector, officially named “Fashion IT Culture Zone” (marked with a star in Figure 4.8) replacing some old textile factories.

‘Walking’ itself helps an anthropologist grasp many things in the field (cf. “Fieldwork on foot” (Lee and Ingold 2006)). De Certeau, a French philosopher, theologian and historian, emphasised that ‘walking in the city’ is a very basic method to experience a city (De Certeau 1988). He explained ‘walking’ as a sort of ‘pedestrian speech act’. In other words, although walking in the city is composed passively, it could be differentiated by subjective choices. De Certeau also described walking has a ‘phatic’ aspect like speaking (e.g. ‘hello’, ‘well’). Thus, I kept walking to experience what De Certeau said, ‘walking as a conversation.’ Through this bodily conversation, I attuned myself in the same environment with the workers’ in SDIC while feeling their walking rhythm and seeing what they see. The walk in this industrialised city, sometimes I felt, was like standing on a conveyor belt in a massive factory; No rest, but keep walking.

Walking was a great method to directly experience both the past and present of SDIC. If the sound from my steps was a voice from my body, I must have talked with the streets in SDIC very much. From these longstanding conversations through all my senses, I felt the past and present of Korean industrial modernization coexisting in this industrial complex. In SDIC 2, when I walked through the Chinese immigrants’ market street wrapped in the pungent smell of Chinese foods (Figure 4.9), it reminded me of the past street of GIC here in the 1970s and 1980s. Adjacent to the exit from the market street is ‘Old Gari-bong five-way intersection’ (*yet garibong ogeori*) (now called as ‘Digital five-way interaction’ (*dijiteol ogeori*)). Heading toward the intersection, I was often welcomed by loud Korean Pop music from fashion malls which awakened me to the fact that I was actually living in the ‘Digitalised’ 2010s. After passing the noisy shops and crossing the ‘Export Bridge’ connecting SDIC 2 with 3, I faced the huge rectangular buildings and I felt chilled, and overwhelmed (Figure 4.9). Just as in each of the SDIC sectors I experienced while walking, the digital complex was a palimpsest of the past and present.



SDIC 2: Residential area and market for Korean Chinese migrant workers



SDIC 3: Multi-storey factory building where call centres are located

Figure 4.9 The different views of street buildings in SDIC 2 and 3.

Another merit of walking in the field was to have the opportunity to take many pictures of the scenery of SDIC. Ashtrays and smoking stands became main subjects for my photography. In the evening in SDIC, I found the ashtrays full of cigarette butts. They seemed to represent a pile of workers' sighs. Interestingly, many resting spaces in SIDC were often divided into two areas: 'Smoking' and 'Non-smoking.' Recently, in Seoul it has become difficult to watch smokers on the street because of the expansion of tobacco control policies concerning non-smoking public areas. However, SDIC was exceptional. I walked to observe as many smoking areas as possible and also how smoking and non-smoking areas were comparted in and out of the buildings. Through this observation, I was able to see female workers' smoking scenes.

In addition, since the SDIC is historically very meaningful in terms of industrial modernization in Korea, it was very interesting to walk around everywhere in it to find traces or landmarks of the past GIC and then compare these with the current, allegedly 'digitalised,' complex. My interest in walking in the field was further stirred by the organised historical tour programme of SDIC, designed to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the industrial complex. The tour programme was composed of three routes: 'The road of labour' (*nodongui gil*) (tracing the

workers' lives in the 1970s and 1980s), 'The road of production' (*saengsanui gil*) (following the steps of current workers' lives in the 2010s) and 'The road of immigration' (*ijuui gil*) (touring the living spaces of immigrant workers). During the whole fieldwork period, I walked all three routes many times. In particular, I walked the 'The road of production' together with one social activist who organised the route and had acted as a guide for several months. Through this special experience, I listened to the detailed stories of past industrial traces and learnt how female workers in textile factories in the 1970s and 1980s were pushed out of the central industrial complex by mass shopping centres and multi-storey factory buildings and have since been working on a small scale in the outskirts of the industrial complex in an area called 'Sewing street' (*bongjegeori*) (Figure 4.8).

#### 4.4.3. People and organisations

During the fieldwork, I participated in many social events and met as many public organisations and NGOs as possible in order to hear more of the diverse stories of Korean female workers and to discuss my research topic regarding call centres (see Appendix 1). Through a diverse range of social activities (see Appendix 2), I met many people and arranged formal and informal interviews with them. As a result, I interviewed 34 people in total<sup>45</sup> (23 formal interviews and 11 informal

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<sup>45</sup> In terms of so-called 'scientific' methodology, the number '34' might be called into question. Why might I think 34 is enough to represent the lives of female call handlers in Korea? The history of a debate about anthropology and science is long, particularly focusing on the believability (i.e. reliability and validity) of anthropological research results (Pelto and Pelto 1978:17-37; Wolcott 2001:160-170). Bernard (2011) gives a clear explanation of this argument. He differentiates anthropological data (as 'cultural data') collected by 'nonprobability sampling' (e.g. snowball sampling) from 'individual attribute data' by 'probability sampling' (ibid:113). In terms of sample size, he explains that there is increasing evidence that '10-20 knowledgeable people are enough to uncover and understand the core categories in any well-defined cultural domain or study of lived experience' (ibid:154). He provides evidence suggesting a minimum of 'six' interviews for phenomenological studies and '30-50' interviews for ethnographic studies (Morse 1994) and showing only '10-13' knowledgeable informants necessary to understand the contents of a well-defined cultural domain (Weller and

interviews). Amongst the interviewees, eight people were my 'key informants'<sup>46</sup>; Miss Hyun, Ms Woo (regarding call centre experience), Ms Jang, Miss Joo, Miss Shin, Miss Lee, Mr Chang (regarding call centre experience and labour union activities) and Master Yang (regarding MPG exercise). For 'formal' interviews, I requested an interview in advance and after participants signed a written informed consent form I progressed to interview with recording. I had 1-3 interviews per person and each interview took 2 hours on average or maximum 8 hours in one special case.<sup>47</sup> During the initial meeting I asked for an additional interview with the informant, if I felt there was a need for it (e.g. exploring personal life and history, etc.). The decision to meet again was, however, entirely dependent on the interviewee's opinion. For 'informal' interviews, I had not made appointments and then got verbal permissions from participants and progressed to interview while writing down conversations without recording. Regardless of the types of interview, I had already made close relationship with the people I interviewed through several informal meetings and talks. Each recording was transcribed the day after interviews. This iterative process of transcription helped me to see what I needed to explore further and also inform how to approach subsequent interviews. The detailed information of whole interviewees is listed in Table 4.1 (names have been changed to protect anonymity).

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Romney 1988). '34' informants in my sample seems to be appropriate to argue that my ethnographic work is believable. However, I did not intend to meet these numbers or count them during fieldwork. I do not think the number of informants itself is enough to secure believability. Rather, I focused on 'reflection' through a mutual relationship with informants and 'ethical' consideration as well.

<sup>46</sup> In anthropological research, participants are termed 'informants' rather than 'respondents' (to survey questions) or 'subjects' (of some experiment). Amongst my 34 informants, people who I choose as 'key informants' are those 'who know a lot about their culture and willing to share all their knowledge with me,' furthermore, developing close relationships that literally 'can last a lifetime' (Bernard 2011:149-150).

<sup>47</sup> Ms Woo, a single woman in her late-50s, is the oldest female call centre worker I met, probably the oldest employee in every Korean call centre. When I first met her near her flat, I did not expect I would spend many hours interviewing her. Before, between, and after formal interviews with her, I spent many hours talking, more precisely, listening to her tale of woe. Her life story was as long as her age. During our meetings she did not stop talking to me while saying repeatedly "It has been a long time since I met and talked with a humane person." That is why I did formal interviews with her for 6~8 hours each time, having lunch and dinner together.

Table 4-1 The lists of interviewees (eight key informants are emphasised with *italic*)

<b>Num.</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex/Age</b>	<b>durations</b>	<b>type</b>
1	Call Centre Workers	Miss Min	F/20s	2 times x 2 hrs	Formal
2		Miss Yu	F/20s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
3		Miss Bong	F/30s	2 times x 2hrs	Formal
4		Miss Munwha	F/30s	1 times x 2hrs	Formal
5		<i>Miss Hyun</i>	F/20s	3 times x 2hrs	Formal
6		Miss Goo	F/20s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
7		<i>Ms Woo</i>	F/50s	2 time x 6-8hrs	Formal
8		Ms Nerr (manager)	F/30s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
9	Call Centre Workers & Labour Union Members	<i>Ms Jang</i>	F/40s	3 time x 3hrs	2 Formal + 1 Informal
10		<i>Miss Joo</i>	F/30s	2 time x 2hrs	1 Formal + 1 Informal
11		<i>Miss Shin</i>	F/40s	2 time x 1-3hrs	1 Formal + 1 Informal
12		<i>Miss Lee</i>	F/30s	2 time x 2 hrs	1 Formal + 1 Informal
13		<i>Mr Chang</i>	M/30s	3 times x 2 hrs	Informal
14		Ms Kim	F/30s	2 time x 1hrs	Informal
15		Ms Cee	F/40s	1 time x 2hrs	Informal
16	Trainers of Stretching Body Exercise	<i>Master Yang</i>	M/50s	3 times x 2hrs	1 Formal + 2 Informal
17		Ms Goo	F/40s	3 times x 1-2hrs	Informal
18		Mr Roo	M/40s	2 times x 1hrs	1 Formal + 1 Informal
19	Seoul Worker's Health Centre	Ms Gu	F/40s	2 times x 1hrs	Informal
20		Prof Kim	F/50s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
21		Dr Choi	F/40s	2 time x 1hrs	Informal
22		Ms Cheon	F/40s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
23	Survey Agency	Ms Sa	F/40s	2 time x 1hrs	Informal
24		Ms Park	F/40s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
25	Guro Worker's Welfare Centre	Ms Min	F/40s	1 time x 2hrs	Informal
26	Kumcheon Public Healthcare Centre	MS Yoo	F/40s	1 time x 2hrs	Informal
27	Worker's Future	Mr Lee	M/30s	2 time x 2hrs	Informal
28	Psychology Counsellor in a call centre	Ms Choi	F/50s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
29	Korean Scholars of Gender Study	Prof Kim	F/40s	1 time x 3hrs	Formal
30		Prof Moon	F/40s	2 time x 2-3hrs	1 Formal + 1 Informal
31		Miss Song	F/30s	2 time x 2-3hrs	Informal
32	Assistant director of the film "Factory Complex"	Miss UJ	F/20s	1 time x 2hrs	Formal
33	Historical Tour manager in SDIC	Miss Sun	F/20s	2 time x 2-4hrs	1 Formal + 1 Informal
34	Textile Factory worker in Guro Industrial Complex in 1980s	Ms Zan	F/50s	1 time x 2hrs	1 Formal + 1 Informal

#### 4.4.4. Documentary film, ‘Factory Complex’

It was a moment of great serendipity when I watched the documentary film, ‘Factory Complex’ (*wirogongdan*) during my fieldwork (Figure 4.10). The film was very helpful for my research because it documented the female workers’ struggles from the 1970s to 2010s and included testimonies from past textile workers in GIC and current ABC call centre female workers. I heard about the film five months ahead of its August 13<sup>th</sup> release since two informants from the ABC call centre labour union appeared in it. With their help I was introduced to the assistant director of the film and was able to interview her. I was also invited to a VIP preview and an open preview as well. The preview was useful because I had a chance to listen to the direct comments from female workers who appeared in the film. In addition, I got the opportunity to interview Ms Zan, who had worked in a textile factory at GIC in the 1980s and had also undertaken the heavy responsibility of running a labour union. In addition, the film vividly showed the realities of female textile workers’ lives in Korean factories in Cambodia which were very similar to the reality of the 1970s and 1980s female workers in Korea.



Figure 4.10 The film poster of ‘Factory Complex’ (*wirogongdan*) by Heung-Sun Im. It shows the ‘Semi-nude Protest’ of factory girls at the Dong-II Textile Corporation on 25th July 1976. Against police officers’ indiscriminate arresting of them, the women on strike were taking off their coats since they thought if they did the police officers would not touch or grab them recklessly. However, in reality, just like the picture depicts, they were forcefully arrested. The documentary film explores the suffering of factory girls in the 1970s and 1980s that still exists in the 2010s in Korea.

#### 4.4.5. Practicing exercise together

After the first meeting with the ABC call centre union members, from 26<sup>th</sup> February 2015 to the end of August 2015, I regularly attended the MPG exercise meeting at the union office every Thursday (Figure 4.11). The purpose of my attendance, above all, was to promote rapport. Exercising together and chatting after exercise provided good opportunities to establish a close relationship with my informants. Soon, I had become a member of the stretching exercise group. It helped me temporarily lay aside my researcher's identity. In addition to establishing good rapport, I also experienced the effectiveness of the MPG exercise both personally and for other participants.



Figure 4.11 A picture of MPG exercise assembly at ABC labour union office. The researcher is seen on right corner of the room (taken by ABC labour union).

Meanwhile, I was able to explore why the union had selected the MPG exercise regime over other exercise regimes. It was quite unfamiliar with the public in Korea, including me. I wanted to find out if there were other reasons for establishing the MPG exercise gathering in addition to its health benefits; for example, in order to build sustainability within the labour union and friendly relationships between labour union and non-union members. Thus, I interviewed the first

leader of the union (Ms Jang) who originally designed this exercise gathering, first and second presidents of the exercise group (Miss Joo and Ms Kim) and the main official trainer (Master Yang). Furthermore, I obtained histories and instructional materials through the Korean MPG exercise Association. In order to get more diverse information about the exercise, I visited other centres such as the DEF call centre labour union, Guro Citizen Centre (*guro-simin-senteo*) in SDIC 2 and Wonju branch of the Korean MPG exercise Association.

#### 4.5. Ethical considerations

Before the main fieldwork, my research was reviewed and given ethical approval by the Research Ethics and Data Protection Committee in the Department of Anthropology at the Durham University.<sup>48</sup> In section 4.5, I provide a brief introduction to the main ethical issues about doing ‘overt research.’ In section 4.6, I describe in details my progressive reflection of positionality as an ‘overt’ researcher and explain how I experienced an epistemological turn (i.e. from analytic physician to phenomenological anthropologist) through two routes; awakening talks and bodily practicing.

During the fieldwork, I upheld the ethical guidelines of Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (2011) by protecting participants’ physical, psychological, and social well-being. Every interview, including casual conversations and fieldnotes, was conducted under principles of confidentiality and the anonymity of subjects. In particular, I carefully checked the pictures from the field site with regard to informants’ confidentiality and anonymity. In this thesis, for all the pictures in which faces were exposed enough to identify them, I either got permission from the person(s) involved or added a gradation pattern to the pictures to maintain

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<sup>48</sup> The approval letter was issued on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 by the Department of Anthropology at the Durham University.

anonymity. All pictures in the thesis were taken by me unless I put any specific descriptions. While informed consent before an interview was sought, I was very sensitive to my dominant position and gave my interlocutors every chance to refuse to participate and to withdraw at any point. Fundamentally, albeit having obtained the appropriate ethical approval before fieldwork, ethical considerations were continuously reviewed throughout the research.

The most delicate ethical issue in this research was my identity, including the gender issue of being a male, the occupational issue of being a doctor, and as a graduate student from overseas. During my pilot study, the distinct differences between me and many female call centre workers such as gender, smoking status and educational level often unintentionally mirrored their social positions in Korean society and sometimes made them feel uncomfortable. Some smoking women tried to avoid encountering me and some were worried about whether or not I reported their daily behaviour to managers. Each could have induced filtered or restricted research results (Kim 2013).

To overcome these limitations and conduct a thorough participant observation, I had planned to become of equal status, i.e. a call centre worker, even temporarily. This status, I had assumed, could have been a robust foundation to “write against culture” embedded in my body as a non-smoking male doctor in Korea (Abu-Lughod 2006). However, the reality of my field site was that being a call centre worker myself was quite impossible, at least as an overt researcher, because of the exclusive corporate character of call centres, particularly when researchers aim to investigate poor working conditions (e.g. fear of disclosure of questionable work practices).

The difficulty of securing a job in call centres as an overt researcher was one of the reasons for giving up on the idea of working in a call centre, but ethical issues were also important. Recent debates have claimed that current ‘ethical hypersensitivity’ (Lugosi 2006) and ‘methodological hypochondria’ (Calvey 2008) have undermined academic freedom. Particularly, Scheper-Hughes (2004) argues that ‘undercover’ ethnography might be worthwhile when it comes to researching illegal and covert activities like ‘back door’ organ transplants. However, in principle, I am cautious about arguing that academic achievements outweigh any ethical disadvantages caused

by covert approaches and do not agree that “a fieldworker often needs to be ‘deceitful’ in order to survive and succeed” (Punch 1986:71).

These considerations were the main reasons I gave up on the idea of being a worker in a call centre and turned towards other routes, wherever situations led me, as concretely described in section 4.4.1. In the following section, I describe my progressive reflection of positionality as an ‘overt’ researcher with giving up my intention of working in the call centre and furthermore explain how I experienced an epistemological turn through the fieldwork.

#### 4.6. Reflection on positionality

*“How can we understand someone else without sacrificing him to our logic or it to him? Whether it assimilated reality too quickly to our own ideas, or on the contrary declared it impenetrable to them, sociology always spoke as if it could roam over the object of its investigations at will – the sociologist was an absolute observer. What was lacking was a patient penetration of its object, communication with it.”*

(Merleau-Ponty 1964:115) (emphasis added)

From the preparation stage of the fieldwork, I had been concerned about my positionality in the field. The concern continued to evoke internal conflict between practicality and ethics in terms of doing thorough ‘overt’ research. The decision not to work in a call centre was not a sequential consequence of logical thinking but a result of having gone through several challenges in the field (described in section 4.6.1). Abandoning the idea of being a call centre worker, I happened upon other routes to sharing the female workers’ experiences (details in section 4.6.2).

The reflective process can be summarised into two stages chronologically; awakening talks and bodily practice. The reason for a concrete description of my reflective practice is because I think participant observer is the chief instrument of ethnographic research (i.e. “I am a fieldnote”). During the main fieldwork, I experienced an epistemological change that was deeply entangled

with the field context. Thus, I consider it reasonable to discuss the change this in the methodology chapter.

Before listening to the awakening talks, I became sceptical about my plan to work in a call centre after reviewing another anthropologist's ethnography. Kim (1995, 1997), a Korean female anthropologist, worked in a factory at Masan free trade zone (adjacent to a southern coastal area of South Korea) for 3 months in 1987 without disclosing her identity (researcher, PhD student from abroad, etc.). She could have been accepted to work there by her personal connection. After three months, having stopped working in the factory, she was embarrassed because her former female colleagues were sincerely concerned about her unemployment and living. However, when they became aware of her real identity and the reason for her working, some were sympathetic but some were quite angry at her deception. Kim's field experience might be different from mine because of a Korean contextual gap of about 27 years between us. Nonetheless, both of us are in the same position that we do not need to work for a living and there is a due date for the research. Thus, from Kim's experience, I recognised the inevitable positional limit of a researcher whether I worked in a call centre overtly or covertly. Until that moment, however, I had believed there must be a solution to this problem if I tried hard enough to find it.

At that time, I had not given up the idea of working. In order to ask for practical suggestions, I contacted Miss Song, a female researcher who had interviewed female call centre workers with whom she had developed a rapport during the time she had worked at a call centre for 8 months (Song 2014). She had suffered for the first three to four months not only due to the workload but also by the difficulty of getting close to former call handlers. Even though she had worked in a call centre, she had not introduced herself as a 'potential' researcher. One year after having left the centre, she began to contact former close colleagues asking for formal interviews. She advised me that rather than working in the call centre I was better off meeting her informants since working in a call centre from her own experience was very challenging. She called the closest informant to ask for an interview about working experience and its effect on one's health, but was

rather shocked by an unexpected response. The colleague was extremely angered by her request; she said for her to talk about her health-related behaviour including smoking to a male researcher would be shameful and humiliating. The colleague said to the researcher, “How dare you ask me to do that kind of humiliating interview?” From this indirect experience, I was able to forecast how hard working overtly in a call centre would be for me, including the prospective hostility toward a male researcher doing a PhD from abroad. Nevertheless, even having recognised the real challenges in the field, I had not yet reflected deeply about myself.

This lack of reflection on my own position means an absence of any scepticism about my ‘epistemology’. Epistemology can be described as ‘the way I see the world,’ that is, ‘my views and opinions on things like truth, knowledge, and reality’ (de Gialdino 2009). I had never heard the word ‘epistemology’ when training to be a doctor; thus I had never asked myself, “What is my epistemology as a family medicine doctor?” (Grad 2009). After working in a hospital and studying anthropology, I began to realise the limitation of my biomedical perspective. However, although I could think it, have it in mind, I had not been able to bring up the subject of epistemology and challenge it. Instead, until the early phase of my fieldwork, I had focused on practical limits rather having questions about my frame of thought. The way I saw the reality at that time was that because the real cause of a certain ‘problem’ actually exists ‘in’ a call centre, I should enter a call centre and observe the cause in order to solve the problem. Therefore, my epistemology was based on a firm conviction of a cause-and-effect relationship; that is, more ‘deductive’ than ‘inductive,’ more close to ‘biomedical epistemology’ than ‘biopsychosocial epistemology’ (Grad 2009:357). I seemed to be obsessive about fulfilling ‘scientific’ or ‘social scientific’ investigation while avoiding being enchanted by any evidence generated by ‘non-scientific means’ (cf. Macnaughton, Carro-Ripalda, and Russell (2012:466)). I had not realised the phenomenological meaning of intersubjectivity at that moment; that is, I myself can be a problem when I face female call handlers.

#### 4.6.1. Awakening talks

I first had cause to reflect on my positionality in the field and my standpoint from longstanding experiences as a doctor when awakened by ‘two inspiring talks.’ The first awakening talk which impacted on my epistemology was with a female thyroid cancer patient. On 5<sup>th</sup> November 2014 I attended a public conference about hearing stories from female cancer patients (the title was “*Yes! I am sick!*”) held by WomenLink<sup>49</sup> (*hangug yeoseong minuhoe*) in Seoul. Here I listened to a story of a woman in her mid-30s who had undergone a thyroid cancer operation. Her testimony introduced me to the ‘embodiment of suffering’.

“These days I am learning to dance. Today I have danced excitingly just before coming here. Because after the operation I feel that I have carefully read the status of my body and served my body. At some point I think before the operation I had treated my body too negatively. So I decide to learn to dance. I’d like to give my body a chance to have a positive experience...*To experience a disease is not like putting one stone in a fishbowl but like pouring a red dye in a fishbowl, completely changing the whole water.*” (emphasis added)

The last sentence greatly inspired me. Applying her metaphor to my research, working in a call centre as a researcher is simply putting a new stone in a fishbowl and then this activity is only an ‘experience,’ not the ‘embodiment’ that can change my water colour. The woman’s anecdote revealed to me the thoughtlessness of my conceit that I could deliver the real story of female call centre workers more objectively by direct observation and a ‘scientific’ perspective. After

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<sup>49</sup> ‘WomenLink’ is one of a well-known non-governmental feminist organisations in Korea. During the early period of my fieldwork, I contacted this organisation, since it has been engaging in many societal issues of gender and labour. In addition, Professor Yeong-Gyeong Baek, a medical anthropologist teaching at the Korean National Open University, was involved in many activities of ‘WomenLink’ and she recommended the organisation to me. She invited me to the public conference of “*Yes! I am sick!*” where she presented her current research about the lived experiences of female cancer patients.

listening to her talk, I realised that I should prepare spaces for the interviews with female workers where they could talk frankly, without any censorship of employers rather than editing their experiences in the name of the academy through my superficial working experience in a call centre. Besides, by the time I experienced this first awakening talk, I had also been told by Mr Lee, a main executive of the Worker's Future (*nodongjai mirae*)<sup>50</sup> that one female call centre worker in SDIC had called him for help to report the wrongful act of a company, but she had not told the real name of the company out of fear of retaliation even though it would be reported to Seoul Regional Ministry of Labor anonymously. As a consequence, I felt doubtful that I would get 'uncensored' interviews from workers if working together depended on gaining permission from employers.

The second inspiring talk to impact on my epistemological frame was the talk with feminists, members of the 'Gender and Health' team in the Centre for Health and Social Change (*geonganggwa daean*)<sup>51</sup> in February 2015. The meeting was a group seminar to introduce my research and obtain comments from the group. The main issue I suggested was the difficulty of accessing call centres. All participants in the meeting greatly supported the value of my research and my sincerity. However, they brought my epistemological frame into question. The frame was that I strongly believed I could close the gap between female workers and me if I made more efforts with more detailed plans. They criticised my sincere 'effort' itself. They argued that the more I forced myself to be humble and serious towards female workers, the more the gap between us would increase. From this talk, although I felt initially discouraged, even upset, I soon realised

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<sup>50</sup> The Worker's Future is a branch of the Korean Confederation of Trade Union in SDIC 2 and Mr Lee is a main executive. Since he is also a certified labour consultant, he knows many details of working conditions of the companies in SDIC. That is the reason I contacted him.

<sup>51</sup> The Centre for Health and Social Change is a non-governmental research community to develop alternative health policies against commercialised and neoliberalistic public health strategies. Since main members of it are progressive medical professionals (doctors, dentists and pharmacists), it is helpful to get critical views about current health policy issues including labour and health. In particular, 'Gender and Health' team of the centre is good to listen to the gender specific perspective on female labour.

that there must have been a limitation to my epistemological frame itself. The limitation I recognised from the talk was my assumption that a ‘full experience of mutuality’ is possible and my empathic responses to female call handlers (e.g. “I can understand how you feel”) would be appreciated by them. I had not considered the possibility that my empathic practice would be ‘potentially dangerous’ and even both ‘resented’ by them and ‘self-deceiving’ (Macnaughton 2009). In other words, I had thought that my sincerity would excuse me from being criticised.

To borrow a line from Merleau-Ponty (1964:115), I had tried to understand my informants by ‘sacrificing them to my (academic) logic.’ I had trusted that: 1) there were public health issues clearly demonstrated by authoritative epidemiological statistics; 2) if I directly observe the problems ‘in’ working places, I could clearly analyse and solve them; 3) I should be ‘in’ a call centre. However, due to the serendipitous and insightful talks I heard, I had an opportunity to examine critically my deductive and biomedical epistemology as well as a potential danger from my empathic involvement. As a result, I began to bracket my ‘theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematising’ toward female call handlers and instead focused on describing their lived experiences (e.g. their efforts for ‘coping with life or finding meaning in the face of suffering’) (Jackson 1996:2, 22); in short, focusing not on my efforts, but theirs.

#### 4.6.2. Bodily practice

“There are significant differences between the way the world appears to our consciousness when we are *fully engaged in activity* and the way it appears to us when we subject it to reflection and retrospective analysis”

(Jackson 1996:42) (emphasis added)

My epistemological turn was not completed only by realising the limited frame of my thought. I underwent another step when investigating female call centre workers’ lives. The following steps were not what I had planned but had come about naturally, when I tried just to get along with

female workers more. The steps were to share ‘bodily’ experiences with them. First of all, I participated in the street rallies of the ABC call centre labour union several times. I wanted to know its slogans, atmosphere and performances (singing, dancing and speeches). While marching, chanting together and holding the union’s flag in the middle of Seoul city, I sensed the cold eyes of passing citizens and supervising policemen staring at us (Figure 4.12). These experiences were opportunities to directly feel the hostile viewpoints of citizens toward female call centre workers and also helped me earn the trust of labour union members.



Figure 4.12 The scene of the street rally of the ABC call centre union on 6 Aug 2016 in Seoul.

Another bodily activity was the MPG exercise at the ABC call centre labour union. Almost every week from 2015 February 26<sup>th</sup> I attended the exercise meeting, mainly to ‘meet’ people. But while practising the same postures as them my strained body became relaxed, resulting in my nervousness as a stranger also gradually disappearing. Especially, the exercise greatly relieved my right shoulder pain (because of ‘frozen shoulder’) which had prevented me from putting my right hand up completely before the fieldwork. This kind of testimony as to the effectiveness of the exercise was easy to find amongst participants. A lot of musculo-skeletal pains amongst call

centre workers - headache, back pain, wrist pain and shoulder pain - were relieved by the stretching exercise. By sharing these testimonies together, as well as wearing the same exercise uniforms (Figure 4.11), I became closer to the workers.

The 'moving body' in the research field has been discussed meaningfully by anthropologists but has remained undertheorised compared to the 'static body' (Farnell 1999). Jackson insists that 'to participate bodily in everyday practical tasks' and 'using one's body in the same way as others in the same environment' both help anthropologists grasp the sense of activity as others do. He also insists that bodily participation helps researchers avoid 'seeking truth at the level of disembodied concepts and decontextualised sayings' and then solves 'the phenomenological problem of how I could know the experience of the other' (Jackson 1989:134-135). In my case, my bodily participations such as screaming slogans at the rally field and following a trainer's commands and motions in the exercise field helped me remain consonant with the experience of female call handlers. Even though I was not able to write down or ask anything while moving my body together with them, I transcribed every scene and moment through my body senses and felt that I, as a main instrument of the fieldwork, gradually changed; that is, my body was a living 'field-note' (Jackson 1990). My fieldwork definitely was 'co-created in the embodied dialogical encounter' (Finlay 2009:13). In other words, through intercorporeal relationship between researcher and researched, I changed from a positivist physician to a phenomenological anthropologist.

#### 4.7. Conclusion: The *rite de passage* of becoming an anthropologist

In this Chapter, I have described the whole process of my ethnographic journey from the pilot study to main fieldwork. It is also the story of my *rite de passage* to becoming an anthropologist. Due to the serendipitous insightful talks I heard, I had an opportunity to examine critically my deductive and biomedical epistemology as well as a potential danger of my empathic involvement.

Meanwhile, in sharing ‘bodily’ experiences with call handlers on the street (joining the union’s protest) and in the union office (participating in the exercise), I was accepted as one of the inside members – they often called me ‘*dongji*’ (同志 = people fight for same goals; comrade) - and this enable me to establish close relationships with union members, who became my key informants. Furthermore, bodily engagement helped me write a fieldnote in my body; that is, actually feeling and experiencing solidarity, fear, humiliation and pleasure. The fortuitous chance to learn the MPG exercise from the union was a crucial opportunity to change my epistemology, as it related to my ‘incarnate consciousness’ and also to conceive of the concept of ‘cultural gravity’ (historio-culturo-emotional physics). Thus, my epistemological turn has not only impacted on the content of this ethnography but also my life after the fieldwork. In this sense, the research journey from the pilot study to the main fieldwork is the *rite de passage* of becoming an anthropologist.

In next chapters, I describe my research results by following the chronological order of my fieldwork; walking in SDIC (Chapter 5), meeting call handlers (Chapter 6), attending the labour union’s activities (Chapter 7), and practising the MPG exercise together (Chapter 8). Going through these processes step by step, one sentence attracted my attention. It was ‘Hands Up.’ It is not a consequence of ‘deductive’ logical thinking or research plans, but rather ‘inductive’ result from ‘fully engagement in bodily activity’ (Jackson 1996:42) and ‘a patient penetration of informants and communication with them’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964:115). In other words, ‘Hands Up’ came to my mind while I chanted slogans together with my hands up, practised the exercise together with stretching my hands out, and listening to lived experiences of the women. The body of mine and theirs is, to be sure, the crucial fieldnote. In the following chapter, I show the evidence from first ‘Hands Up’ of factory girls in GIC during the 70s and 80s.

## 5. The remnants of Factory Girls in the Industrial Complex

In this Chapter, I describe the call centre industry in the SDIC and compare it with the GIC, particularly regarding factory girls' lives in the 1970s and 80s. Initially, I describe my first impressions of the SDIC (section 5.1): the stunning buildings and big ashtrays, complex of heterogeneous spaces and characteristics of SDIC from the perspective of 'the boundary of pollution.' In section 5.2, I explain why it is hard to access call handlers in SDIC through my experience with a health centre, a welfare centre and a labour union. In particular, I reveal the current reality following the downfall of labour union organisation in the SDIC and its effect on workers' welfare. In section 5.3, I reveal the meaning of revitalising the 1970s and 80s' political project, the 'Factory New Community Movement' in the SDIC alongside the local governmental celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the GIC; particularly, describing the implications of 'the Statue of Woman of Export' and 'the Workers' Living Experience Centre in GIC.' Last, in section 5.4, in contrast to the governmental glorification of factory girls as 'industrial soldiers' and 'the pillar of industry,' I highlight the lived experience of the 1970s and 1980s factory girls' 'hands up,' collective resistance, its background and their bodily suffering in their workplaces including use of chemicals.

### 5.1. First impressions of the Seoul Digital Industrial Complex (SDIC)

#### 5.1.1. Stunning buildings and big ashtray

The SDIC is more than an assembly of so-called IT companies. It is the historical place where female workers, figuratively speaking industrial soldiers, dedicated themselves to building the Korean nation in the 1970s and 80s. In 1978 around 114,000 workers were employed in this

industrial complex and in 2012 around 153,000 people were still working in the 10,000 or so companies located here (Seoul Museum of History 2015). The road to the area is easy to find because Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, provides a well-structured 10-line subway system of which lines 2 & 7 serve Guro-Digital Complex station in SDIC1, Southern Guro station in SDIC2 and Gasan-Digital Complex station in SDIC3, respectively (Figure 5.1). On 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014, I took line No. 7 and got off at the Gasan-Digital Complex station.



Figure 5.1 The subway map of Seoul. Three red arrows indicate the stations in SDIC (retrieved on 31 Oct 2016 from <http://www.mappery.com/map-of/Seoul-Metro-Map>).

When I went through the subway exit, I gazed vacantly at the exit sign and the tall squared building in the background. The station name was translated in English, Chinese and Japanese. Alongside this international signpost, gigantic multi-storey factory buildings on every side stunned me and then I felt bewildered, asking myself, “Is this the same place the industrial

complex used to be?” The buildings were huge, splendid and there were many more of them than I had imagined. There were relatively a few people on the street, though. Many of those I bumped into were groups of smokers congregating in front of buildings. The thing that caught my eye the most was a big ashtray (Figure 5.2). I had never seen such a big ashtray before. On closer inspection, I soon realised that every rest area outside the buildings was meticulously prepared for smokers. Figure 5.3 shows the typical resting space structure in the SDIC. Almost every building provided three resting places - 1) on the roof, 2) in the middle of the building, and 3) in front of or behind the building - and there were more than enough ashtrays in each. When I visited the SDIC in the evening, particularly out of office hours, the ashtrays were filled with cigarette butts. Ms Cheon, an experienced nurse in her early 40s working as a smoking cessation counsellor at Seoul Worker’s Health Centre in SDIC3 told me the features of workers’ smoking practices in the SDIC.

“Really this Digital Complex doesn’t have appropriate places for a break. There is nothing special to do here during a break. Workers, if they were smokers, just go out of the building and sit down on the bench in the resting place in front of or behind the building and smoke together. There are no parks, no specific resting facilities in SDIC. Especially, in the case of non-smokers, many benches are occupied by smokers and then there are fewer places to take a rest. Truly here are only offices and not enough spaces for a rest. When I first came here, I was very surprised. After getting out of the subway exit and on the way to the Seoul Worker’s Health Centre, people were very naturally smoking on the street in front of the buildings. It was a big shock. I had no idea that there was such a great number of smokers in our country.”

(Ms Cheon, counselling nurse, 12/11/14)

Ms Cheon was shocked by how naturally and commonly people smoked on the street. Even though she was an experienced smoking cessation counsellor, the smoking-friendly environment was as alien to her as it was to me. She agreed with me that the SDIC did not have extra resting spaces, only smoking areas. She went on to provide me with a further explanation as to why she

felt shocked.

“Before finding employment in the Worker’s Health Centre, I had worked in the smoking cessation clinic in Songpa Public Healthcare Centre in Seoul. In Songpa, there were a lot of streets, parks, and bus-stops where smoking was banned. So smokers in Songpa were not likely to openly smoke on the street. But here, surprisingly, people just smoked naturally. I think young people here seem not to take smoking cessation into consideration. It’s like a herd mentality. When I worked in Songpa, it was hard to meet smokers on the street, but in the SDIC it was so easy to find smokers. When I did the street campaign for a smoking cessation clinic and distributed flyers, I felt awkward and even ashamed. The smokers seemed to think the campaign insane.”

(Ms Cheon, counselling nurse, 12/11/14)

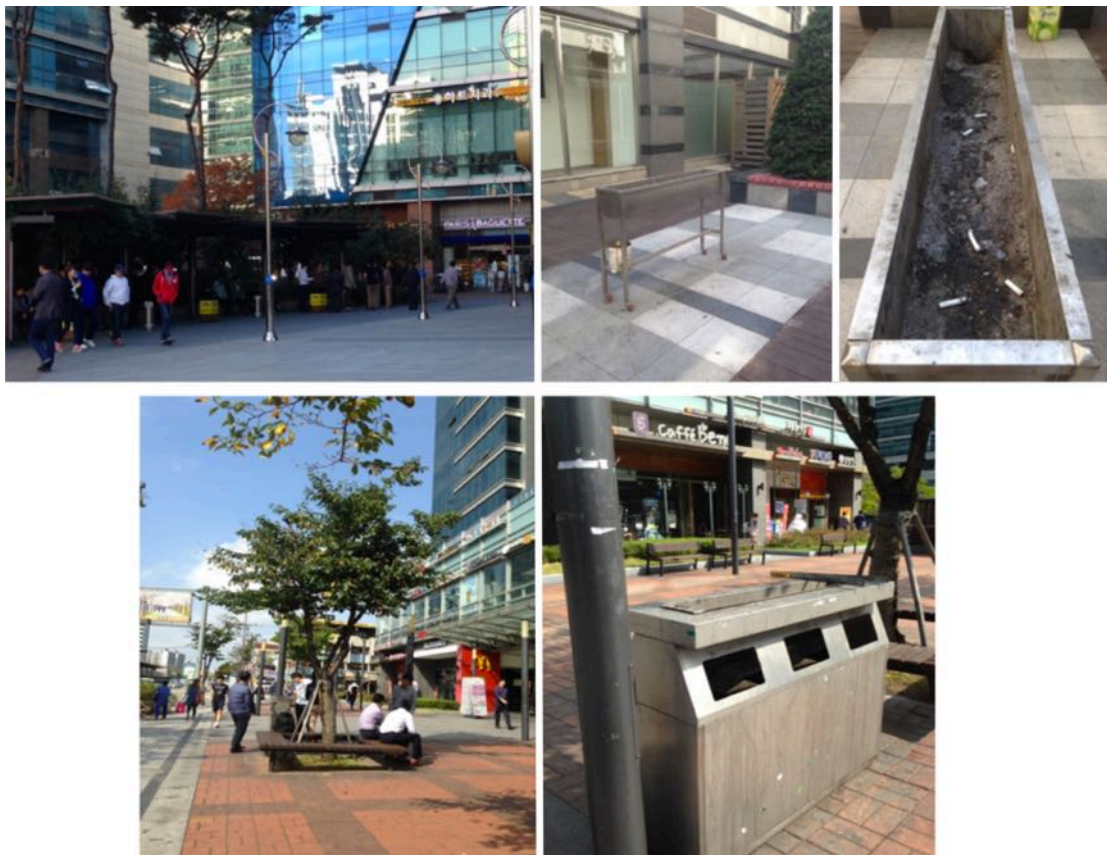


Figure 5.2 Smoking areas with a big ashtray in SDIC2 (lower) and SDIC3 (upper).

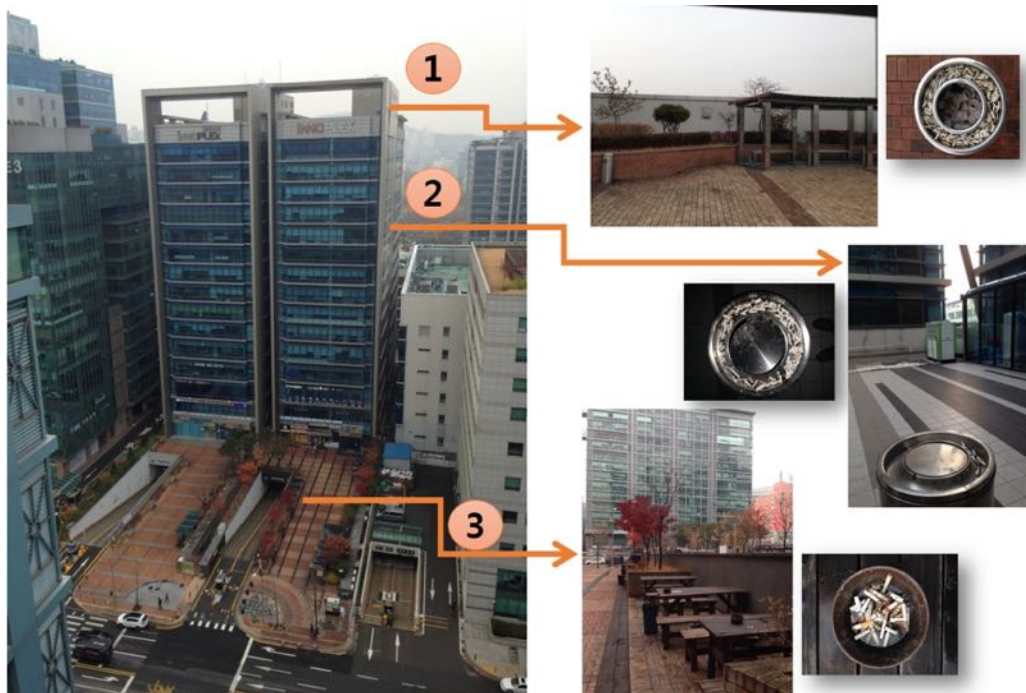


Figure 5.3 Typical resting space structure in the SDIC; All of them were prepared for smokers.

Songpa is about 40 minutes from the SDIC by public transport in Seoul. However, the atmosphere of each was totally different. Considering the different purpose of the two areas (residential versus industrial), the gap regarding smokers' attitudes on the street was huge. In Songpa, the local government enforced smoke-free streets. In the SDIC, in contrast, a number of ashtrays were provided for workers. Why was there such a difference? In the SDIC, I wondered whether there might be something more important than workers' health. Whatever it was, the call handlers in the SDIC were exposed to this typical environment and inhabited it every day. Therefore, the 'herd mentality' about smoking which Ms Cheon pointed out might have influenced the call handlers. The scenes of big ashtrays and smokers around them could be a powerful advertisement of tobacco.

### 5.1.2. The SDIC, a complex of heterogeneous spaces

“Guro Digital Complex (SDIC1) was truly a shock for me. It consisted of old flats and villages, which was totally different from Gangnam where I lived. The adult entertainment street was totally alien to me. In Gangnam, the entertainment street was very neat, polished, and luxurious. But, in contrast, here, in Guro, the entertainment street was somewhat Chinese style. The light was too bright and gaudy. Actually all of the workers at my favorite snack bar in Guro were Chinese immigrant women. Do you know the Japanese animation movie, ‘Ghost in the Shell’? Anyway it’s about a future society, not utopia but dystopia. In that future dystopia, the buildings were huge, tall and covered with rectangular windowpanes. Very inhumane, chilly buildings. Here, in Guro, the multi-storey factory buildings were just the same as the buildings in ‘Ghost in the Shell.’ Dystopia!”

(Miss Yu, call handler in SDIC1, 21/12/14)

Miss Yu described SDIC1 as ‘Old’, ‘Chinese style’, and ‘Dystopian,’ meaning diverse but with negative overtones. Diverse things indeed coexist in the SDIC, especially in SDIC2. When I first visited the key location, the ‘Digital Complex Five-Way’ (*dijiteoldanji ogeori*) intersection (Figure 5.4), I noticed that there was something unmatched, unmixed like water and oil, so I felt it heterogeneous. In particular, the northern area from the intersection seemed to be a completely different world: old, alien, and messy. The heterogeneous place is called Garibong-dong and is a longstanding residential area from the 1970s. It is famous for its cheapest and tiny rental rooms, nicknamed ‘*beoljip*,’ meaning honeycomb. The houses remain habited today (Figure 5.5), providing accommodation for immigrant workers, particularly Chinese, who make up 40% of the residents of Garibong-dong. The adult entertainment street with its restaurants, pubs and market for Chinese workers serves this community (Figure 5.6). The street is often dirty with rubbish, cigarette butts, discarded food and packaging, even signs of vomit; there is also random violence (Figure 5.7). Many immigrant workers do not have appropriate health insurance, partly because of illegal immigration, and so two private medical clinics for immigrant workers were established

here (Figure 5.8).

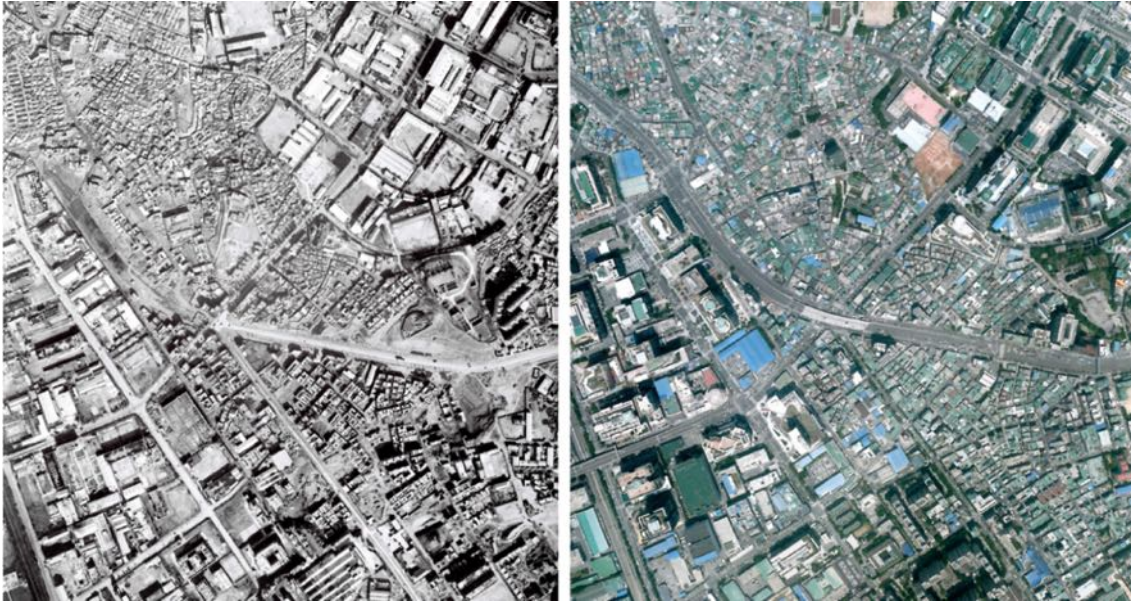


Figure 5.4 Garibong Five-Way intersection in the GIC in 1975 (Lt) and Digital Complex Five-Way intersection in SDIC in 2014 (Rt) (Seoul Museum of History 2015).



Figure 5.5 Old houses in SDIC2, composed of tiny rooms to rent.



Figure 5.6 China-like entertainment street and karaoke with glaring lamps and Korean and Chinese signs.



Crackdown on town mobsters : "£600 fine for even a slap across the face"

"£17 fine for throwing away a cigarette butt on the street"

Figure 5.7 The trash bin (Lt) and warning notices (Rt) in SDIC2. The logo 'Digital Guro' contrasts with discarded cigarette butts and the warning sign for street violence represented the usual atmosphere in the SDIC, particularly the Chinese words showing who often fought.



Figure 5.8 The free medical centres for the immigrant workers in the outskirts of the SDIC; an NGO clinic (Lt) and a Mission Church clinic (Rt).

Away from the maze of honeycomb-like houses in Garibong-dong, the world is completely transformed. Many buildings are decorated with cold large windowpanes. Miss Yu deemed them dystopian because, in contrast to their splendid appearance, the work going on inside the buildings was similar to the period of GIC. She said the understanding of labour in the SDIC is “the same as in the 1970s,” pointing out that there seems to be a common consensus that work is fundamentally difficult and every worker should endure the difficulty, not desiring easy work. As an example, she said, workers were reticent about visiting the toilet in fear of annoying managers.

In order to find the call centres in the SDIC, I looked at a local tabloid publication. It gave me a lot of information about what kinds of jobs the companies in the SDIC provide now, including: 1) International marriage information: Women from Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Philippines, North Korea, Japan, etc., 2) Consulting for Personal Bankruptcy, 3) Female workers in restaurants, 4) Loans for women, 5) Call centre working, 6) Housekeeper and Caregiver, 7) Seamstress, 8) Karaoke female workers.<sup>52</sup> As I expected, there were lots of advertisements for call handlers. Most of the content of the tabloids provided information for financially vulnerable people. Notably, one specific advertisement caught my eye. It was regarding Karaoke female workers, who while at work were expected to provide illegal sexual acts. The tabloid provided as much information about Karaoke as it did about the call centre. Actually, it is not hard to find Karaoke signposts in the SDIC. The reality for Karaoke's existence is predominantly due to the huge number of male workers in SDIC, however its existence highlights the fact that there are many women in financially vulnerable states who have to resort to this illegal trade. This sex work and call centre work, the legal and illegal side-by-side for women. Such is the reality surrounding the SDIC.

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<sup>52</sup> Karaoke female workers (*noraebang doumi*) sing and drink with customers, offer company and sometimes sexual services to them.

### 5.1.3. The Zero Gravity Zone in the SDIC

In SDIC3, there is a free resting place, ‘*mujungryeok jidae*’ (meaning ‘Zero Gravity Zone’) which is open 24 hours a day for mainly young workers (Figure 5.9 and 5.12). The Seoul Metropolitan City has offered it since December 2014 and explains its purpose to “provide a shared resting place for free activities of youth employees through escaping from the social gravity (*sahoejeok jungryeok*) restraining them” (retrieved from <http://youthzone.kr>). The ‘social gravity’ figuratively expresses the weight of workers’ various obligations requested directly or indirectly by the workplace, society, family, etc. This mention of ‘social gravity’ reminded me of the concept of ‘cultural gravity’ (Chapter 1.3 and 3.2.3) and I thought about it constantly during the fieldwork. I wondered what kinds of social gravity weighed so heavily upon youth employees. I considered that workload might be a key factor. Workload might not only mean the quantity of actual work but also the load of expectation related to socio-cultural norms attached to the notion of the ‘ideal employees.’ I was able to infer the norms out of what I observed and felt while walking in SDIC: big ashtrays, many smokers on streets, massive multi-storey factory buildings, splendid shopping malls as well as a maze of old houses for immigrant workers.



Figure 5.9 The inside of ‘zero gravity zone’ in SDIC3. There are many chairs, tables, sofas and a small kitchen. The logo of this area looks like a clerk wearing formal suit and a tie while floating with the helmet of a spacesuit (retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016 from <http://youthzone.kr>).

Above all, a huge number of ashtrays and their unusual size and a pile of cigarette butts enabled me to estimate the weight of an aspect of the social gravity (Figure 5.10 and 5.11). I wondered why the SDIC featured numerous ashtrays and smoking areas. This sight was exceptional in view of the current strong tobacco control policies in Korea such as the increase in smoke-free streets and the cigarette price hikes (80% in Jan 2015). According to the testimony of Ms Cheon, the SDIC can be regarded as a ‘smoking island’ in Seoul (cf. Thompson, Pearce, and Barnett (2007)) in that it offers smoking areas rather than smoke-free streets. The SDIC seems to be an exception to tobacco control policy; figuratively speaking, it is like a ‘zero-gravity zone’ in which the obligation for workers’ health protection disappears.



Figure 5.10 The pictures of ashtrays full of cigarette butts in the SDIC.

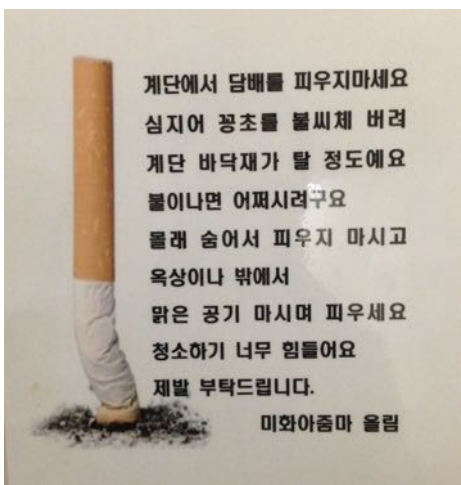


Figure 5.11 The sign by one female cleaner in a building where PH call centre located. I heard from Miss Bong, a call handler who had worked in the call centre, that about 70% of female call handlers there were smokers. The sign says, “Please do not smoke on the stairs. Someone even discarded a cigarette butt without putting out and it burnt the flooring material. What if there had been a fire? Please do not smoke in secret and rather smoke outside or at the roof smoking area, breathing in fresh air. It is too hard to clean the stairs. I beg you. – from a cleaner in charge.” This message represents how smoking behaviour is prevalent in the SDIC.

The SDIC, particularly 1 and 3, is clearly an industrial area filled with massive factory buildings. It is easy to recognise whether I am inside or outside the SDIC; all that I need to do is look for ‘stunning buildings and big ashtrays.’ Here it is also easy to meet workers smoking in front of buildings, not hiding themselves behind the buildings, even female smokers. Unlike the smokers in Songpa whom Ms Cheon described - “being very careful not to draw attention to themselves, attempting to lower their head and hiding their face,” workers here ‘naturally’ smoke on the streets. The SDIC is a place where the social norms or stigma attached on smoking are temporarily suspended, becoming ‘a smoking island,’ containing a ghetto of Chinese immigrant workers, many of whom are also regular smokers. Considering workers’ smoking from the perspective of ‘labour enhancer’ and ‘working drug’ or ‘drug food’ (see Chapter 2.3 and 3.1), the big ashtrays may represent the excessive burden of labour.

## 5.2. Looking for hidden call handlers in the SDIC

Tall buildings and many ashtrays full of cigarette butts convinced me that many employees must be working in the SDIC. Workers existed almost everywhere in the field, but they were hidden, and I found it difficult to find them. During the early period of my fieldwork when I visited three different centres located in the SDIC in order to look for female call handlers, I was able to understand why it was difficult to find and meet call handlers here. There were the Seoul Worker’s Health Centre (SWHC) (section 5.2.1), Guro Worker’s Welfare Centre (GWWC) (section 5.2.2) and the Worker’s Future (WF) (section 5.2.3) (Figure 5.12). The centres for providing health (SWHC) and welfare service (GWWC) – which companies often do not provide – were not performing their functions properly, resulting in failing to encourage workers to enjoy and realise their rights. A local branch of the Korean Confederation of Trade Union (*minjunochong*) (WF) also faced limitations in their ability to help workers. These failures or limitations are relevant to the reality of call handlers hidden in the SDIC. In the end, ironically,

when I visited these centres to ask for help to find call centre workers, I was actually asked to help them find the hidden workers.

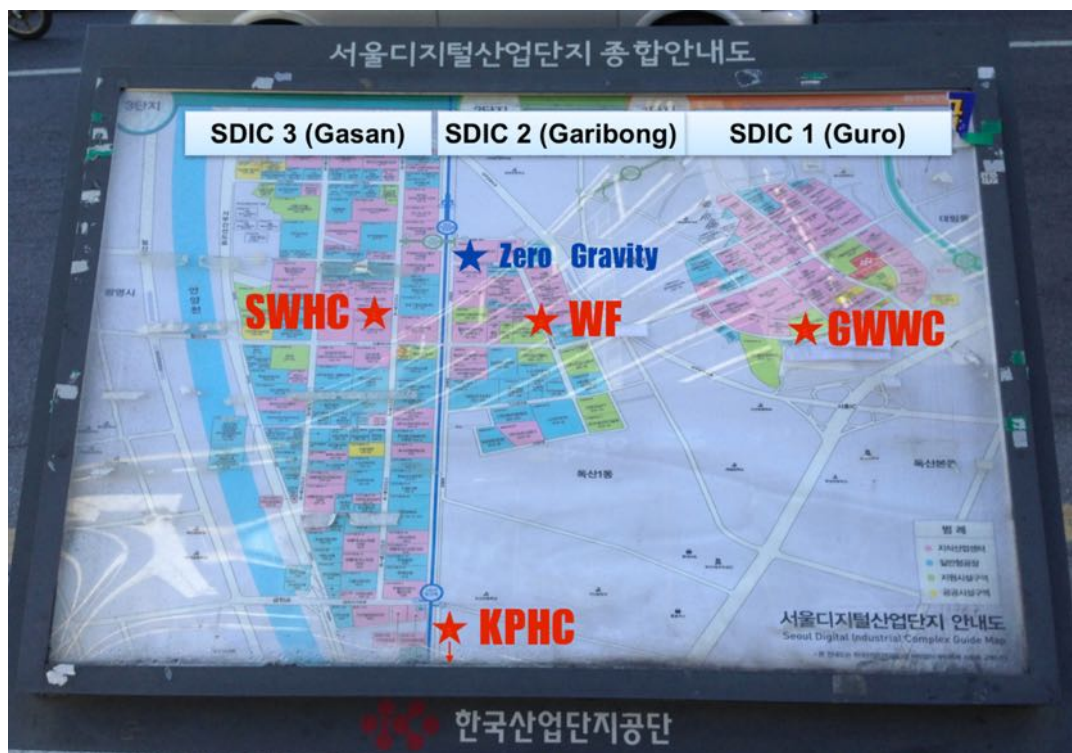


Figure 5.12 The locations of several centres in the SDIC I visited. Each acronym means as follows; SWHC for the Seoul Worker's Health Centre, WF for the Worker's Future, GWWC for Guro Worker's Welfare Centre, KPHC for Kumcheon Public Healthcare Centre, and Zero Gravity for 'Zero Gravity Zone.'

### 5.2.1. Through the Health Sector

The first organisation I visited was the SWHC (Seoul Worker's Health Centre) in SDIC3.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> This is a specialist public health centre for workers of a small company (employing less than 50 workers). It is contracted to Ewha Womans University Hospital (department of Occupational & Environmental Medicine). It is not a clinic providing medical treatment, but offering free health prevention and promotion service to workers: for example, counselling on occupational diseases and work-related stress, prevention and management of cardiovascular diseases and musculo-skeletal diseases and consulting about occupational environments. The founder of the centre, Professor Kim at Ewha Womans University Hospital, was commissioned by the local authority to research the female

Since members of the Centre conducted the survey of over 700 call centre workers' health conditions in the SDIC in 2012, I expected to be able to get any information I needed to contact the call handlers from the Centre. However, my anticipation was completely wrong. Professor Kim, the founder of the Centre, emphasised "In SDIC, nobody knows where the call centres are!" She explained there were no companies named 'call centre' in SDIC. Professor Kim emphasised that locating and getting permission to research in call centres was difficult.<sup>54</sup> In the past, female workers in the factories in the GIC were easy to find due to the smoke from the factory's chimney, their typical shape and signposts, and the workers' blue uniforms. None of these markers are effective for call centres. The reality is that the companies restrict any contact-visits with call handlers, as if the workers are prisoners, during their office hours.

Besides expecting some relevant information about call handlers in the SDIC, I contacted the SWHC in order to grasp the management conditions there. The centre provided health prevention and promotion services from 8 am to 7 pm on weekdays. However, I was told that employees in the SDIC found it difficult to visit the SWHC because the break time was short and the distance

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service workers' health in SDIC in 2012 (Kumcheon County 2013). The Health Centre was established in SDIC3 to fulfil one of the recommendations resulting from the report.

<sup>54</sup> Ms Park, a representative of a professional research agency, conducted the health survey report of female workers in the SDIC with Professor Kim in 2012. Ms Park explained the difficulties when she and her colleagues surveyed the call handlers. She emphasised the difficulty to distinguish the call centres from the company name lists of the SDIC. She also stressed the importance of public documents to access call centres. At that time, her survey team tried to contact call handlers through three routes. Firstly, after receiving various official documents, the team contacted very large-scale companies that seemed to care about their reputation and relationship with public organisations. Secondly, her colleagues directly visited the property management offices of each building where they suspected call centres could be found and asked the caretakers whether there were call centres in the building. Thirdly, they searched job seeking online sites (for example, 'ALBAMOM') looking for call centres located in the SDIC, called each call centre and got the information about the place, the number of workers and the possibility of carrying out their survey on the call handlers. However, contact was not everything. When they surveyed the call centres, the manager checked the content of the questionnaire and distributed them on behalf of the researchers instead of allowing the researchers to work face-to-face with call handlers. It was the same when they collected call handlers for the focus group interview. Ms Park said - "I felt it was filtered" - that the interviewees sought permission from their managers before making a decision about whether to attend the group interview or not.

was not so close, particularly for health promotion purposes rather than to receive medical treatment. For this reason, the centre planned to provide as many outreach services as possible, especially to the small companies which did not have a health manager in charge. Professor Kim, however, stated that in reality fewer small businesses applied or requested outreach services from the SWHC than large-scale firms, which often utilised available services astutely and hence received more benefits. For the manager of the SWHC, these big companies were preferable because they had their own health managers, practically supporting and managing the outreach service to achieve good results which, in turn, helped the Centre receive a favourable evaluation by the (local) government. Namely, this was a win-win situation. This situation followed a well-known paradox of health service delivery: ‘The Inverse Care Law,’ which states that “the availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the need of the population served” (Tudor Hart 1971:405).

After visiting the SWHC, I went to the KPHC (Kumcheon Public Healthcare Centre) in SDIC3. With the help of the SWHC, I was able to meet Ms Yoo, the main health projects manager of the KPHC. Since publishing the health report about female service workers in SDIC 2 & 3 in 2013 (Kumcheon County 2013), she said, the KPHC had not conducted any advanced programme. The KPHC provided a smoking cessation clinic to address the high smoking rates of female employees, but only for those who could afford to visit it during the daytime. In effect, Ms Yoo explained, the Centre, at that time, focused on ‘supervision and punishment’ rather than ‘providing a health service.’

“[Ms Yoo]: Well, unfortunately there is no special smoking cessation program. Only two nurses are allocated to the smoking cessation clinic in our Healthcare centre. However, they are not specialists in stop-smoking counselling. Sometimes, when there is a request for outreach smoking cessation counselling, the nurses visit the local companies but it is very rare because of the lack of members.

[The researcher]: Then, what is the main service regarding smoking cessation?

[Ms Yoo]: At the moment, the Centre is concentrating on supervising the violation of the

smoking-ban area and charging a fine for non-compliance. As far as I know, it is mainly for increasing the local authority's income. Regarding the charge, particularly on female smokers, I heard one special case. A woman was caught while smoking in a non-smoking area. She begged the officer not to send the fine notice to her home but wanted to pay the penalty there and then. She was very concerned about her parents discovering her smoking habit if the bill arrived at her home."

(Ms Yoo, public health officer, 16/12/14)



Figure 5.13 No Smoking Area Notice in an emergency stairway in the building at SDIC. "There is a fine for smoking in a no smoking area. –Kumcheon County." As the announcement on the notice suggests, the KPHC primarily focuses on supervising and charging a fine.

Through my conversation with Ms Yoo, I understood why groups of people in the SDIC smoked on the street within smoking areas and also why there were such huge ashtrays. In the SDIC, surprisingly, only two non-specialist nurses covered a wide area including SDIC 2 & 3. The Centre's main task was also to supervise whether people smoked in a non-smoking area and charge a fine partially to augment the local government's income (Figure 5.13). I felt that any medical concerns about the harmful effects of smoking were temporarily suspended. All of those facts revealed that in the SDIC smoking seemed not to be an issue at all unless people smokes in non-smoking areas. Meanwhile, the anecdote of the female smoker above showed that female smoking still remained stigmatised throughout Korean society.

### 5.2.2. Through the Welfare Sector

Following my visit to the SWHC in SDIC3, I visited the GWWC (Guro Worker's Welfare Centre) in SDIC1. It was established in November 2011 when the Seoul Metropolitan Government commissioned the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions to improve labour-management relations and provide a labour law counselling and welfare service. I thought that through this Centre, I could get information about the various welfare projects for female service sector workers in the SDIC. However, when I first visited the Centre, I realised it was not running any welfare programmes for women. I visited again when a new Centre chief, Ms Min was appointed in February 2015. She welcomed me very kindly since the Centre was tasked with managing a programme to relieve emotional stress in 2015 by the Seoul Government. At that moment, she was struggling to look for female call handlers 'hidden' in SDIC, which was the same problem I faced.

The GWWC was hidden deep inside a large building in SDIC1, and was hard to find. The first impression of the Centre was that it was like a small bookstore with two clerks. However, the Centre seemed inaccessible when it came to borrowing books. It was difficult to imagine workers going to this place to borrow a book during their short breaks. Ultimately, the main tasks of the Centre were external programmes or events (particularly, guitar and photography classes) and outreach services. There was no welfare service directly linked to labour, only interest oriented services that a few people could participate in. Despite being a welfare centre, it still had not grasped who needs welfare the most. Therefore, it was not able to provide proper services, and did not seem to be much used.

The welfare centre did, however, conduct an outreach service once a month at the entrance of the subway station, Guro-Digital-Industrial Station (*gurodigiteoldanjiyeok*) in SDIC1 (Figure 5.1). It offered various services including labour law counselling by a certified labour consultant and lawyer and health consultation by a nurse from the SWHC. During my fieldwork, I attended there

twice and observed the service they were providing (Figure 5.14). Most passers-by did not even look at it. Over two hours, only a few people sought consultation, however this was through simple curiosity. As a result, the welfare centre had no opportunity to meet call handlers either inside and outside the Centre office.



Figure 5.14 The outreach welfare service by the GWWC at Guro-Digital-Industrial station. The person sitting at the right end is the researcher (the picture taken by the GWWC).

### 5.2.3. Through the Labour Union Sector

The WF (Worker's Future) is a branch of the Korean Confederation of Trade Union in the SDIC. I contacted Mr Lee, a certified labour consultant who was its main executive. Before meeting him, I had convinced myself that several labour unions might be available to help me to contact call handlers in the SDIC. This is because Guro has been a symbol for Korean labour movements since the Korean labour unions' first solidarity strike, the 'Guro Alliance Strike' (*guro dongmaeng paeop*) started here in June 1984. However, it was not long before my conviction turned out to be wrong. The word, 'Labour Union' had already disappeared in Guro.

When I visited the WF office in SDIC2, Mr Lee said that "unfortunately, there is no call centre union in the SDIC at all." He explained the reason the labour union activity in the SDIC nearly

collapsed. In the past, there was a statement, “From Guro to Geoje” (*guroeseo geojekkaji*). This means that the influence of labour unions reached from the north of South Korea (Guro) to the south (Geoje-Island). Guro was as influential for its labour movement history as it was for its industrial scale in Korea. Mr Lee explained that the membership rate of the Guro labour union in late 1980s and early 90s was about 20%, the highest in the country and then there was a saying that when the labour unions in Guro succeeded to negotiate an increase in wages, the wages of the whole country increased. However, the manufacturing industry weakened step by step and, as a result, around the time of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, factories moved out to the local provinces and to the South-east Asian countries to seek cheaper labour forces. Accordingly, the labour union in Guro also weakened. Furthermore, as the multi-storey factories developed in Guro and the small scale subcontractors moved into them, the foundation from which to organise the labour union weakened. By 2015, the membership rate of the labour union in SDIC had decreased to about 2%, the lowest in the country.

Mr. Lee explained that SDIC3 has the largest number of multi-storey factories with some specifically for call centres with specialised telephone line equipment installed. Therefore, there were overwhelmingly large number of call centres in SDIC3 compared to SDIC1 and 2. Mr. Lee emphasised that the reason for the labour unions’ weakening in the SDIC was principally the increase in subcontractor companies. Figure 5.15 shows how the major contractor companies subcontract call centre work to medium and small companies inside or outside the contractor companies. The subcontractors employ the majority of call handlers as irregular workers, initially as temporary workers for a limited period (two years). Accordingly, the call handlers’ jobs are almost always unstable. Even though there is a possibility for temporary workers to be upgraded to ‘unlimited period temporary workers’ or regular workers, their employment status is essentially unstable because they can lose their jobs abruptly if the major contractor does not extend the subcontractor’s contract.

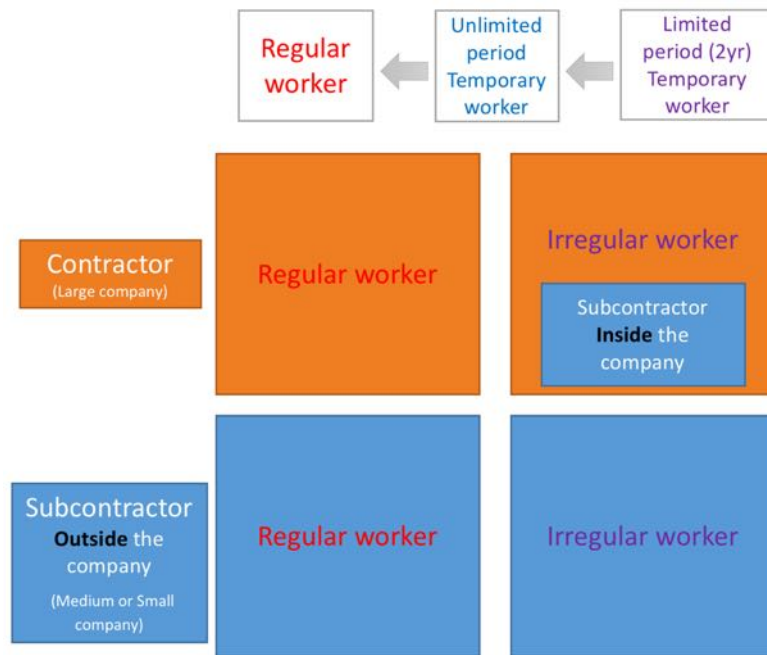


Figure 5.15 The structure of contract and subcontract with regular and irregular employment in the SDIC.

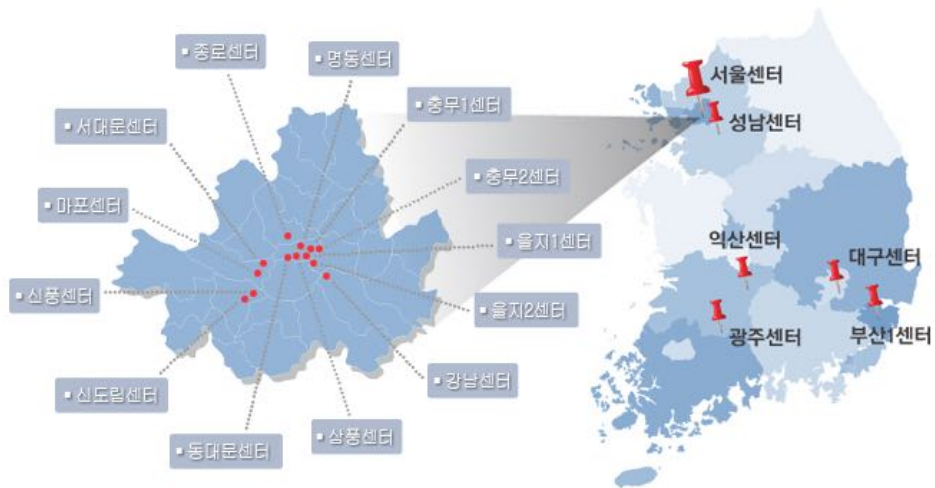


Figure 5.16 The map of branches of one large call centre company. The figure was referred from the company's website. The branches showed the call centres 'outside' the contractors, and then many small branches 'inside' the contractor companies were not indicated.

Mr. Lee explained further about the system of call centre companies. He noted that as the subcontracting system developed, the professional call centre companies also grew. They subcontracted with diverse contractors and became large sized companies themselves. As a result, there are three leading call centre companies in Korea now and they have many branches in the country (see Figure 5.16). They have a lot of small sized subcontractor branches 'inside' the contractor companies. Therefore, it is very hard to find call handlers covered by the contractor companies' names.

Mr. Lee, as a labour consultant, had received many complaints from call handlers at the WF office. The majority of these complaints concerned heavy workload and the difficulty of achieving targets which triggered bonus payments which compensated workers for the low basic pay. It was noteworthy that whenever Mr. Lee asked for the companies' names, about 70% of callers would not say for fear of recrimination. Mr. Lee told me of one case he became involved in, regarding unfair extra-work in a call centre in SDIC3.

"It was in November 2014. I got the call from the call handler, a limited period temporary worker in SDIC3. She worked in one branch of the big call centre company. She said that every team was expected to take 1000 calls a day and that during normal working hours the team usually took around 800 calls. So the team had to do extra-work to get 200 more calls and so call handlers often finished work at 8pm or 9pm. But she complained that she did not receive the extra-payment. I asked her the company's name but she refused to disclose it. I emphasised that Workers' Future would report her case anonymously but she was afraid of any repercussions...However, one month later, she contacted me again and this time gave me the name of the company, NET. Actually, the NET call centre is one of the three major call centre companies in Korea and notorious for its unfair working conditions. The Workers' Future finally reported the case to the Ministry of Labour. When questioned, the company replied that the call handlers finished their work at the exact official time and they had accurate record to prove this. She stressed that the workers signed the record book by hand, not checked by a computer system, so the company could easily fabricate the record book. However, NET insisted the book was original. As a result, the only evidence left was her testimony, but as she was extremely reluctant to expose her

identity, this case ended. Finally, she left the company. I heard that the NET company employed 10,000 call handlers throughout the country.”

(Mr. Lee, labour consultant, 27/10/14)

From the above case, I was aware of the difficult working conditions the call handlers were facing. And I also grasped the correlation between the irregular workers’ unstable employment status and the labour union’s decline in the SDIC. The temporary worker did not feel able to put her ‘hands up’ to demand her rights even if those rights were fair. Meanwhile, Mr. Lee told me how a company utilises temporary employment to break down a labour union.

“Do you know the typical strategy for a company to break down a labour union? Not employing new workers. When a labour union arises, the company often stops hiring new recruits. If there were no new employees and as regular workers resign, the number of labour union members reduces naturally as time goes by. At the point when the company has to employ new recruits to sustain their profit, it employs temporary workers on a lower wage. Then, accordingly, the labour union breaks down.”

(Mr. Lee, labour consultant, 27/10/14)

To conclude, temporary employment is infertile soil for a labour union, due to the rapid turnover rate of employees. It can also be an effective tool to destroy a labour union without effort. After talking with Mr. Lee, I could understand the historical and practical reasons for the low membership rate of the labour union in the SDIC including the call centre sector (Figure 5.17). Therefore, it became clearer to me how hard it was going to be to contact call handlers in the SDIC. Additionally, I realised that call centre companies were not only located within SDIC, they were spreading all over the country, which meant I did not have to hang around in the SDIC to look for call handlers.



Figure 5.17 The scene of a street protest in front of one major shopping malls in SDIC2. This scene was the only street rally in the SDIC that I witnessed during my fieldwork. It was a protest against the unfair dismissal of workers and overdue wages. Nevertheless, this small rally of three people received no attention from passing citizens. These were all executives of the WF protesting on behalf of dismissed workers. Indeed, the voices of the resistance in this area have long disappeared (gradation effect added).

### 5.3. Rebirth of Factory Girls in 2015

Mr Lee pointed out the paradox that the vibrant trade union activities declined even though Korean society has become more formally democratic.<sup>55</sup> It became rare for labour unions to raise their voices on the streets, and when they did they were often buried in the indifference of others. I also witnessed the 50th anniversary celebration of the establishment of the GIC and the admiration of the former factory girls. Thus, while current female workers were hidden in huge

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<sup>55</sup> South Korea won the direct presidential election system in June 1987 due to a large-scale democratic uprising and elected the presidents (Dae-jung Kim in 1997 and Moo-hyun Roh in 2002) who gained the absolute trust of the people. Chung-hee Park, the military dictator who became president as a result of an institutional military coup in 1961 and ruled the country until 1979 when he was assassinated. After Park's death, Doo-hwan Chun an army general at that time, took power as president from 1980 to 1988. Therefore, it is correct that Korea has walked along the path of democratisation.

factory buildings and hard to find, the devoted lives of the past female workers who built the nation were being celebrated on the streets in the 2010s. Thus, in this section, I describe what I observed on the streets of the SDIC during the first phase of my fieldwork; that is, the propaganda campaigns regarding the female labour force in the 1970s and 80s and what implications they have for the reality of today.

### 5.3.1. ‘The Statue of Woman of Export’: Inheriting ‘the Factory New Community Movement’

Ten minutes’ walk from the Guro-Digital Complex station in SDIC1, there is ‘the Statue of Woman of Export’ (*suchului yeoinsang*) located in front of the Korean Industrial Complex Corporation (Figure 5.18). The woman holds a torch in her right hand and a ball of yarn in her left, symbolising the textile industry. The statue was resprayed with a new coat of paint and moved here to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the GIC. Beside the statue, there is a monument stone inscribed ‘The Base of New Industry: Dream, Technology, and Future’ (*sinsaneopui teojeon, kkum, gisul, mirae*). The rebirth of ‘the Statue of Women of Export’ seems to pray for the SDIC to become the basis of new industry for the country’s future and to reproduce the glorious epoch of the GIC.

Under the statue, there is a description about ‘factory girls’ (*yeogong*) in the period of the GIC carved on the base stone. It admires the commitment and effort of the female workers and calls them the ‘heroines of GIC growth.’ The inscription is as follows:

“Female workers’ commitment and efforts made rapid economic growth possible and the export result which was named as ‘the Miracle of Han River.’ This statue represents the passion, commitment and progressive spirit towards the developing future of numerous female workers as the pillar of industrialisation and export and the heroine of GIC.”

(Korean Industrial Complex Corporation)



Figure 5.18 The Statue of Woman of Export.

In the 1960s, the key word was ‘export.’ Since economic aid from the USA was reduced in the late 1950s, the Korean government had to find a new breakthrough, and so paid attention to light industry, which had showed favourable export tendencies during that period. Accordingly, the idea of creating an exclusive export industrial complex to bring in foreign capital and technology, especially from Korean residents in Japan, gathered momentum. On 14<sup>th</sup> September 1964, ‘The Creation and Development of Industrial Complexes for Export Industries Act’ (*suchul saneop gonggeop danji gaebal joseongbeop*) was promulgated. The construction of the GIC was completed in April 1967. It reached a peak in the late 1970s, when the number of workers had grown to well over 120,000.

The dominant industrial fields of the GIC changed as time passed: textile and garment industries in the 1960s and 70s; electric and electronic industry in the 1980s; paper manufacturing industry and printing business in the 1990s; from the 2000s, the IT (information and technology)

industry. After the mid-1980s, the GIC gradually declined due to the continuous rise of labour costs and real estate costs. Many companies began to relocate to the provinces and to Southeast Asian countries or close down completely. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 was a critical blow to the Korean economy including the GIC (further discussed in Chapter 7). And then ‘The GIC Improvement Plan of 1997’ (*guro danji cheomdanhwa gyehoek*) was launched and set the framework to transform the area into ‘Digital Industry Complex.’

Throughout the project, during the ten years from 1997, four cutting-edge industries (High-Tech, Venture business, Fashion Design, and IT) were chosen as leading fields. Accordingly, at the beginning of 2000, the official name of the GIC changed to the ‘Seoul Digital Industrial Complex.’ Vast multi-storey factories were built according to the development project with various tax benefits. In 2010, there were more than 100 such factories. They employed increasing numbers of non-manufacturing workers, from 1000 in 2001 to 88,000 in 2011. In 2013, the SDIC had 12,000 companies and approximately 160,000 workers. However, the average working week was 45.6 hours, 3 hours longer than the national average; while the average wages were 1,965,000 KW, 220,000 KW less than the national average<sup>56</sup> (Seoul Museum of History 2015). Low wages and long working hours were sustaining the ‘Digital’ industry, as I will go on to explain in Chapter 6.

I wondered if the factory girls were actually considered ‘the heroines’ of the period and whether this was also the case today. It was not difficult to get the answer to this query. On September 17<sup>th</sup> 2014, there was an event to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the GIC in front of ‘The Statue of Woman of Export.’ I met Miss UJ, the assistant director of a documentary film, ‘Factory Complex’ (*wirogongdan*) (Figure 4.10). She was there to record the event by making a film and told me the details about it. She informed me that an officer in charge of the event asked her to introduce any

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<sup>56</sup> Based on exchange rate of 1480 KW/BP (January 2017), 1,965,000 KW is about 1330 BP and 220,000 KW about 150 BP.

‘pure female worker’ who had worked at the GIC in the past. The local authority was looking for a factory girl of the day who had not joined a labour union. The local authority thought of women who put their hands up to protest against the company as ‘impure.’ The truth I heard from the woman who worked as a factory girl in the 1980s, Ms Zan (Figure 5.19), was that ‘the commitment’ referred to on the base stone is translated as ‘unquestioning obedience’, and ‘the effort’ as ‘exploitation.’ On the same day, on the other side of the road to the event, there was demonstration to criticise the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The demonstrators were the women in their late 50s, stigmatised as ‘impure’ factory girls.



Figure 5.19 The demonstration against the governmental celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GIC. Ms Zan was an ex-general secretary of the Daewoo Apparel factory union. The placard says “50 years ago, life as a factory girl, 50 years after, life as an irregular worker.” (retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016 from <http://gcinnews.tistory.com/2366>).

The following year, on June 25<sup>th</sup> 2015, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions held its own 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GIC and at the same time, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ‘the Guro Alliance Strike’ (*guro dongmaeng paeop*).<sup>57</sup> This was the first alliance strike after the independence of Korea

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<sup>57</sup> In the early 1980s, activists who had participated in student movements moved into the GIC, providing momentum to the labour movement to form unions. By 1984, unions had been organised at Garibong Electronics, Daewoo Apparel, Hyosung Trading Company and other firms. The unions actively cooperated with each other. In June 1985, the ‘Guro Alliance Strike’ began following the sudden arrest of Daewoo Apparel’s union leader. A strike was initiated by Daewoo Apparel’s 350 workers, later joined by union workers in seven other companies. But the strike was forcibly dispersed after a week, ending with 43 arrests and forced resignations and more than 700 layoffs.

from Japanese colonial rule in 1945 (Figure 5.20). The ‘heroines’ of the strike were the factory girls who were stigmatised as ‘not pure.’ I attended the event and met Ms Zan, a woman in her mid-50s who, as a general secretary of the Daewoo Apparel Union, had been involved in the alliance strike and had subsequently been detained in prison for ten months. She told me about the experiences of the factory girls in the past.



Figure 5.20 The pictures of the ‘Guro Alliance Strike’ in June 1985 (retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016 from <http://www.labortoday.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=54366>).

“When they celebrated the 50th anniversary of GIC, I demonstrated against them on the opposite side of the road. Well, 50 years ago we were factory girls and now we have become irregular workers. At least, we were regular workers in the past. Who the hell is the pillar of industry? F\*\*\*\*! My education finished after primary school. So the only jobs available for me were unskilled, cleaning jobs or working in a restaurant kitchen. Now I am working with a sewing machine. In the 1980s, we factory girls were called ‘the pillar of industry’ and ‘industrial soldier,’ but this was just bullshit!...During the period of the 1980s, our lives were only expendable, just like a fly (*parimoksum*; a cheap life, an ephemeral). There was nothing like human rights. Sexual violence and things like that were common. One factory girl in my company was found dead, there was a rumor that she was involved in an affair with the factory manager, but everyone hushed up the alleged affair. She was found dead at a local park on a mountain. She was an orphan and was a charming girl...At that time, we were called machine girl, country girl, country hen, factory girl, and so on. The manager often pushed our foreheads with his finger, bullying us. It was really awful. The male technicians, employed to maintain the sewing machines, treated factory girls as sexual playthings. One lifted a girl's skirt while pretending to fix the sewing machine...The factory girls were completely marginalised, treated like an

acorn in dog food (*gaebapui dotori*; a person being bullied).”

(Ms. Zan, an ex-general secretary of the Daewoo Apparel Union, 07/08/15)

Ms Zan had the lived experience of factory girls in the 1980s and never thought of herself as the pillar of industry. Rather, her vibrant metaphors reflected her inhumane treatment; for example, as a fly, a machine, a country hen, an acorn in dog food and sexual plaything. People even shut their eyes to a factory girl’s death and just gossiped about immoral intimacy. In fact, the figurative expression - ‘the pillar of industry’ - used to praise factory girls in the 1970s and 1980s served only to emphasise the highly productive young female labour force receiving low-wages for working long hours. Ultimately, the celebration of factory girls represented by ‘the Statue of Woman of Export’ was a kind of political tactic to justify the exploitation of the girls’ labour force and hide their lived suffering and the history of their resistance. Accordingly, the government and local authority propagandised the spirit of ‘New Community Movement (*saemaul undong*)’<sup>58</sup> of the day such as ‘national loyalty (*chung*, 忠)’, ‘filial piety (*hyo*, 孝)’ and emphasised individual commitment to industrial labour as a key to national goals such as ‘a defense against the communist North Korea, a solution to poverty, and a strengthening of sovereignty’ (Kim and Park 2003). It also had the effect of extending the patriarchal norm of the family into the entrepreneurial and national political levels (Janelli and Yim 1993). Ms Zan lamented that the reward of committing one’s labour force as a ‘factory girl’ in 1980s was to work as an ‘irregular worker’ in the 2010s.

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<sup>58</sup> The ‘New Community Movement’ was a political initiative to modernize the rural areas, launched on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1970 by the president Chung-Hee Park. The three main slogans were ‘diligence, self-help and collaboration’ to encourage rural residents to take part in the development process. The initial stage of the project concentrated on improving the basic living conditions and then later on constructing rural infrastructure etc. (Retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016 from <http://saemaul.com/>). Meanwhile, Chung-Hee Park was a South Korean president who led the country from 1961 to 1979 until he was assassinated. He grasped power through a military coup on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1961. His daughter, Geun-Hye Park is the current South Korean President (2013-2016). She was democratically elected.

Numerous female call centre workers were passing by the Statue of Woman of Export. I observed that few of them paid attention to the Statue and I doubted whether they would understand its meaning. They might have thought that the lives of the factory girls in the 1970s and 1980s – their parents’ generation – were very different from their own. This is probably due to the fact that the content and method of work are obviously different. The call centre workers deliver services to customers over the telephone. Seen from the outside, it appears to be a modern industry, people working with computers and telephones, enjoying a comfortable environment, sitting at a desk, seemingly not being physically challenged. Miss Min, who has been working as a call handler for one year, thought that the call centre would be more ‘modernised’ before she actually worked there, since there were computers and telephones and it did not seem to involve physical labour such as the work in a factory or restaurant. In reality, however, there were obvious similarities between the work of factory girls in the past and that of current female call centre workers: low wages, poor welfare, excessive work pressure, simple repetitive work, and exposure to humiliation (details in Chapter 6). In each era, the social status of factory girls and call centre workers in Korean society seems to be similar. This can be easily inferred from actual workers’ testimonies. Ms Zan, like other factory girls back then, took off the blue uniform and dressed like a college student. Similarly, most of the call centre workers I met did not tell the truth about working in a call centre, as they simply mentioned the name of the main contractor company’s name (e.g. not ‘Hyundai Insurance call centre’ but ‘Hyundai Insurance’), believing that their jobs were not honourable enough to be disclosed to others. The situation could be described as a ‘female job ghetto’ in each era of a low-educated, low-wage female labour force (Belt 2002).

### 5.3.2. ‘Factory New Community Movement’ and Industrial Soldier

In the 1970s, ‘New Community Movement’ began to be hailed in all parts of Korea, including both rural and urban areas. It reached the factory and the independent organisation for ‘Factory

New Community Movement (*gongjang saemaul undong*)’ (Figure 5.21). The Factory New Community Movement was basically the movement for the reconstruction of consciousness which would encourage workers to participate in the national policy, ‘Export Enhancement.’ The political tactic was clearly expressed in the ‘New Mind Movement (*saemaum undong*),’ disseminating Confucian norms to the school, factory and diverse communities according to the ‘New Community Movement.’ The fundamental logic of ‘New Mind Movement’ was that the spirit of ‘national loyalty and filial piety’ was the key solution to every matter of concern in Korea, particularly the labour issue.<sup>59</sup> It was grounded in traditional Confucianism, the so-called ‘wisdom of the nation’ (Kim 2006:331).



Figure 5.21 The picture of ‘Factory New Community Movement’ in a company in 1977 (retrieved on 10 November 2016 from <http://www.dschem.com/history/footprints/index.php?boardid=footprints&category=36>).

This ‘New Community Spirit’ was a political project to make factory girls members of the community by repeatedly learning and practicing detailed daily rituals in a factory in a military manner. This involves national physical exercise, morning cleaning, wholesome song, running,

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<sup>59</sup> ‘New Mind Movement’ was launched and led by Geun-Hye Park. Her mother was assassinated on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1974, after which Geun-Hye was regarded as the first lady until 1979, when her father was also assassinated. During the period of acting first lady, she was actively involved in propagandising ‘the New Community Spirit’ through ‘the New Mind Movement.’ She was elected as the 18th president of South Korea in December 2012. Since 2013, she has made an effort to revitalise the ‘New Community Movement.’

holding a bazaar, sending postal orders on their parents' birthdays, watering seedlings, not having snacks etc. (Moon 2005; Kim 2006:335). Its context coincided with calling factory girls 'industrial soldiers.' The major slogan of the 'Factory New Community Movement' was "the workers as your family, the factory work as my own work" (Kim 2006:329). This concept reestablished the correlation between an employee and an employer not by 'contract', but by 'indebtedness' (*eunhye*), putting the employer in the same position of a patriarch in a family (Kim 2006:342). In other words, a factory girl was an 'indebted' worker to an employer and therefore she was expected to commit herself and be self-sacrificing without reward in order to repay the debt.

The details of 'New Mind Movement' worked as follows. The company selected exemplary workers to participate in a four-day seminar at a 'New Community Education Centre.' During the seminar, the workers listened to a series of lectures about 'New Community Spirit.' The participants were expected to spread the spirit of commitment and self-sacrifice on their return to the factory. These so-called 'New Community Girls' were encouraged to arrive at work early, voluntarily clean the factory, sweep the street outside, reduce waste and errors in production, and to be prepared to work during lunch time and breaks without demanding any extra pay (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983). The 'New Community Education Centre' also provided forceful moral education to the union members at that time (Gang, Choi, and et al. 2013:70).

### 5.3.3. 'The Workers' Living Experience Centre in the GIC: Commodifying Factory Girls'

#### Spirit of Sacrifice

'The Workers' Living Experience Centre in the GIC' (*gurogongdan nodongja saenghwal cheheomgwan*) in SDIC2 was built in 2013 to celebrate the lives of factory girls and their historical contribution to socio-economic development (Figure 5.22). It is located amongst rows of houses; five minutes walks from the Gasan Digital Complex subway station. It contains many

exhibitions of newspapers, pictures, miniatures of the day and real-size rooms and kitchens to represent the factory girl's daily life after work. All of the exhibitions seem intent on re-enacting the description about 'the pillar of industry' carved on 'the Statue of Woman of Export'; emphasising the factory girls' commitment and self-sacrifice. The Centre makes an effort to introduce the factory girls' protests and the suffering they experienced in their daily lives, including the labour unions' activities. However, there is no explanation about what happened to the factory girls afterwards and how well they are living now. All the stories focus on the 'past' and not on the present.



Figure 5.22 The Workers' Living Experience Centre in the GIC. Left was the outside look (Lt) and exhibitions inside the centre (Rt).

Visiting school students produce many paintings representing the workers and their working conditions and these paintings are hung on the walls of the centre. The paintings seem to portray that the present economic success of Korea is based on the factory girls' commitment and self-sacrifice. In Figure 5.23, the coarse, dirty, stained and wounded hands of the factory worker support the road leading to the future skyscrapers. The cuts on the hands are honourable and the coming future is glorious. However, the picture fails to show the current reality of the female worker's life regarding the transition from the 'factory girl' to the irregular worker. Nor do other

paintings express the history of suffering or the factory girls' protests about the violation of human rights during the period of industrial modernisation. The students' paintings on the centre's wall seem to speak to the purpose of the government and local authorities setting up a history of the GIC: to delete the history of people's protest and desire and to propagandise the inevitability of their sacrifice.



Figure 5.23 A student's painting exhibited in the the Workers' Living Experience Centre in the GIC.

By chance, while I visited the Centre on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014, I bumped into a group of people enjoying a guided tour. All of them were female government officers from South-East Asian countries. The Centre has been actively exporting the 'New Community Movement' project to the developing countries since 2014. As part of its strategy, the Centre regularly invites officers from the developing world. The manager of the centre explained the exhibitions in Korean first and the accompanying Korean guide offered English interpretation. Standing right behind them, I listened to the explanation. Then I wondered how the foreign female officers saw and felt about the exhibitions. Did they think about the factory girls' suffering in the past or the current 'splendid' appearance of the modernised Korea based on this sacrifice? If the visitors had focused on the present, even the outcry of the factory girls in the black-and-white photographs might have been

thought of only as one of the rites of passage to industrial modernisation. Throughout the guided tour, I could easily read the positive responses of the foreign government officers from the smiles on their faces and their several outbursts of laughter. It was not difficult to recognise whether they paid extra attention to the past or the present. The pictures of the protest were not interpreted in detail, resulting in the visitors just briefly glancing at them. 30 years after the ‘Guro Alliance Strike’, the factory girls’ lives were being commodified and being exported to the developing countries (e.g. Figure 5.24), as a route to industrial success



Figure 5.24 The picture of 34 visiting officers from Vietnam and Myanmar at Korean New Community Movement Centre in March 2015. (retrieved on 11 November 2016 from <http://saemaul.com/nationwide/report/view?boardType=REPORT&seqNo=293>).

My observation of the government officers reminded me of the news from Cambodia in 2014, of gunfire in Korean garment companies. On 3rd January 2014, there was gunfire in Canadia Garment Industrial Complex in Cambodia. The garment workers struck to demand a monthly minimum wage increase from US\$110 to US\$160 (a month’s accommodation rental was US\$30). They protested on the street, where the soldiers from the Special Command Unit 911 fired shots at them, resulting in the death of four workers. The workers were only requesting a fair payment to make a living but the response from the companies was their violent suppression. The reason

why I paid extra attention to this terrible incident was twofold. First of all, the Korean company, garment maker Yakjin was deeply involved in the military action (“*South Korean garment industry urged Cambodia to act on striking workers*”-ABC News on 8th Jan 2014). Secondly, the working conditions of the Cambodian female labourers reminded me of the conditions of Korean garment factory girls in the 1970s and 80s, with in-line sewing machines and the workers’ uniforms with head scarves (Figure 5.25). In addition, the low wage, long hours, poor working environment and honeycomb-like small lodging houses were just the same as for the GIC factory girls. The history of foreign capital's exploitation of the low-wage female labour force in Korea (e.g. American ‘Control Data Corporation’) (Yoo and et al. 2011; Gang, Choi, and et al. 2013:120-121) is now being repeated in South-east Asian countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, etc.).

The memory of the Cambodian garment workers’ 2014 strike and the encounter with the Southeast officers in the Workers’ Living Experience Centre in GIC stayed with me. I thought that the history of the market economy continued to be repeated in different times and places in the pursuit of profit and power. I had a chance to reflect further when I attended a preview of the documentary film, “Factory Complex” in June 2015, the 30th anniversary of ‘Guro Alliance Strike.’ A middle-aged woman, an executive member of the Alliance Strike in 1985, expressed her impressions as follows.

“When I saw the facial expression of the Cambodian female worker, I thought it was very similar to mine in the 1980s. So I am very concerned about how many challenges they face in the future and how they can overcome them. I think the past seems to begin again now. Capitalism, indeed, is impregnable.”

(ex-factory girl in GIC in 1980s, 03/06/15)

In other words, the present of Cambodia is connected with the past of South Korea. In the next section, I describe the lived experience of Korean factory girls including their protests in the 1980s.



Figure 5.25 The scene of Korean garment factory in 1980s (top) and the scene of Cambodian garment factory in 2015 (bottom) (reference: the documentary film, *Factory Complex* (2015)).

#### 5.4. 'Hands Up' of Factory Girls in the 1970s and 80s

"The more we became skilled workers, my cousin and I lost our names step by step. I was called 'A line No.1' and my cousin 'A line No.2.' The line manager shouted, "Hey! No.1 and No.2! What on earth are you doing? The working process is cut off!"

- *oettan-bang* (a solitary room) (Shin 1995)

##### 5.4.1. Lived experience of a factory girl's 'hands up'

On 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2015, I met Ms Zan at a theatre for the VIP preview of the documentary film, 'Factory Complex.' She shared her lived experience as a garment factory worker and leading member of a labour union in the film. After several meetings and informal conversations with her during some events promoting the film, I was able to have a formal interview with her on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2015. My first impression when I saw her was that she looked very happy. She always smiled and was very sociable, enjoying being surrounded by people. I wondered how she

overcame the memory of the trauma she suffered from the company's suppression of the labour union and her 10 months of detention. When I met Ms Zan, I asked her, "Have you ever regretted your activity in the labour union that led to your imprisonment?" She replied as follows.

"No, absolutely no. Rather I think it was a very good choice to participate in the union activity. I lived my youth passionately in this Garibong area, GIC. I think the labour movement is 'yeui' (=etiquette) for a human. I learned it. I don't think I could have cared for my nearly paralysed bed-ridden mother-in-law for several years without having experienced the labour movement. The labour movement is basically about the etiquette for a human, therefore how could I as a union member avoid the responsibility to care for my mother-in-law? Then I thanked the labour movement. Throughout it, I came to understand myself, my identity, the society, my family and my mother. Honestly, before participating in the union, I had talked back to my mother rudely. I even spoke to her, "Why did you bear me if you were not able to send me to school?" But through my involvement in the labour movement, I realised why my mother had no choice but to do that. Furthermore, I benefitted by being able to build strong friendships with many good people."

(Ms Zan, ex-general secretary of a trade union, 07/08/15)

Considering her suffering in detention, it was not easy to comprehend why the labour movement had been a good choice for her, however through the union she learned a sense of courtesy and compassion for humanity. I asked her why she came up to Seoul and became a factory girl in the GIC. I wanted to know whether her choice was inspired from the commitment and self-sacrifice for the family and nation which the 'New Community Movement' had propagandised. She explained;

"Obviously at that moment, our family was very poor and so I didn't want to be another burden to my parents. Well, I was not smart and considerate enough to have any specific purpose; for example, what employment could I find in Seoul? I just went to Seoul for a living. Why? Because we were poor, my mother couldn't afford to send me to school. I had to be independent and support myself. Naturally, I accepted it as a rite of passage. At that time, my older sister was working at Daewoo Apparel factory in Seoul and she said,

“Come to Seoul and get a job, then go to the night school.” Honestly, I really envied my sister’s working uniform of Daewoo Apparel factory. The head scarf and the name tag on her chest. I really envied the factory girls who had their lunch sitting on the company lawn wearing that uniform. It looked so peaceful. The uniform was really cool. Then I made up my mind to work there and wear that working uniform. But, as soon as I began to work there, I realised that the company lawn was not peaceful, but was a completely living hell.”

(Ms Zan, ex-general secretary of a trade union, 07/08/15)

Ms Zan was born in 1962 in the countryside and only attended primary school. When she decided to go to Seoul, she was too young to consider carefully her future, but wanted to leave the hopeless rural area and wear the working uniform like her sister. Working in the city was the extent of her adoration like that of many of her contemporaries (Kim 2006). However, Ms Zan realised the reality of the working environment soon after she began to work in the Daewoo Apparel factory; it was not a peaceful space but a ‘living hell.’ She became called “Hey! Sleeve” rather than by her name. She was part of the process only to make the sleeve. I asked her about the working life in the factory.

“We were not treated as humans. Just like a hamster on a wheel, we went round and round. We worked from 8 am to 7 pm, and if ordered, continued to work until 9 pm. If ordered to do all-night work, we would work until 4 or 5 am the next day. Then we would be expected to start to work again at 8 am. When feeling sleepy after the all-night work, we took a ‘Timing’ tablet and had ground coffee beans to keep us awake. Working while relying on stimulant drugs, we often got hurt by the sharp needles. But at that time, we couldn’t dare to dream about seeing a doctor. All we could do was put the finger into the industrial oil and wipe it with a remnant cloth. There was so much extra work. The male manager constantly checked the number of completed clothes, also the male workers often sexually harassed us... We resided in the company dormitory and they could restrict our going-out and sleeping-out. We were only allowed to go out on Wednesday evenings and only allowed to sleep out on Saturday. Even when our parents visited the dormitory, we were only allowed to briefly see them on a Wednesday or Saturday. It was an absolute violation of human rights. We were not treated as humans. At that time, we didn’t even

know the word, 'human rights.'”

(Ms Zan, ex-general secretary of a trade union, 07/08/15)

The factory girls' lives were machine-like, without human rights. The company dormitory was like a military camp. Every night the lights were turned off at exactly 10 pm. A male superintendent of the dormitory would patrol the dormitory, checking to make sure the girls were awake or sleeping, because they required them to be well rested before they started work the next day. This patrol was not for the benefit of the girls but for the company's profit. They were actually 'soldiers' to protect the company's best interests not those of the nation. The dormitory was a prison without bars, in which they were not even allowed to meet their parents except for short periods on prescribed days.

This military-like suppressive working environment was sugarcoated and transformed by the notions: 'industrial soldiers', 'the pillar of export' and 'the pillar of industry', and utilised to propagandise national loyalty and filial piety (Moon 2005; Kim 2006:335). The girls were symbolised as women full of sense of duty and self-sacrifice. The government reports and many scholars described the factory girls as living an 'ascetic life' (Kim 2006:559, 581). But, what was the reality? Ms Zan, 22 years old when she entered the Apparel factory in the GIC, loved to go out eating street food, and dancing in a disco every Wednesday and Saturday evening. The factory girls, whatever their socio-economic backgrounds, had their own entertainment culture. They had a desire for pleasure and between the brief and transient entertainments they were permitted they endured the rigor of life in the factory. Ms Zan herself recalled that during her early life in the GIC she was crazy about dancing all night every Saturday.

Then, why and how did Ms Zan join the labour union? Ms Zan felt that the female workers' conditions in the factory were unfair and inhumane and shared this critical approach with others by organizing a book club. Through the club she was introduced to labour unions and their union activities in 1980s Korea. She was very sociable and many colleagues liked her. In 1984, one

colleague, who would become a leader of the union, suggested Ms Zan become a general secretary. However, unfortunately, the secret plan to establish the union in the Daewoo Apparel factory was revealed several days before it was launched. Unfortunately only the identity of Ms Zan was disclosed. She was brought to the president's office, forced to kneel down, and was completely humiliated (Park 2006:34). She refused to yield and finally inaugurated the union on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1984. Her suffering as a union executive, however, had only just begun.

“Soon after establishing the union, the like-minded roommates in the dormitory were sent to other rooms and new roommates who were extremely antagonistic towards the union were allocated to the room. Every night after work, they grabbed my hair, swore and shouted, “The company will fail because of you!” It was so terrible that I found it difficult to endure. I hated to return to the dormitory. By the way, these opponents were almost all orphans and the company cajoled them...While I was a general secretary of the union, when I went upstairs, I often experienced chest pains, also the psychological pressure was very severe. At that time, my weight dropped to only 39 kg. I was called ‘*samakui mareun myeolchi*’ (a dried anchovy in a desert). It was so nervous and stressful, I rarely had a proper meal.”

(Ms Zan, ex-general secretary of a trade union, 07/08/15)

From this time on, Ms Zan was a constant target for abuse. However, the worst suffering came from the male workers' physical violence and harassment. At the establishment of the union, there were around 2000 members, however after a while the number decreased to around 150. This massive decrease was due principally to the male workers' violence. It was commonplace for the union members to be dragged by their hair from room to room and to be beaten by sticks, putting union members into a small room and then covering them with a black blanket and hitting them. As Scheper-Hughes (1993:223) indicates, violence or fear of violence was sufficient to guarantee the order in a factory.

“Everyday suppressed, disregarded. Always being sworn at and humiliated, in and out of the factory. On one occasion in the factory I bumped into a male manager, without

warning he dragged me by my hair, shaking my head and hitting me. Now I can tell the story comfortably, but at that period it was really horrible. He then dragged me to the sector where the male workers stayed. They laughed at me, clapping loudly. I was so ashamed and humiliated. Looking back, I myself wonder why I endured such a humiliating and violent situation. In fact, the company tried to cajole me a lot, asked me to give information etc. But I didn't capitulate. I have always tried to lead a blameless life. I feel very confident in my decisions throughout my life. I was right at that time. I am 'dang-dang.' I don't feel any shame whatsoever even though I am poor and only studied at primary school. I am of the opinion my poverty is no way any fault of mine, its rather due to a social problem, namely, capitalism. Now I am not ashamed of myself and never shrink away from difficult decisions and situations."

(Ms Zan, ex-general secretary of a trade union, 07/08/15)

The suffering she endured as the union's general secretary was incredibly humiliating. The most notable thing from her interview is the reason why she endured the humiliation when over 90% of the union members dropped out. Ms Zan thought the company's treatment of factory girls was unfair and inhumane. She wanted to maintain basic etiquette for a human, so felt confident. She described this feeling as 'dang-dang' (堂堂) in Korean. The Korean word, 'dang-dang' means more than 'confident' or 'blameless.' It comes from a Chinese character, '堂' which means 'the central building in the oriental house where the oldest family member resides.' Then, 'dang-dang' represents the typical body posture, 'straightening one's back and keeping one's chin up' (Figure 5.26). The antonym of 'dang-dang' in Korean is 'weechuk' (萎縮) which means 'being intimidated' or 'shrinking.' Therefore, Ms Zan endured the humiliation because she did not want to kowtow or huddle herself up when being a victim of inhumane treatment; 'dang-dang' is her etiquette for a human expressed by her whole body.



Figure 5.26 The example of 'dang-dang' posture. When googling the expression, 'dang-dang' posture in Korean (*dangdanghan jase*), the first image is the figure. It reveals the specific body posture well, 'straightening one's back and keeping one's chin up' (on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2016, graphic effects added).

Merleau-Ponty considers the ‘body’ itself as the basis for understanding the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):73). Csordas (1990:39) also notes that “the body is the existential ground of culture.” From this perspective, Korean culture in the 1980s was very suppressive of factory girls and the girl’s body was easily huddled up. They were expected to endure inhumane treatment and humiliation, and were not allowed to keep their chins up. Factory girls should not have been ‘*dang-dang*.’ Ms Zan, however, did not follow the dominant culture of the day. The result was continuous humiliation, physical violence and, finally, 10 months of detention. The factory girl’s ‘*dang-dang*’ body should not have been ‘seen’ outside. When it exceeded the cultural boundary, it had been treated as ‘dirty’ (Douglas 2010(1966): 44-45). In February 1978 at the Dong-II Textile Corporation, there was an actual case of a factory girl’s body becoming dirty by being covered with faecal contaminated water (Figure 5.27). The factory girls attempted to select a female representative for the labour union which was strongly blocked by male workers on the side of the corporation.



Figure 5.27 The picture of the factory girls at the Dong-II Textile Corporation covered with faecal matter on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1978 when there was an election of the labour union’s delegates. (retrieved on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2016 from <https://namu.wiki/w/동일방직%20똥물%20사건>).

Ms Zan did not regret her involvement in the labour movement in any way. Rather she felt ‘*dang-dang*.’ Nevertheless, she had suffered from it so terribly that she felt relieved when she was imprisoned since she was able to sleep without any distress. After being released from prison, she was on the blacklist, therefore unable to find employment easily. Now she is working with her husband ‘irregularly’ by making garments in their small sewing factory. As time goes by, new

light is shed on the life of factory girls in the GIC (e.g. Kim (2006); Gang, Choi, and et al. (2013)) and Ms Zan's '*dang-dang*' life of the day has also been reevaluated (Park 2006; Seoul Museum of History 2015). For example, she participated in the documentary film, "Factory Complex" and helped the tour guide to introduce the 'Road of Work' in the SDIC. In the picture of her as a tour guide (Figure 5.28), her walk seems to be very vigorous, ensuring she keeps her chin up. She looks again like "*dang-dang*."



Figure 5.28 The tour guide of the 'Road of Work' in the SDIC. The leading woman in front is Ms Zan (Seoul Museum of History 2015:154).

## 5.4.2. Bodily suffering of Factory Girls

### 5.4.2.1. Industrial accidents and the health condition of factory girls in GIC in the 1980s

"Every week, I treated two to five patients on average from industrial accidents. By the way, almost always the patients didn't consider it an industrial accident. Rather they thought they got hurt because of their inattention and then felt very sorry about it and apologized to the colleagues. Furthermore, when someone recognised it as an industrial accident, it was nearly impossible to be acknowledged and compensated. Most of the patients themselves paid for the treatment."

- Gil-Seung Yang, a general doctor in the GIC in the mid-1980s (Ahn and et al. 2014)

Like Dr. Yang remembers, the concept of the industrial accident had not yet materialised in Korea in the 1980s. Every accident while working was perceived as due to the worker's carelessness. In that period, especially in the GIC, there were many patients with diverse problems; finger amputation caused by being trapped in a press machine without guards; poisoning with heavy metal such as chrome (plating factory), toluene and mercury (electronic factory). In the case of female workers, there were many women who had abortions due to a lack of contraception education (Gurouiwon and et al. 1991:139-141, 162-164; Ahn and et al. 2014). Regardless of the high incidence of industrial accidents in the GIC, the media of the day paid no extra attention, and even the death of a worker failed to make the news.

“What did the media say about workers' accidents? The newspapers reported the death of an iconic Chinese bird but never said even one word when female workers starved to death or had finger amputations. All of society kept their silence.”

- Myung-Jin In, a pastor of the Yeongdeungpo-urban industrial mission in the 1980s  
(in the Kyunghyang Newspaper on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2014)

In such a manner, industrial accidents of the day were not revealed in their entirety. This signified that the worker's sick body was not allowed to be 'seen' in society. If the worker had been sick, he or she would have pretended to be normal. There was a relevant anecdote for this regarding tuberculosis, one of the most prevalent infectious diseases of the day. Factory girls with tuberculosis hid their condition with thick make-up so as to continue to work.

“Tuberculosis and the sewing factory were impossible to be disassociated. A factory girl with tuberculosis tried to hide her disease by taking a handful of tablets at first but before long, she made an effort to cover her pale face. Kyoung-Suk often witnessed someone putting red lipstick on the lips, and wearing thick makeup on both cheeks. It was not only a sentiment of pity but rather tragic for a woman like them. Seeing death up close, they

continued pedaling the sewing machines because of the poverty!”

(Park 2003:125)

The reality of the 1980s was that the factory girls had to continue to work while covering the aura of death with makeup. Ms Zan recalled that there were a lot of people with tuberculosis in the factory probably because of “poor diet or the poor working environment.” At that period, when a worker had a disease, particularly tuberculosis, she or he should have left since it was understood to be an individual's fault. Ms Zan remembered that many who left the factory due to tuberculosis often worked as a bar hostess because they could not get a job in other factories. This fact revealed how the factory girls in that period were in an extremely vulnerable situation.

#### 5.4.2.2. Chemicals to survive

One of the pictures in the Workers' Living Experience Centre in GIC attracted my attention. It was the title of an old newspaper, “Employers forced employees to work by giving a stimulant drug” (*jam an oneun* 藥 *meokyeo il sikineun* 業主 *do*) (Figure 5.29). The stimulant drug was ‘Timing,’ a high-dose caffeine medicine. Caffeine was one of the generalised ‘drug foods’ (for example, sugar, chocolate, tea, and cigarettes) (Mintz 1985; Jankowiak and Bradburd 1996). In Korea, stimulant drugs containing amphetamine or caffeine were sold in the drugstore and became widespread during the 1960s (Figure 5.30). The factory girls in the GIC were not exceptional in their heavy use of stimulant drugs. ‘Timing’ was one of the most famous brands. The notable thing was that many factory girls were addicted to the drug half-willingly and half-reluctantly in that period.



Figure 5.29 A picture of one newspaper entitled, “Employers forced employees to work by giving a stimulant drug.” It shows the women working with sewing machines.

“The workers often nodded off, so the employer forced them to take stimulant drugs, especially ‘Timing.’ The company placed a pile of the pills at the corner of the factory and fed them to the workers as if it was a vitamin. The factory girls just took the pill without knowing what exactly it was and its side effects. The factory girls who had taken the pills habitually became seriously addicted to them, and suffered from the side-effects such as shivering.”

- Myung-Jin In, a pastor of the Yeongdeungpo-urban industrial mission in the 1980s (the Kyunghyang Newspaper on October 19th, 2014) (emphasis added)

“We heard the boss’s pet dog got cold and then taken to the hospital by a car. But we could only afford to buy a ‘Timing’ pill [at a drugstore for a cold]. We are only waiting for the day when we were promoted from being an errand girl.”

- a part of a lyric of a satirical song with the meaning of resistance, ‘Night Overtime Work’ (yageun) by Min-Gi Kim, published in 1978 (emphasis added).



1) The advertisement of the stimulant drug, “노스리움 (=No Sleep)” on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1964, the Joseon Newspaper.

2) The article entitled, “Abuse of the Detrimental Stimulant Drug” on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1967, the Donga Newspaper.

3) The cartoon entitled, “The Korean society dependent on sleeping pills and stimulant drugs on January 10<sup>th</sup> 1992, the Hangeorye Newspaper.

Figure 5.30 The contents of a ‘stimulant drug’ in Korean newspapers from 1964 to 1992

Factory girls were not to fall asleep while working. Long working hours was the main and only competitiveness of Korean industry in the world market in the 1970s and 80s. Extra work and all-night work were very common, and keeping the workers awake was essential to maintain productivity. I was told that when there were no more ‘Timing’ pills, workers ate ground coffee beans with a spoon. The reason why the workers became dependent on the chemicals was to remain alert to avoid industrial accidents such as a finger pricked by a sewing machine’s needle, or a finger amputated by the press machine, or even death by getting entangled in the machinery.

For factory girls in that period, the high-dose caffeine drug was a way to sustain their employment by meeting a certain disposition that the employer wanted them to have. Thus, the situation the factory girls faced is an example of ‘chemical employeeship’ (Chapter 3). Caffeine is a well-known traditional agent of ‘chemical coping’ (Pellegrino 1976) and it was even

advertised as ‘the chemical road to success’ in a western society (Warburton 1978:314). As Figure 5.30 shows, in Korea, the dependence on various stimulant drugs had been rampant from the 1960s to 90s while creating Korea’s rapid economic success. Considering the history of the nation’s hasty industrialisation-cum-modernisation, Lee (2002:56) points out that ‘the pathological obsession with speed’ can be diagnosed as ‘the Korean disease’ and it actually causes workers to be sick, figuratively, being afflicted with ‘illnesses of modernisation’ (*hyeondaebyeong*). The key point for me is how employers of that period fed caffeine to workers like a vitamin. Furthermore, as Ms Zan told me, she and her colleagues took the caffeine pills as if they were ‘having a meal’ (*bap meokdeusi*). For employers and employees alike in the GIC, such things have come to represent the ideal dispositions of workers such as loyalty, docility and industriousness (c.f. Van der Geest, Whyte, and Hardon (1996); Ecks (2013)). All they needed to do was ‘feed drugs’ (employers) and ‘eat drugs’ (employees).

Meanwhile, the ‘stimulated’ body of the factory girls was not different from the machine. Their bodies were actually treated as a cog of the whole machine. The proof was the ‘P.Q.M.’ (Product Quality Management) regulation. In the 1980s, the ‘P.Q.M.’ company adopted a new regulation over workers. The following article of the ‘Seoul Labour Movement Alliance’ describes in detail what the ‘P.Q.M.’ regulation was (Seoul Museum of History 2015:38).

*“-The workers produced very well competitively. Okay, cut down 100 workers- Let’s suppose that I work as a solderer, soldering components. Always watching me the Maintenance Division manager measures the time of every motion I make. Separating the soldering process into details, i.e. picking up the product, shifting it onto the worktable, grabbing the soldering iron, dipping the iron in a lead pot, carrying out the soldering, and finally returning the product onto the conveyor belt. Each time for the detailed process is one second, two seconds, one second...the for the whole process is calculated as 30 seconds. Then the worker can solder two products in one minute and 120 products in one hour. To calculate every process like this is the ‘P.Q.M.’ regulation, which exploits the labour force entirely.”*

Throughout the P.Q.M. regulation, the company identified the maximum output per person by calculating the precise time of each process. Companies adopting the P.Q.M. system experienced productivity increases and subsequently cut down the number of employees. This mechanical calculating method reflected the idea that the factory girls should keep working relentlessly every second in the awakened state. To the company, their bodies were a cog in the machine, a very cheap and disposable one, which could easily be replaced with a new one if accidentally broken.

### 5.5. Conclusion: from a factory girl to an irregular worker

I have discussed how the government and local authority tried to revive the myth of ‘industrial soldiers’ and ‘the pillar of industry.’ This propagates the image of ‘a pure female worker,’ demanding only the mechanical integrity of workers based on Confucian ideas and ultimately controlling collective resistance and trade union activity. Employees were expected to appreciate their employment and concentrate only on their assigned tasks. However, I felt the newly renovated ‘Statue of Woman of Export’ - looking like a western woman with a sensual and strong body, standing between huge buildings (Figure 5.18) - was heterogeneous. The female workers in the SDIC, the next generation of factory girls, seemed to be too busy to cast a glance at the statue or were even indifferent to it. So, what has changed with respect to working conditions for women in the SDIC? Now it is hard to see a factory with a chimney and the blue uniforms of female sewing workers. Instead, people are ‘hidden’ in huge multi-storey buildings and wearing mass-produced colourful clothes which make it difficult to guess their job. At the same time, the membership rate of trade unions in this area has radically decreased while the poor working conditions of a low-paid factory girl have transformed into the unsecure employment state of irregular female workers. Miss Yu, a call handler in SDIC1 felt herself to be “a digital version of a factory girl.” Considering all these changes together, following Ms Zan’s statement, the life of a female worker in this industrial area could be simply described as the change from ‘life as a

factory girl’ to ‘life as an irregular worker.’

Nonetheless, there is one thing, I think, that has not changed. It is the popularity of Bacchus-D, one of the the most representative and longstanding fatigue reliefs in Korea (Figure 5.31). As its advertising copy in the late 1970s states “At the site of precious sweat, Bacchus is there” (Figure 3.2), there is still a culture that values the sweat of workers as well as enjoying a cheap fatigue relief. On the other hand, the ‘sweat’ accompanying the drink can be also a concrete ‘thing’ to implicate the exploitation of low-wage labour force. This possibility can be understood by considering other kinds of agents for ‘chemical coping.’ As I discussed in Chapter 2.3 (‘Smile and Smoke’), it has been reported that the smoking rate of female call centre workers is higher than that of female adults in Korea (e.g. 26% vs 7.4%). The frequent smoking of female call handlers is compared with the rampant chemical use, particularly caffeine pills (‘Timing’), of factory girls in the 1970s and 80s. The history of female workers’ chemical coping from caffeine to nicotine indirectly shows what Korean society demands in the field of labour, especially for low-educated, low-wage women. It is a ‘docile and tireless body,’ not a ‘*dang-dang*’ body. In the next Chapter, I show the female body call centres demand today through exploring the lived experiences of call handlers.



Figure 5.31 A picture of a bottle of Bacchus-D on the desk of one female call handler at the ABC call centre. This was what ABC call centre labour union provided to call handlers to promote the documentary film, “Factory Complex” in August 2015 (taken by Miss Joo, one of informants).

## 6. 'Hands Up' in 'Humiliation': the modern sweatshop, call centre and workers' health

In this Chapter, I move from history to documenting the lived experiences of female workers in the call centres of SDIC. Particularly, I show the labour management techniques in detail and their correlation to employees' health. In 6.1, I describe which groups of women are employed in a call centre and why they decide to work there. Next, section 6.2 describes the situation that female call centre workers face in their daily lives in what I call digitalised modern sweatshops. These include the supervision system, the labour force grading system and the management of sick employees. Sections 6.3 and 6.4 describe the lived experiences of call handlers that derive from these structures and positionalities, under the rubric of social suffering. I have divided this experience into bodily suffering (6.3) and emotional suffering (6.4). In section 6.3, I show what kinds of diseases call handlers suffer from and their chemical solutions such as overeating, drinking and eating sweets. I focus in particular on the presence of smoking areas, the high smoking rates of female call handlers and the lived experience of one female smoker. In section 6.4, I focus on the humiliation call handlers experience from customers, managers and colleagues.

### 6.1. Call centres, the last bastion in the era of unemployment

In Korea, who are the people working in a call centre? Seeing the picture of a female call handler of a huge Korean insurance company (Figure 6.1), the woman looks neat, feminine, submissive and gorgeous, an ideal office woman. Through her soft gazing, smiling face and red lips, the picture seems to imply feminisation, gendering or 'pinking' of the call centre labour force

(cf. Howe (1977), Freeman (2000), Basi (2009), and Tabuwe et al. (2013)). The kind of female call handler expected in Korean society can be inferred from the image. In other words, customers might expect the woman's affability, femininity and even beauty to be delivered intact through the 'voice' on the phone. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2.3, many female call handlers in Korea are not highly-educated and well-paid office women. Unlike Indian female call handlers, their Korean counterparts generally use low-educated women who are expected to satisfy the demand for low-paid and highly-intensive work.



Figure 6.1 An image from a news article about Samsung Life Insurance Call Centre. The centre advertises that it has been judged for 12 years as an 'excellent' call centre based on the Korean Service Quality Index (retrieved on 23 November 2016 from [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/04/22/2015042203034.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/04/22/2015042203034.html)).

In recent years, no one has been free from the insecure job market in Korea. However, the call centre is a very unusual place. It is one of the easiest places to find employment in Korea. Through

well-known job seeking websites (e.g. ‘*alba-mon*’ and ‘*alba-cheonguk*’<sup>60</sup>), employment in a call centre is readily available. I was told many times by my informants that almost no qualification was required when applying for call centre work. However, age was a relatively important factor since the call centres management usually preferred younger women. Particularly for women in their early 20s the call centre was one of the easiest jobs to get into; the typical pattern was that of entering the centre with ease, quitting in the face of any difficulties, and then finding a position in another centre if needing money. One informant likened this life to a “squirrel’s spinning in a wheel, but fun, though.”

However, for women over the age of 30 from poor educational backgrounds and with few job qualifications, the call centre was more like what one informant described as a ‘last bastion’ (*majimak boru*). There were no alternative workplaces suitable for them; there were no exits from the call centre. The traditional workplaces for poorly educated, older women such as factories, restaurants, and other places of physical labour had been increasingly occupied by Korean-Chinese immigrant women whose payments for their hard work were relatively small. Thus, for these female call handlers, it was difficult to quit their jobs. Although ashamed of themselves, reflected in terms they used such as ‘loser or outcast’ and ‘cannon-fodder,’ they considered the call centre an ‘inescapable trap.’

“[The researcher]: How’s your feeling about working in a call centre?”

[Miss Bong]: I feel like a *loser or outcast*. Honestly, the call handling is not a job to boast of.

[The researcher]: But why do you work here?

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<sup>60</sup> ‘*alba*’ is a sort of abbreviation from ‘Arbeit’, that is, a part-time job. Both websites list predominantly part-time or temporary jobs.

[Miss Bong]: There were no workplaces recruiting except the call centre. My age, early 30s, is the biggest problem. I think I seemed to hesitate to apply for other jobs because of my age and lack of qualifications.”

(Miss Bong, call handler, 03/03/15) (emphasis added)

“I had no experience relating to call handling at all before entering this call centre. So I never expected call handling to be such a low-value job, like *cannon-fodder*. And I was already over 30-years-old, no alternatives, and then I made up my mind that I would continue to work here unless I had any difficulties to get along with...I felt ashamed of myself that I had no special qualifications. So I persuaded myself to endure any difficulties here and continue to work.”

(Miss Joo, call handler, 13/06/15) (emphasis added)

While the reality of easy employment made the call centre the ‘last bastion’ of the disadvantaged woman aged 30 or more, it also evoked the social stigma attached to call handlers. One call handler, on disclosing her job to a friend, was told “Your life seems to be entirely ruined, doesn’t it?” The potential of call centres to employ delinquent adolescents and other social undesirables made the stigma worse. It was easier for women to get a job in a call centre than men. Miss Hyun, a call handler with two years’ experience, attributed this to the fact that “women are easier to control and should be.” Such ‘patriarchal stereotypes’ (Park 2006) are combined with the social stigma of the call centre job itself, which further strengthens society’s negative views about female call handlers.

“I think both the call centres and customers want female call handlers, considering them easier to control. It’s ridiculous, but customers seem to respect male call handlers, just because they are men. They speak to female workers harshly, though. Men are considered all right, but women vulgar. Nonetheless, the stupid thing is that customers prefer female

call handlers...I often felt that they thought they could speak to female handlers harshly, that is, “You call handlers should always be nice to us!”

(Miss Hyun, call handler, 24/03/15)

Despite their ‘last bastion’ image, call centres have a high labour turnover rate (over 4% per month, about 20% per year) (National Human Rights Commission of Korea 2008:67). Call handling is very tough, and many quickly leave, a phenomenon observed in other countries as well (Hunt 2004). Yet there seems to be little effort to improve the working conditions in call centres to ensure a more stable workforce. I heard from Miss Nerr, a call centre manager with six years’ experience, that the centre did not need to invest resources in improving conditions because the call handlers were usually ‘temporary’ workers and there was no benefit to investing in such employees. She, instead, berated current workers for their lack of patience. The approach could be summarised in one word, ‘flexible.’ The social stigma attached to a call centre job and the unstable employment market combine to ‘ghettoise’ cheap female labour in the Korean call centre industry (cf. Belt (2002)).

## 6.2. The call centre as digitalised modern sweatshop

The working environment offers some clues concerning possible causes for the high turnover rate in the call centre. In this section, I look at what kinds of labour systems cause call centres to be likened to the 20<sup>th</sup> century “sweatshops” (Apostol 1996), “tomorrow’s dark satanic mills” (Roncoroni 1997) and “battery farms” (Arkin 1997). In particular, as mentioned in Chapter 2.1 in the UK context, I examine the characteristics that might appropriately define Korean call centres as an ‘electronic panopticon.’

### 6.2.1. Direct and Digitalised ‘Supervision’

My first impression of the call centre in Feb 2012 during my pilot study was ‘stuffy and relentless.’ The air in the centre was very stuffy, and call handlers were working relentlessly while fixing their eyes on their computer monitors. A professor of Industrial Medicine measured the indoor temperature and CO2 levels of the ABC call centre in 2012. The result showed extremely high CO2 levels (1697 ppm in average) (the recommended amount is below 500 ppm) and high indoor temperatures (28°C average) (Joo 2012:123). The professor concluded “call handlers are working ‘in a daze (*meonghan sangtae*).” When I visited with union members in 2014, I heard more reason for the drudgery I had observed in 2012. First of all, there were not enough workers to deal with the volume of incoming calls. The company did not employ a sufficient number of employees, but the exact number of workers according to their highest work abilities, just like the P.Q.M. system in the 1980s in the GIC (see Chapter 5.4.2.2). Thus, call handlers were expected to keep talking tirelessly, like a cog in a machine, until they became completely exhausted or broken. The ACD (Automatic Call Distributor) system (also known as a ‘Computer Telephony Integration’ system) force-feeds incoming calls to workers. From this perspective, the system has been analysed as “Taylorism” (Bain et al. 2002) with call centres, likened compared to “communication factories” because of their characteristics of extremely repetitive work and regimentation of time (Cameron 2000:93-94).



Figure 6.2 A picture of the ABC call centre. A manager with a formal suit is standing in the left corner seemingly supervising call handlers (retrieved on 25 November 2016 from [http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002089000](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002089000)).

Figure 6.2 shows a typical call centre. It reminds me of the regimented workplace of the textile factories in 1970s and 80s Korea. Several call handlers actually referred to their call centre as ‘a call factory’ (*kolgongjang*). Each call handler station was separated by partitions which created an atmosphere to keep the workers’ minds on their duties and not to distract one another. The exact deployment made it easy to match a particular call handler to a specific seat to find and point out any mistakes. The ‘easy line-of-sight surveillance with open-backed cubicles’ was effective for managers to supervise call handlers directly and also exerted ‘panoptic force’ on workers by managers simply walking past (Winiecki 2007:362). I was told that when one call handler was crying in her seat because of a customer’s harassment, the manager approached and said, “Why are you crying here? Stop crying! Feh! [with humiliating tone]. Why don’t you report my statement to the Ministry of Labour?” Furthermore, as shown Figure 6.3, the seating arrangements of supervisors and workers also function as surveillance. Miss Bong, who drew the figure, was a call handler with three years’ experience working for a mobile phone company helpline. She explained that in her centre one had to walk in front of the team and centre heads but it felt embarrassing to pass in front of the heads’ seats during work hours.

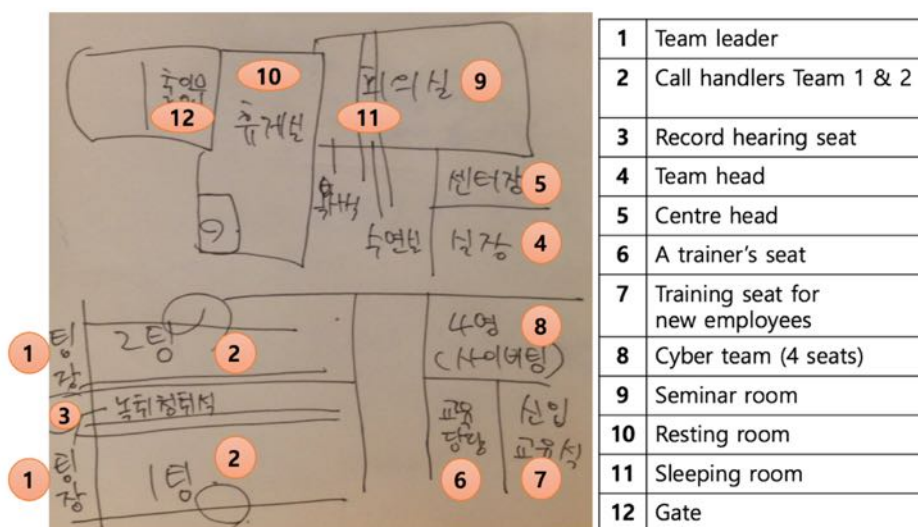


Figure 6.3 One call centre structure (drawn by Miss Bong)

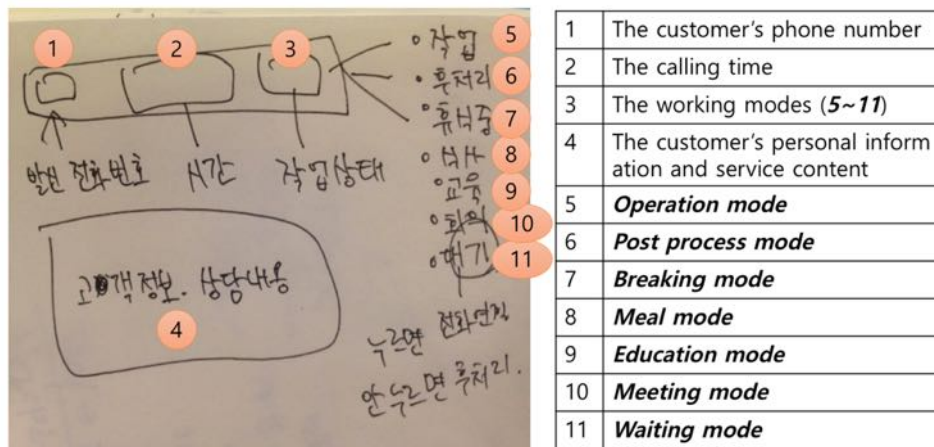


Figure 6.4 The display of a call handler's monitor (drawn by Miss Bong)

Miss Bong also drew a picture of the call handler's computer monitor (Figure 6.4) and explained it. It clearly shows what tight supervision individual call handlers are under. Their calling time, post process time, and break time were recorded and reported in real time. If the time was more than expected, the manager directly pointed this out, sometimes yelling it out. I was told that the manager listened to the call handlers' conversations in real time besides recording all the conversations between the workers and customers. They were under direct electronic supervision with its consequences, which often caused humiliation and psychological pressure. From what Miss Min, a one year experienced call handler of an insurance company, had seen on the manger's monitor, I could figure out further what the manager was doing during working hours, and how she or he was supervising call handlers. She described the manager as a 'king,' with herself, by implication, a servant.

[Call Handler's Monitor]; "During the operation, if I'd like to take a rest, I click 'Break mode' (Number 7) on the monitor. The break time in total is 20 minutes a day, ten minutes in the morning and ten in the afternoon. *The most humiliating thing is they even monitor toilet visits!* When I finish a call, then I click the post-process mode (Number 6), typing the conversation content, which has to be done in 35 seconds. Only 35 seconds! I also

have to deal with one call in at maximum three minutes. One day, I handled one call for about eight minutes, and then the manager stood up on her seat and yelled at me, “Hey! Miss Bong! Your calling time is eight minutes! Eight minutes! What the hell!” If I finish the post process, then I click the waiting mode (Number 11). If there are ‘waiting calls,’ the call is connected immediately, there is no time to think. Within one second, another call is delivered...The real-time listening is, I think, a double-edged sword. It may be helpful, especially for new employees, but *principally I felt a psychological pressure.*

(Miss Bong, call handler, 03/03/15) (emphasis added)

[Manager’s Monitor]; “There is a certain programme to monitor call handlers on the manager’s desktop. The programme checks whether the call handler is receiving a call or not in real time, and also records how many minutes the call handler does not get a call. *Here in the call centre, the manager is a king.* One day, I watched the manager’s computer secretly. On the monitor there were some graphs and many of lists. The manager was supervising us at her seat by looking at the monitor. She got the highest payment only by supervising us. Definitely, she is a person in power. It really irritates me. She never get a call, but only supervise us, then gets paid the highest salary. Those cursed by customers are us, not her. The status of the manager and us is completely opposite.”

(Miss Min, call centre, 17/03/15) (emphasis added)

### 6.2.2. Labour force ‘Grading’

In addition to the architectural and technological ‘supervision,’ call handlers mentioned ‘grading’ as another difficulty. In the previous section, I referred to the surveillance system with automatic call distribution as ‘Taylorism.’ In the context of Indian call centres, Nadeem (2011:132-133) points out that ‘Taylorism’ (Taylor 1911) is a strategy to prompt workers to focus on ‘comparatively high wages’ and ‘the relationship between wages and effort.’ In call centres, this strategy has been materialised through PRP (Performance-Related Pay) systems (Ferne and Metcalf 1998). It takes each agent’s productivity and quality scores – even called “qualictivity”

(i.e. quality + productivity) -, allocating each worker to a grade (Winiiecki 2007:361). Korean call handlers also suffer from such a grading system.

“The number of calls, the time for post process, and the quality of the call, all of them are converted into grades, and [they] then compare them amongst call handlers and subcontractors. Everything, every moment, when I breathe, speak and type are being checked and turned into grades. So I have to check the number of my calls in real time as well as those of my colleagues and other subcontractors. Therefore, I have to be very careful that the call time is not prolonged and the time for post process also.”

(A vice-leader of ABC call centre labour union,  
quoted from an internet news article on 12nd December 2012)  
(retrieved from <http://www.pressian.com/news/article.html?no=40131>).

This quote shows how thoroughly the call centre monitored workers' performance and turned it into 'grades' - even breathing was said to be scored. Ms Shin (in her mid-40s, a call handler with four years' experience) was working at the same call centre mentioned in the article. By chance, on the day I interviewed her she received a personal assessment from the company. When I met her, she seemed very upset. I asked why and she answered that “Today I got my monthly grade sheet, and I was very disappointed that I did not get the highest grade, ‘S,’ but ‘A.’ I feel really down and regret not being able to deal with the calls quickly.” She explained that the final grade was directly related to the monthly incentive she would receive; S grade, the highest one can get, is a 270000 won (=£180) incentive, A grade 220000 won (=£147), B grade 150000 won (=£100), C grade 100000 won (=£67) and D grade 50000 won (=£33). S grade is given to the 25<sup>th</sup> top-scored call handlers, A grade from the 26<sup>th</sup> to the 56<sup>th</sup>, B grade from the 57<sup>th</sup> to the 106<sup>th</sup> and C grade from the 107<sup>th</sup> to the 138<sup>th</sup>. She was scored 54<sup>th</sup>, and thus got an A grade.

Ms Shin showed her grading sheet and explained each component to me (Figure 6.5). The calls-per-day (CPD) (component 1) is the largest component (35%). That is why, she explained, workers tried to take as many calls as possible. She confessed that she became very upset when the customers asked a lot of questions and did not hang up the phone. The real time pressures on CPD was very severe and the manager quite often sent messages to show other colleagues' CPD results and put pressure on workers to get more calls. The company's catchphrase was "kindness, correctness, and quickness." If the workers did not get a certain number of calls, they could not leave work and had to do overtime.

		Component	Percentage reflected in grading
	1	CPD (Calls Per Day)	35%
	2	Total calling time	5%
	3	Total post process time	5%
	4	Quality of call	30%
	5	First completion rate	5%
	6	First completion correctness	10%
	7	Counselling record correctness	10%
	8	Data base improvement factor	5%
	9	Compliment from customers	[additional point]
	10	Attitude in work (penalty)	[penalty point]
	11	Total score	
	12	Ranking	
	13	Final grade	

생산성지표				품질지표			
1 CPD (35점)	2 상담시간 (N+협의, 5점)	3 후처리시간 (5점)	QA평가 (30점)	4 QA 가감점			
89.2	27.5	4:09:29 4.8	2:30:19 4	98	29.4	0	
5 성과지표		8 관리지표		11 총점	12 순위	13 등급	
1차처리율 (5점)	1차처리 정확도 (10점)	상담이력 정확도 (5점)	DB개선도 (10점)	9 참여도 (강간)	10 근태 (감점)		
5	10	5	5	2.1	0	92.77	54 A

Figure 6.5 The monthly grade sheet of ABC call centre

In the grade sheet, interestingly, there was a category for customers' compliments (component 9). Ms Shin explained that when the call handler was about to finish the call, if the customer said "Thank you" with an additional adverb like "very much" or "indeed", the handler got 0.3 points each time. In Ms Shin's case, in this month, she had seven complimentary comments from customers and hence got 2.1 points. Alongside the customer's compliments, finding any errors in

a database of counselling materials to improve the system during a lunchtime or after office hours provided an alternative method to obtain additional points (component 8).

Ms Shin pointed out that Quality of call (component 4: 30%) was the most important after CPD. The evaluation criteria for call quality were very detailed, taking up a page of A4 (see Appendix 3). The assessment was conducted three times per month. Ms Shin complained that the manager in charge conducted the evaluation of the call quality and that the result was not objective. For example, a call handler who was close with the manager often did well but other workers with no personal connection to the manager sometimes got poor results. The content of the evaluation interested me. There were very detailed evaluation criteria which I summarise in Table 6.1. Surprisingly, there were clauses to check the call handler's voice tone, intonation and positive response.

<b>Evaluation clause</b> (100 in total)	<b>Details</b>
Introduction part (23/100)	Greeting (5), Checking the call purpose and expression of gratitude (3), Confirming the identity (10), Checking the contract and informing a record (5)
Primary ability for service (33/100)	Voice tone/Intonation/Positive response (17), Speed/Pronunciation (5), Situational comments (3), Attentive listening (5), Expressions (3)
Service contents quality (36/100)	Explanation power & Ability to handle situation (10), Essential information briefing (18), Correctness (4), Data processing capacity (4)
Closing part (8/100)	Closing line (3), Greeting (5)
Specialised ability	Activeness (-2 ~ +2), Phone etiquette (-1 ~ 0)

Table 6.1 The evaluation criteria of call quality

Many of the call centres tested the workers' call handling abilities monthly. It was a written test, an enormous burden to call handlers. The main contractor company determined the range of the test, and the subcontractor companies trained the call handlers for one hour after office time for one week. The individual test score directly connected to one's monthly payment. Furthermore, the main contractor presented the test results in a comparative evaluation of subcontractors in order to prompt them to compete. All the managers of the different subcontractors, therefore, grilled call handlers about the test results. The monthly test was what the majority of workers at ABC call centre chose without hesitation if they were asked to choose just one thing they would like to see changed in the centre.

“The monthly test is really horrible. If our company's total score was the worst, the evaluation grade for our company went down. So the call handlers whose company had the worst grade from the monthly test felt terrible. It felt just like returning to schooldays. If the company was ranked last, its managers got upset, and at the end of the day, of course after office time, call handlers were trained and tested again, having to submit homework reviewing the questions they got wrong. It was a sort of detention for students. It is really terrible!”

(Ms Shin, mid-40s, call handler, 07/07/15)

Another type of test also gave additional stress to call handlers. It was the so-called 'mystery shopper.' The mystery shopper was a professional evaluator checking the call service quality and reporting the results to the company. The shopper intentionally called and performed as if they were a regular customer every few months. If a call handler did not cope with the mystery shopper's fussy manner, the worker would get a penalty, of course resulting in a reduced payment. Taking the supervision and grading systems together, the call centre deserves to be likened to a 'modern sweatshop,' where 'architectural, technological, and regulatory tactics' are interconnected (Winiecki 2007:373).

### 6.2.3. Marking one's sickness

Call handlers were not only checked for their performances during work hours. They were even scored for sickness. The first anecdote I heard was from Miss Bong. When I first met her, on her way back from the toilet in a café, she mentioned “the call handler should not have constipation.” I was surprised she said it, but realised why at once. The manager often rushed to the toilet and yelled out to find workers whose seats were empty during the busiest times. Miss Bong's concern was about ‘constipation’ because that needs longer toilet time. This means the worker is likely to be scolded by the manager, consequently affecting their performance assessment. Miss Bong told me her manager's comment by mimicking her tone; “There are always many waiting calls. If we miss calls, we lose money.”

I heard similar anecdotes regarding workers' sickness and work-pressure. The first case was of a nose bleed. I was told by Ms Jang, a call centre worker with four years' experience, that a female worker in a message contacting team (advising customers via messages in real time) had a nose bleed. She blocked her nose with a tissue temporarily, tilted her head up, and then continued to counsel through messages. When Ms Jang saw this, she approached and asked, “Why don't you report your situation to the manager, and then have a rest to stop the bleeding?” The counsellor briefly answered, “No, I can't,” and started crying. Ms Jang thought that the woman already knew the manager's likely reply, ‘refusal with scolding.’

Miss Joo, a call handler with six years' experience, told me the second anecdote. When the influenza virus (type A, H1N1) was spreading throughout the world including Korea in 2009, Miss Joo's colleague was infected with the flu. When the type A H1N1 was confirmed, her colleague reported it to the manager and wanted to take sick leave. But the manager only asked her, “Can you work now?” The manager did not care about her illness and the high possibility she

might transmit flu to the call centre. As a result, the colleague left the centre saying, “I can’t endure any more.”

The last anecdote was from Miss Bong’s experience. One Saturday morning on her way to the centre, she had a severe stomachache. She wanted to see a doctor and thus called her manager. The manager’s reply was “Stop whining! Come straight to the centre. There are only a few call handlers working today, so you have to work.” Miss Bong could not help but follow the manager’s order, so she briefly stopped by a clinic and rushed into the centre. As Miss Joo summarised it:

“We call handlers should not be sick. If I am sick, it is all my fault, not caring for myself. When I want to leave work early because of a bad condition, I have to work at least four hours on that day. Otherwise, my monthly score will go down or I have to do extra work for just the same hours I missed before. Shortening my lunch break and staying after office hours, I have to fill the gap. If I am too sick to come to work, the absence date will be counted as annual leave, namely, taken away from my official holidays, not accepted as sick-leave. When your throat is extremely painful and a doctor recommends you have a rest, you can get sick-leave, but it is unpaid leave, though.”

(Miss Joo, call handler, 13/06/15)

Living in these grading systems as call handlers, sickness went from being a natural part of life to something shameful. In other words, a call centre employee’s sickness becomes ‘delegitimised’ (Ware 1992; Kleinman 1992). It is as if their bodies were part of the call centre machinery, which cannot feel any pain at all, so “should not be sick.” More consequences of this attitude will be found in the next section. In all anecdotes, when call handlers were sick and reported it to the manager, what they received was not words of comfort but scolding. Every sickness of call handlers was marked and reflected in reduced pay, and so workers tended to endure sickness.

## 6.3. Call handlers' bodily suffering

### 6.3.1. "I am a low-priced disposable battery"

"In the call centre, there were always plenty of calls waiting. After one call, I had to take another call immediately. Unbelievably, the calls continued, here was absolutely no break while waiting for a next call. We are not a machine, but human. How dare the company think a human can answer calls for eight hours without a break? Honestly, I can't tell my friends that I am working in the call centre. I think I am a sort of expendable supplies now, namely, a low-priced disposable battery. Just like, "We don't care whether you can survive or not. We just buy you for a low price and consume you as much as possible."

(Ms Shin, call handler, 07/07/15)

In the previous section, I showed the architectural, technological, and regulatory tactics of call centres, likening them to a 'digitalised modern sweatshop.' This has ramifications for how call handlers think of themselves; "a low-priced disposable battery" (*ssagulyeo ilhoeyong baeteoli*) in the words of Ms Shin. This 'lived metaphor' captures Ms Shin's daily sufferings 'thickly' like painting or poetry. It illuminates her ceaseless working life ("answer calls for eight hours without a break"); for this, employees have to be well-charged and show their state-of-charge to employers through their work performance. Otherwise, they are easily disposed of and replaced by a new one. Accessories or parts of a machine can be used for a long time through maintenance and repair, but a battery is discarded as soon as it becomes useless.

I have already described the regimented working conditions as 'Taylorism' and I think it showed enough that call handlers are expected to operate tirelessly just like the parts of a machine. However, the following experiences that Ms Woo (in her late-50s, a call handler with nine years' experience) told me represent more 'fine machine tuning.' This is something people will not

notice unless they have been working for a long time, but it is a good representation of how call handlers are treated as if a part of a machine or a battery.

“It is only April, nice weather outside. But in the centre, the air-conditioner is turned on. One day, I felt it was rather cold. I looked around to understand why this was the case, and then I realised the air-conditioner was on. I just thought it might be on test. I asked the manager why it was on this nice afternoon. She replied that she turned it on because some workers complained it was a bit hot. But I finally found the right answer after asking someone else. The company turned on the air-conditioner after lunch to keep workers awake because in this spring season and after taking food they would likely feel sleepy. These days the air-conditioner is kept on low. So many workers are wearing a scarf and cardigan.”

“Do you know what our call centre doesn’t have? Windows! The company covered all windows completely with curtains. You know why? They think the workers only have to concentrate on working hard and are not supposed to see outside through the window. If it was allowed, the company might think, the workers have been wasting time, absent-mindedly watching the outside world through the window.”

(Ms Woo, call handler, 11/04/15)

Neither of the examples Ms Woo gave to me, the air-conditioner and window, directly related to the labour force, and might even have gone unnoticed. The fact of matter was that workers had been influenced unwittingly by such ‘fine tuning.’ Tactility and visibility of working bodies were under the company’s control by regulating ‘invisible’ air and ‘visible’ scenery. When a worker is subject to an external manipulation without fully controlling her own senses, it would be right to regard her (or him) as a machine. However, although the lived experience of the female call handler is expressed metaphorically as a machine or battery, her body can feel, get hurt and also

react. In the following sections, I show the bodily ailments that call handlers were suffering from in consequence and how they were coping with and adapting to these situations.

### 6.3.2. Pain, prevalent but delegitimated

Disease (previous year)	ABC call handlers	General workers	Musculoskeletal symptoms (last three months)	ABC call handlers
Headache, Eye strain	90.40%	17.80%	Shoulder pain	88.8%
General Fatigue	87.30%	26.50%	Neck pain	83.6%
Insomnia or Sleep disturbance	59.40%	2.50%	Back pain	79.1%
Hearing problem	53.90%	2.30%	Wrist, Lower arm pain	75.7%
Stomachache	51.00%	1.60%	Knee pain	43.0%
Skin problem	40.80%	2.40%	Ankle, Feet pain	30.8%
Difficulty in breathing	18.60%	0.80%		
Cardiovascular disease	8.60%	0.70%		

Figure 6.6 The percentage of diseases and musculoskeletal symptoms that ABC call centre workers reported in 2014 (Korea Labour & Society Institute 2014:301, 304).

Looking at the results of the ABC call centre health survey obtained through its trade union, every health problem listed had a higher incidence than general workers' results (Figure 6.6). The majority of call handlers reported headache, eyestrain and general fatigue. About 60% of workers experienced depression or anxiety disorder and insomnia or sleep disturbance, around 20 to 40 times the incidence amongst general workers. High rates of hearing problems presumably had to do with the headsets they used, while stomachache might result from longstanding sedentary work with short lunch breaks. Furthermore, considering the job characteristics of sedentary working and a continuous typing process, rates of neck, shoulder, wrist and lower arm pain were high. There is no routine collection of data on these problems amongst general workers.

According to Ms Jang, “Every worker here has basically at least one or two health problems.” The commonest health problem was throat pain. Ms Jang always prepared a green tea to sip when her throat became a little uncomfortable and a supplement to strengthen her immunity in order to be safe from a cold. In the picture of her desk that she took and sent to me (Figure 6.7), I can see the water bottle and nutrition supplement on either side of her desk. She explained that call handlers had to keep talking, consequently overused their throat and often had a hoarse throat, and took a relatively long period to recover from a cold. These problems seemed to be regarded not as ‘serious’ but rather ‘normal’ because of their high frequency and relative low severity from the perspective of medicine. Another common problem I heard was a ‘numb hand.’ This was also not considered a ‘problem,’ but was regarded as routine. As shown in Figure 6.7, Ms Jang squeezed her hands during the counselling. Figure 6.6 shows 75.7% of workers had experienced wrist and lower arm pain during last three months. Another worker in the same call centre, Ms Shin, told me she almost always put a medicated patch on her wrists.

There is no doubt that these bodily pains are connected to the time limit for typing a counselling case (35 seconds per one case), with consequences for a month’s salary levels, causing workers’ hands to get strained endlessly. Hence, the real problem was the situation itself that made it inevitable the workers could not help but endure throat pain and numb hands or forced them to be exposed to work levels that meant they were not able to think of anything constructive to complain about. Throat and wrist pain as well as general fatigue are so common that reporting these symptoms tends to be regarded as unreasonable; in other words, ‘delegitimation of illness experience’ happens in a workplace (Ware 1992). Furthermore, as pain is something invisible and easily experienced by everyone, and often lacks a clear-cut diagnosis - described as ‘liminality of pain’ (Jackson 2005) - it can provoke stigmatising reactions. Thus, if call handlers refer to any chronic symptoms, they can be stigmatised as insincere, malingering and disgruntled employees. The anecdotes introduced in 6.2.3 show this well. When remembering the ideal disposition of factory girls disseminated during the nation-building period of South Korea in the 1970s and 80s

(Chapter 5.3.2), employees' common health problems can be understood as a kind of physical 'tax' that is expected to repay the favour of employment.



Figure 6.7 An actual image of call centre working. The worker massages her hands while talking to a customer. The picture was taken by one of my key informants, Ms Jang.

There were far more serious health problems suffered by call handlers. Most stories were unknown outside the call centre. I had also not heard about such severe cases before meeting Miss Hyun. When we met on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2015, she told me that she agreed to be interviewed by me because she got a facial palsy while working in the call centre and was aware that three other call handlers had also suffered from facial palsy. The facial palsy in her right cheek happened in January 2014. She suddenly felt cheek stiffness, and then a numbness developed. She recovered a lot but still has a problem with contracting facial muscles. Although she has adapted to her facial palsy well, after the event she got a sort of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). She confessed that she often becomes nervous when a call is coming. While preparing herself to answer it, she felt her right cheek becoming solid, and it became difficult to speak. This was not an exceptional case. She heard that there were other workers who suffered from the facial palsy. One of them was a female worker who had lots of stress after the transition from temporary to regular employment and got a permanent complication with her mouth turning to one side. Those stories, however, were likely to be hidden. Some were accepted as normal or even inevitable problems; others were disregarded as if they were unfortunate personal happenings.

In addition, there were more extreme incidents which were kept 'secret,' particularly those resulting in death. Ms Jang told me that in ABC call centre there were several night-shift workers who had died of sudden brain haemorrhages while working. She said, however, nobody in the centre wanted to speak about the deaths openly. Later, she told me another devastating story about a female call centre worker's suicide (described in detail in Chapter 7). In terms of workers' suicide, there were other stories. Miss Hyun, the facial palsy sufferer, told me about it, starting with the words, "It's top secret, though."

"One call handler in the centre took her life by meeting people from a suicide website and committing suicide together. I heard she seemed to be a little depressed. The incident happened one or two years ago. She was 27-years-old at that time and worked in the outsourced company DFG. In my opinion, the manager seemed not to control her well. It was rumoured that the DFG had lots of similar accidents. An outsourced company, DFG (located in SDIC1) was notorious amongst call handlers. To endure in the centre for just one year was considered very tough. I heard the DFG pressurised call handlers every second."

(Ms Jang, call handler, 19/05/15)

I felt quite awkward when Miss Hyun said it was 'top secret.' Probably the company must have wanted to keep it a secret. No matter what the reason was, the fact of the matter was that some call handlers took their lives because of job-related stress and other colleagues kept it a secret. I wondered what kind of force or power caused them to shut their eyes to these facts. Did the companies put implicit or explicit pressures on them? Or was there some kind of 'cultural gravity' which pulled their bodies down preconsciously? If there was, I wondered how others got used to it and coped with it.

### 6.3.3. Chemical solutions, not ‘ruining’ my body but ‘healing’ it

“All possible temptations, all allurements combine to bring the workers to drunkenness. Liquor is almost their only source of pleasure, and all things conspire to make it accessible to them. The working man comes from his work tired, exhausted, finds his home comfortless, damp, dirty, repulsive; he has *urgent need of recreation*, he must have something to make work worth his trouble, to *make the prospect of the next day endurable.*”

(Engels 1958 (1845):113) (emphasis added)

“I am really in a bad mood after work. So I almost always go out and drink. I smoke a lot when I drink. During work hours, I am actually too busy to smoke. In my experience, alcohol should accompany smoking. After work, I am emotionally exhausted and completely wiped out. So I can’t to go to bed without doing something. If I do, I become more depressed. So, *I need to do anything to relieve this bad mood.* When I have no plans with my friends for a drink after work, I become anxious. Thus, I have to drink till at least 11 pm.”

(Miss Min, call handler, 17/03/15) (emphasis added)

The two quotations above are about drinking behaviours of English working men in the 1850s and of a Korean female call centre worker in 2015, respectively. National origin, gender, and era are different, but both have something in common; that is, low-wage workers are exhausted after work and have ‘urgent need’ of pleasure, so they drink alcohol. Both are proper examples of the ‘chemical solutions’ of the urban poor (Charlesworth 2006). As Charlesworth explains, they seem to be unable to avoid being affected by the sense of being in ‘worry, poverty, hopelessness,’ and so look for ‘immediate satisfactions’ (ibid:43, 51). During my fieldwork, the need for chemical solutions after work was common amongst female call handlers. The more call handlers I met, the more I became aware of it, particularly by their appearance. Many of them were ‘obese.’

Miss Munwha, in her mid-30s, had worked in a call centre for only eight months. However, she had gained 15kg extra weight. Her senior often humiliated her, even in front of other workers, and she drank every night, as well as eating a lot of cookies and sweets. She explained, “People need sugar when they get stressed. Stress requests more sweeties, my brain kept talking to me, ‘Eat more!’” Alongside weight gains, call centre-related stress subsequently caused her skin troubles, irregular menstruation, and hair loss, etc. The obesity of many call handlers was often disregarded as a job-related health problem, rather it seemed to be considered the result of a loss of self-discipline. Miss Munwha, however, pointed to stress as the fundamental reason. With respect to job-related stress, the most unforgettable comment of hers was “stomach ache is a kind of duty. Must have!” Even if the degree of disease was not serious, it is noteworthy that certain ailments were understood as unavoidable or even natural.

Miss Hyun, having suffered from facial palsy, had also gained 15kg in weight since working in the call centre. On the way home after work, she used to shop for food, buy lots of food, eat as much as possible, throw away the remains, and rush into bed. She said, “this was the only solution to relieve my stress.” Alongside weight gain, she also had reflux oesophagitis, irregular menstruation, recurrent common colds during the year, gum inflammation, a hearing problem, chronic fatigue, as well as a facial palsy. To relieve her psychological stress, it looked like she was causing a lot of stress on her body. Here I wondered why she was letting her body break down. Regarding this question, she told me her thoughts as follows.

“I bought a lot of foods, often drank alcohol and shopped for nail polish as well in order to heal my psychological sufferings. Without them, I could not relieve my stress. Consuming them, by the way, *made me feel pleasant, even if only for a short time, and elevated my self-esteem.* Regarding the nail polish, I have over one hundred bottles of nail polish, I felt quite better when looking at the newly polished nails. I think *drinking, overeating, smoking and buying clothes and cosmetics were from the same origin, to heal myself.* In my case, I spent my money to heal myself, console myself. Whatever the reason

was, I got hurt and then I was eager to treat it. I know the scholars tended to treat call handlers as 'hopeless idiots', but that was only their interpretation as they wished. They just wanted to analyse us, not sympathise with us. I know, and everyone else knows there was nothing ideal about those types of behaviours. But I can't stop them because I felt like I was going to die unless I did that."

(Miss Hyun, call handler, 24/03/15) (emphasis added)

Miss Hyun's unhealthy behaviour was her choice for 'healing', not for 'ruining' her body. She claimed her spending and eating habits healed her weary body, while acknowledging she might be damaging it 'little by little.' In other words, she wanted to make herself happy for a moment and tried to restore her self-esteem; that is, she was healing her mood and self-confidence.

As in the previous two examples, it was not difficult to see an increase in weight when people started working at a call centre. In 2012, a survey was conducted on the incidence rate of obesity (with a body mass index of 25kg/m<sup>2</sup> or more) amongst female workers employed in SDIC3, including female call centre workers. The result revealed that the obesity rate of female call centre workers was the highest at 19.1 per cent, while the average rate of obesity was 9.4 per cent, and the rate for production jobs was 12.6 per cent, and for white collar jobs it was 6.6 per cent (Kumcheon County 2013). This result may seem to contradict the high smoking rates of call centre workers since smoking amongst women is often known to be a means of avoiding weight gain. One of call handlers I interviewed who had quit smoking three months earlier had started smoking again because of her weight gain.

The notable thing here, however, is that the call centre workers did not start to smoke in order to lose weight. Most of the call handlers I talked to gained weight after becoming a smoker, so their weight gain was an important factor hindering smoking cessation. In other words, the reason why female call centre workers who smoke do not quit smoking is not that smoking can suppress additional weight gain, but that smoking cessation will definitely increase their weight. In other

words, the fact that female workers are afraid of quitting smoking due to their weight may indicate that many of them have already increased their weight to above the average (or above their own standards).

Furthermore, I pay extra attention to the fact that the reasons for smoking and weight gain are the same. The reasons for the increase in weight of the two call handlers were binge eating and frequent drinking after work to relieve work-related stress. The former was a smoker and the latter was a non-smoker. They relied on other chemicals such as sweet foods, sweets and alcohol to relieve their suffering as a result of the harsh working environment. Although their individualised tactics could be medically harmful to their health, they were a secular treatment to defend, protect and even 'heal' themselves.

The three female call handlers I have introduced so far have much in common. In order to heal themselves, they relied on chemical solutions, particularly after work with impulsive and urgent needs for immediate satisfactions. The reason for this common choice is probably related to their lived experience of call centre work as a last bastion. Namely, they were facing the seemingly endless cycle of hopeless and stressful 'call factory' workers' lives. The 'endless cycle' of suffering itself, being repeated every 24 hours for them, might prompt them to depend on chemical solutions which help them escape from the cycle 'temporarily' (cf. Garcia (2008:722)). The confession that Miss Min became anxious unless she had plans with her friends for a drink after work represents well the burden of a repeated cycle of daily sufferings in a call centre. She became anxious probably because she knew a terrible day just like today would befall her a few hours later. If looking at their lives in terms of their daily life cycle, it is understandable that their unhealthy eating habits, which seem to ruin their bodies from a long-term perspective, are seen by them as closer to 'healing.'

#### 6.3.4. Call centre, smoker's heaven or hell?

During my pilot study in 2012, I was told that call handlers thought of the centre as a 'smokers' heaven' (*heubyeonjaui cheonguk*) (Kim 2015: 55). Because of prejudice or even stigma toward female smoking in Korea (Jung-Choi, Khang, and Cho 2012), it was unusual to find any workplace which provided smoking areas for female smokers. The call centre smoking area presumably provided an incentive to female workers who enjoyed smoking. However, as I described in section 6.1, the most common reason for seeking employment in the call centre industry was that it provided the easiest opportunity for employment without the requirement of special qualifications. When I first visited ABC call centre trade union in December 2014, I asked Ms Jang (the union leader at the time) about the story of 'smoker's heaven.' The first reply I got from her was "without the smoking area, they would go crazy!"

Ms Jang was so confident of her opinion that I felt my question about call centre workers' smoking habits quite stupid. She emphasised that since call handlers were always exposed to psychological stress, a smoking area was essential. She as a smoker herself seemed not to take female workers' smoking into account; rather it was a 'routine' to which she had already been accustomed. Female workers in the call centres smoked more than the general female adult population. As summarised in Table 6.2, the surveyed smoking rates were around 20% (except for Z call centre (37%)). This was at least three times higher than the general female adult rate of 7.4%. The notable thing in Table 6.2 is that the predicted smoking rates I got from interviews with call handlers were higher than surveyed results. This might be because of under-reporting. No matter which one was closer to reality, female smoking was one of the distinctive features of the call centre.

	Surveyed Smoking Rates of female workers	Predicted Smoking Rates (by actual call handlers, except *)
Z call centre	37% (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Welfare and Health 2012)	40%~50% (informants during a pilot study)
ABC call centre	18.89% (Korea Labour & Society Institute 2014)	30~40% (Ms Jang)
PH call centre		70% (Miss Bong)
GD call centre	22% (Seoul Worker's Health Centre 2015, unpublishe)	20~40% (Ms Nerr)
SDIC 3 call centres	26% (Kumcheon County 2013)	
HD call centres		50%~80% (Miss Hyun)
General female adult smoking rates	7.4% (Statistics Korea 2014)	*Approximately half of actual smokers hidden (Jung-Choi, Khang, and Cho 2012)

Table 6.2 The female workers' smoking rates (surveyed or predicted) in several call centres

When I first visited ABC call centre, I asked Ms Jang to show me all the smoking areas in the centre. The building of the centre was four-storeyed, and from first to third floors. Each floor had one subcontractor call centre and also one outdoor smoking area; three smoking areas in total. Figure 6.8 shows one of the smoking areas. The overall view of the outdoor smoking area with one smoking booth (number 1 picture in Figure 6.8) was very impressive. The sign of the smoking booth (number 2) attracted my attention at once. It said, "Heaven Garden Smoking room" (*haneuljeongwon heubyeonsil*). I was surprised that the real smokers' heaven was displayed in front of me. It was not only the name itself. The smoking booth was a well-equipped room with three ventilating fans (number 3), an automatic air freshener (number 4), and a huge ashtray full of sand as protection from the fire risk from burning cigarette butts (number 5). Furthermore, in the outdoor smoking area, a wooden fence was installed by the company (number 6). I asked Ms

Jang the reason for installing the fence, and she answered that it was to ensure privacy from neighbouring buildings. It was not clear what the company wanted from the fence, though. To protect workers' privacy or the company's reputation?



Figure 6.8 ABC call centre smoking area, called ‘Heaven Garden Smoking room.’

After that memorable experience, I looked for other call centres' smoking areas, particularly where my informants worked. One of them was PH call centre in Figure 6.9. The worker there, Miss Bong, told me its smoking rate was about 70% (Table 6.2). There was a cosy gazebo surrounded by trees as well as three huge ashtrays and one drinks vending machine. It seemed a very nice place to take a smoking break indeed. So, is it right to represent a call centre as a ‘smoker’s heaven’? The reality is not that simple.

“Here, in the call centre, *there is nothing to relieve stress*. Call handling causes lots of stress. I love drinking very much, and hence I often drank every day after work. But the hangover made it difficult for me to work next day. Therefore, I looked for an alternative solution in the centre. And I found there was a well-prepared smoking area in the centre. So having smoked before, I naturally began to smoke in the centre. It became a regular haunt for myself and many colleagues, and was certainly looked upon as a stress relieving location.”

(Miss Min, call handler, 17/03/15) (emphasis added)

Miss Min worked in OT call centre located in SDIC 3. From her talk, it was notable that there was no alternative to relieving stress except for a smoking area. Before working in the centre, she had stopped smoking for a while, but the job stress provoked her to smoke again. The smoking scenes of OT call centre are shown in Figure 6.9. Based on Miss Min’s interview data, I visited OT call centre and observed the afternoon break at 4.00 pm, which was actually a smoking break. Groups of workers rushed out into the smoking area and quickly began to smoke. It was the first time I had observed such a great number of female workers smoking together.

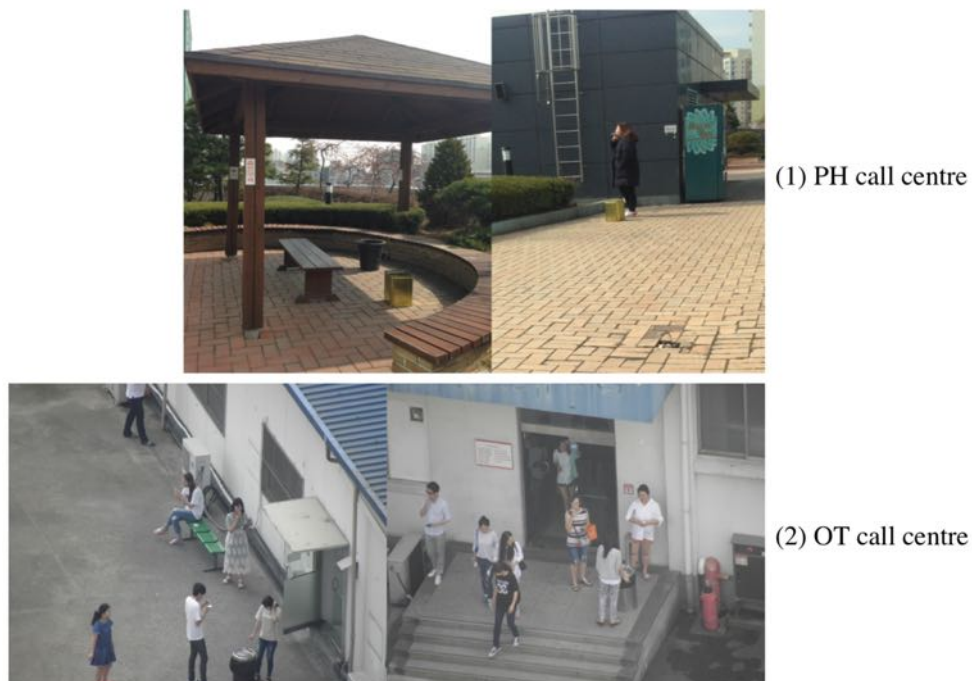


Figure 6.9 The smoking areas of (1) PH call centre and (2) OT call centre

Observing the pile of cigarette butts in the ashtray and the smokers' rush in the call centre, I became more convinced that the call centre did not prepare a smoking area on the workers' behalf, rather for the company's profits. When Mintz explained the features of drug foods, he insisted that the ever-rising consumption of drug foods was "an artifact of intraclass struggles for profit" (Mintz 1985:186). Mintz's comment still seems valid for call handlers' smoking. Although even in recent researches on call centre workers' health their higher smoking rates were connected to psychological stress as a matter of course (Korea Labour & Society Institute 2014), smoking should have been analysed from the perspective of 'profit.' During my pilot study in 2012, I obtained relevant proof from one experienced head manager in Z call centre.

"Call centre working is dealing with one's emotions, so workers can easily get hurt. And they have to recover from it quickly...That's why I don't interfere in their smoking at all. Because I myself definitely get some relief from smoking. Ordering people who usually smoke while working not to smoke in the centre could reduce their work efficiency. So whenever I recognised that the call handler got stressed a bit, I said, "Be back (after one cigarette)" (*gatlawa*), and then the worker began to handle the calls well again. After smoking, people become relaxed. Everyone in the call centre realises this. Thus, I've never told the call handlers not to smoke. Now everyone manages their smoking breaks quite well without disrupting the work because I've allowed them to smoke freely. In contrast, if I had restricted smoking breaks very rigidly, the workers would have visited the smoking areas without any consideration of workload. There is such a thing."

(A head manager in Z call centre, reported in Kim (2015:65))

The head manager, a call handler with seven years' experience, appreciated the practical merit of smoking very well. She might have been biased by her smoking habit, but her belief about smoking was based on several years' evidence she had gathered first hand. The company's provision of such a cosy smoking area in the call centre must be understood from this perspective. To conclude, the cigarette was utilised by both employers and employees as a 'labour enhancer'

(Jankowiak and Bradburd 1996). Thus, I wonder if it is appropriate to believe the representation of the call centre as a 'smokers' heaven' that the informant gave. Instead, I see the cosy smoking area in the call centre as an extension of the direct and digitalised supervision in real time to exploit the workforce as much as possible. Considering smoking's debilitating effects, the call centre, in the long run, might have to be understood as both the smokers' heaven and the worker's hell.

### 6.3.5. Mute button and visible sighs of smoke

Miss Joo in her late-30s, a call handler with six years' experience in ABC call centre, was the first person who gave me a cigarette during fieldwork. One day after dinner with the centre union members, she suddenly gave me a cigarette despite my being a non-smoker, after which we smoked and sighed together. Later I got to know the meaning of her smoking with a sigh. Through countless encounters and conversations with her, I was able to grasp her lived experience of smoking in a call centre. While she experienced smoking for the first time in her second year at college out of curiosity, she seldom smoked during her 20s. It was when working in ABC call centre that she began smoking seriously. When she began working in the centre, she recognised many colleagues smoked during break times. Many of the new starters were smokers, particularly, the women who had worked in a call centre previously. Miss Joo began to smoke for the connection with peers. During the training course, she smoked only two cigarettes during the daytime, and two more in the evening when drinking. After the six-week course, however, she gradually began smoking more. When she began to hear the annoying complaints she received through her headset, she began to sigh and then from her mind "the desire for smoking begins to explode." For her, smoking is deeply connected to 'sigh.'

“During my working, when taking a call from annoying customers, I usually sighed. At that moment, I’d like to visit a smoking room and exhale the sigh while blowing out a stream of smoke. (Why?) Because I wanted to see my stress with my colleagues through my smoke. Watching my sigh together, I’d like to communicate with each other. Normally I don’t talk too much, but I find talking with fellow smokers is easy. Many of my close colleagues smoke, so we often chatted when smoking. For me, smoking time was very precious to interact with my colleagues. If I received some complaints from a caller, I’d enjoy sharing this unpleasant feeling with my colleagues, by sighing and watching my smoke drift into the air.”

(Miss Joo, call handler, 13/06/15)

To Miss Joo, the smoke from a cigarette was not simple smoke at all. It represented her sigh, that was her suffering. As a call handler, she considered that sighing was the only way to relieve her frustration and emotion during work hours. When listening to customers’ complaints and wanting to sigh deeply, she pushed the ‘MUTE’ button to disconnect her microphone briefly and sighed. In order to share this frustrating feeling with her colleagues, she visualised her sigh by exhaling smoke and sharing her suffering. Through watching the smoke together, she interacted and communicated with her colleagues. For her, the ashtray was a “tomb of sighs” (*hansumdeurui mudeom*). It was a lived metaphor that represented what she appreciated as a call handler. By using the word ‘tomb’, she wanted to acknowledge that part of her body was actually being ‘burned out’ and buried in the ashtray. The sigh might be her condolences to her exhausted self.

The presence of the ‘MUTE’ button and Miss Joo’s sighing in the smoking area remind me of the ‘*hwabyung*’ (a fire disease or anger disease) of Korean women as we saw in Chapter 1. *Hwabyung* is depicted as the ‘sickness of an oppressed Korean society’ in which marginalised women have few means to express their ‘resentment’ but are expected to suppress reactive anger (Suh 2013). I think this longstanding byproduct of the traditional, subordinate gender role has

now transformed and extended into the economic area, particularly call centre industries. The 'MUTE' button seems to me to be a materialised symbol of the capitalisation of *hwabyung*. If women in the past had mute buttons in their minds, now the buttons exist as a material reality. Female call handlers have to press the buttons for good evaluations and a decent paycheck. They have to suppress their anger and sigh and be cautious not to let customers recognise their negative feeling. In contrast, smoking is an opportunity for female workers who smoke to emit a sigh that they struggle to suppress and hide during work hours. Thus, it is a kind of 'ritual' to see that through the smoke blown out in the air, the suppressed sigh, frustration, annoyance, chagrin and anger are being drained out of their bodies. Although the chemical poisons of tobacco harm smokers' bodies, smoking can be 'healing' to female call handlers who are vulnerable to *hwabyung* because it helps them eliminate the sigh (i.e. anger) that is otherwise suppressed.

## 6.4. Call handlers' emotional suffering

### 6.4.1. Humiliation by customers: 'Mouth becoming dirty'

Call handlers' lived metaphors about themselves were almost always negative. There were two representative examples: "rubbish bin of emotion" (*gamjeong sseuregitong*) and "swear-pan" (*yokbaji*). The customer is considered a king and is allowed to be ill-mannered to call handlers. Some customers abuse this hierarchical relationship and pour all the negative feelings that they want to discard onto the call handlers. Call handlers thus become a rubbish bin or dustpan. Most of the customers' attacks are related to the call handlers' low educational levels. These originate from their preconceived prejudice of call centre working, not actual educational levels. Examples of the attacks I heard included "You are such a low call handler," "How dare you, call handler, tell me something," "Are you working there because you have a low educational background?," "Didn't you take formal school education?," "Your reading skills are extremely poor," "How dare

you not know about it?” and “Such a stupid! I can’t communicate with you. Hand over this call to others.”

This kind of personal attack, having nothing to do with the original purpose of calling, was hard to endure. People who belittled the workers were from all classes of the social spectrum. Call handlers I met often insisted that theirs seemed to be the lowest of all sedentary occupations. Although humiliation by customers was routine, the worst for them was when they happened to encounter an abusive consumer or ‘consumer from hell.’ In this case, the consequences of the humiliation could lead to the call handler requiring assistance for mental health problems as follows.

“One of my colleagues suffered from a consumer from hell! Since then she has been receiving psychiatric treatment. There were also other call handlers who couldn’t fall asleep at all without alcohol. We often become a victim of someone venting their anger. When I heard someone’s repeated insult, I thought why am I here to get cursed by them? My colleague wrote down the phone number of those who had cursed her. She said she would do the same thing to them after she quit this job someday. For me, I became more unfriendly after working in the call centre. Especially, I seemed to be more irritable to my family.”

(Ms Jang, call handler, 19/05/15)

Call handlers cannot predict who will encounter a customer from hell. It depends on one’s luck, which means there is no proper system to protect them from malicious consumers. The call handler who suffered from them had only personal solutions; to receive psychiatric treatment by spending their own money and to record the phone number of the abuser for a revenge attack. While they always try to be empathetic and welcoming to customers, ironically many of them became unfriendly and even irritable instead. This is represented by one figurative sentence I

heard from my informants; “My mouth became dirty.” Almost every informant admitted that they seemed to ‘swear’ much more often than they did previously.

“I think I am definitely not healthy now, particularly with regard to my mental health. Before working in the call centre, I had not sworn at all. However, after working here I find myself swearing quite often and I am now easily upset. I have no control over my anger. Repeatedly being in conflict with customers and being sworn at, have certainly affected me. Since I had to apologise to customers even though I really hated doing it, the feeling of discontent began to really concern me and then this made me become very irritable toward my family members. When I bumped into passengers on the way to the subway, I unconsciously swore “F\*\*\*!” In a word, I became a very irritable person”

(Miss Bong, call handler, 03/03/15)

“Everybody didn’t know even how to swear when they entered here, but now *my mouth became dirty* and others’ as well. We said to each other, “I swear too often these days.” We became very irritable and easy to quarrel with each other. At the same time, I often swore at home unwittingly, continued to say “F\*\*\* This! and F\*\*\* That!” Then I would say to myself, “Uh? What I am doing now?” I felt extremely ashamed, thinking “I did not used to be like this.” I became depressed. *My mouth became dirty* and couldn’t control my temper, these things damaged my self-esteem. I felt like that I became a savage. So I regretted my decision to work in the call centre, then I lost my self-esteem. Because I had no alternative choices but to work here. This made me more depressed.”

(Miss Hyun, call handler, 24/03/15) (emphasis added)

Like Miss Bong and Hyun’s anecdotes, many of call handlers confessed their personality had changed into a more irritable one. These changes caused call handlers to lose their self-esteem and become more depressed. When I heard the expression, ‘dirty mouth’ from Miss Hyun, I was surprised. She was a two years’ experienced call handler and had her own skills to pacify upset customers (e.g. making them feeling she was sympathetic and understanding of their concerns,

fully convincing them that she was feeling really sorry, and letting them ascertain that she was 'eul' (subordinate) to them). Thus, she successfully developed 'healthy estrangement' or 'emotional numbness' from the call handler's role (Hochschild 2003(1983):186-189). Nevertheless, she thought she was not healthy but depressed, losing her self-esteem. She felt ashamed when realising how much she unwittingly swore. She figuratively described this personal change as "my mouth became dirty." What made her depressed was not only the dirty mouth itself, but also fundamentally her insecure economic status; she could not leave the call centre because there were no other options due to her low qualifications even though she witnessed her language corrupted by swearing. The call centre was her last bastion.

Meanwhile, Miss Hyun's statement - "my mouth became dirty" - can be understood in the same context that caused her to depend on chemical solutions to relieve her stress after work (Chapter 6.3.3). As we saw above, in order to make her pleasant and elevate her self-esteem, she often drank, overate, and bought clothes and cosmetics. I think swearing is also a reaction to offload suppressed anger onto someone else. I commonly found call handlers swore at their colleagues, friends, and family members, those who seemed to be less strong than them. In other words, they were still unable to swear at people of higher socio-economic status, only those lower than them.

#### 6.4.2. Humiliation by managers: 'Hands up' for the toilet

"In some call centres, workers have to put their *hands up to go to the toilet*. Computers dictate the time and duration of breaks, with no flexibility whatsoever. Employees are under constant monitoring and surveillance, driving up stress levels."

(Jones 2011:147) (emphasis added)

In this section, I describe how the manager in the call centre utilises ‘public humiliation’ to control call handlers. The most typical example of public humiliation was the ‘toilet monitor.’ Jones (2011:147) describes how call centre workers in the UK have to raise their hands for the toilet. The ‘hands up’ strategy for restricting the use of the toilet as much as possible is not confined to Britain. When Miss Bong told me about the ‘hands up’ system in PH call centre, I was surprised for a moment, but I got to understand why it was utilised. The core principle of how it worked was ‘public humiliation.’ Miss Bong explained the detailed process of toilet monitoring with the ‘hands up’ system as follows.

“There is the blocktime to prohibit leaving the seat because during the blocktime, 9 am to 10 am and 4 pm to 6.30 pm, when the centre is usually pressed with calls. During the time, if you want to leave your seat, namely to go to the toilet, you have to get permission from the manager face-to-face. Except during blocktime, the workers can go to the toilet relatively freely, but only one person per one time amongst one team, 12 workers. The 12 workers, and, of course, the manager, shared the group messenger window in real time on their desktop monitors. If someone wants to go to the toilet, one must type a message, ‘Hands Up’ or ‘HU’ in the group window. It means the person puts hands up for the toilet. If there is no one in the toilet and the manager allows it, then one can go. The time in the toilet, of course, is monitored. When the person comes back to their seat, they must type ‘Hands Down’ or ‘HD’ in the messenger window. Then other workers can go in turn to the toilet.”

(Miss Bong, call handler, 03/03/15)

The PH call centre was running a more upgraded and technical method for toilet monitoring, the group messenger window. The technique was not for workers’ convenience but the managers’. The point was that everybody in the centre including the manager knew who went to the toilet and all the processes were under the manager’s control. Miss Bong explained why PH centre used this system. The call centre had two teams and made them compete with each other by comparing

the number of calls per day. Hence, the managers of the two teams were very concerned about the workers' empty seats, particularly leaving for the toilet. For each worker, toilet monitoring correlated with their personal evaluation for their monthly incentive payment. The managers nitpicked at everything the workers did. Miss Bong said that "in the centre, this constant monitoring and admonishment produced an atmosphere of uncomfortable tension." Through further conversation with Miss Bong, I could understand the core of how it worked.

"[The researcher]: Why did you and other call handlers follow the rule strictly?  
[Miss Bong]: I think a general atmosphere was just to follow it. It was a kind of tacit rule. Because nobody wanted to be scolded. The manager often scolded the worker openly, so as to warn other workers and put the person to shame. The manager seemed to scold someone to make an example. So I thought it might be possible for call handlers to have cystitis because this kind of oppressive atmosphere stopped them from using the toilet if needed. As you know, these days even primary school students do not ask if they can go to the toilet. How dare female adults be expected to ask for that? It's a shame. I am not a student. I felt really humiliated when I asked the manager face-to-face to go to the toilet."

(Miss Bong, call handler, 03/03/15)

The manager in PH centre intentionally scolded the workers openly in order to shame them and make an example. Thus, the core strategy was 'public humiliation.' As an adult, it must have been humiliating to ask if one can go to the toilet. Such feelings of humiliation, therefore, could be a very effective controlling strategy to restrict frequent toilet usage. Furthermore, in OT call centre where Miss Min had worked, the manager ordered the workers not to drink too much because it might cause them to go to the toilet often. In fact, there was a report that the female workers in the service sector including call handlers at SDIC3 showed a relatively high risk of cystitis (Kumcheon County 2013).

The strategy of 'public humiliation' worked not only for toilet use. When it came to call handling, the manager's open scolding was more direct and humiliating. When Miss Bong spent eight minutes on post-process, which was usually allowed 35 seconds, the manager got up from her seat and yelled out so that every worker could hear. "Miss Bong! What the heck are you doing now? You spent over eight minutes for just one post-process! Uh, are you listening?" Miss Bong emphasised it was to make an example of her and to squeeze other workers at the same time. Another case was from Miss Munwha. When Miss Munwha had just begun to work in a call centre, she gave a wrong explanation to the customer. Unfortunately, at that moment, the senior manager was listening to her dialogue in real time. The manager heard the mistake and got very upset, resulting in her unplugging the headset, turning on the speaker and replaying the conversation at a loud volume so everyone could hear Miss Munwha's mistake. Being publically humiliated by having her conversation played ensured Miss Munwha felt extremely ashamed and was, without a doubt, the manager's strategy. That was the exact way that things went in the call centre.

As a result, in order to avoid public humiliation, the call handlers were expected to avoid coughing when talking to customers, hold their urine, not stay too long in the toilet, not spend too much time in post-process, be kind and animated to the customers, and also have a submissive relationship with the managers. Thus, the call handlers' bodies and minds were vulnerable to becoming shrunken and intimidated, respectively. They were always exposed to others' gaze directly or indirectly, and they struggled to hide their bodies in their seats and concentrated on getting as many calls as possible. With their bodies stuck in their seats, separated by rectangular partitions, their self-esteem was also stuck at its lowest. There was a definite exit for them, quitting the call centre. However, since it was the 'last' bastion for many of them, they could not help but stay there. Meanwhile, I asked Miss Bong how she responded to the public humiliation. She replied, "Just pretend to accept it and in my mind I was swearing at her."

### 6.4.3. Humiliation by colleagues: ‘Bullying’ in the centre

In this section, I introduce the oldest female call handler, Ms Woo, and explain her lived experience in detail and show how she got humiliated by colleagues and the actions she took to protect herself. Ms Woo was in her late-50s and had worked in several call centres for nine years. She was born as the youngest daughter of a wealthy family of six siblings and graduated from a famous university in Korea. However, she had attempted suicide at the age of 35 when her parents passed away and her brothers and sisters’ property disputes got worse. Now she lived in a small flat alone and worked at a call centre for a living.

On 11<sup>th</sup> April in 2015, when I first met her near her flat, she abruptly played a song from her smartphone and gave me the earphone. She explained she liked to listen to the song on her daily commute. Her choice of music surprised me a little. It was a heavy rock song; the sound was very intense, the voice coarse and deep. The title was ‘CHAOS’ sung by Chi-Hwan Ahn, a well-known (politically) progressive folk singer in Korea. The lyrics of the song very profoundly reflected the title of the song.<sup>61</sup> After the meeting with her, I searched for the lyrics, reading them carefully: “managing their faces,” “thick masks,” “who is crazy” and “rotten apple.” Then I got to understand more why she chose it as her song for commuting since she said that while listening to this song she repeatedly practised her usual comment, “Hello! I am a call handler, Ms Woo,” then would change her personality into another one, specifically wearing the call handler’s mask. However, to my surprise, the mask was not for the customers, which was usually the subject when

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<sup>61</sup> The whole lyric of the song, “CHAOS” is as follows; “Crushed, collapsed, broken and destroyed / Hunted, cornered, and rolled over from place to place / When there are no places to stay, cry for help / No one answer / Nobody put everything into the fight / Pretend not to know, and pretend to know everything / Tapping on a calculator, *managing their faces* / Only *thick masks* are there ~ / But the world works well evasively / Nobody even bats an eyelid when beating my head against a wall / *Who is crazy*, me or you or them / What a crazy World! / One *rotten apple* spoiling the barrel, the enemy lives inside me / Look straight, Listen carefully, All of those are the reality / Who is crazy, me or you or them / What a crazy world!” (emphasis added, translated from Korean lyric by the researcher)

discussing ‘emotional labour.’ Rather she enjoyed the communication with customers and felt it worthwhile. The reason behind listening to the music and wearing the mask was she was preparing to encounter her colleagues in the centre.

Ms Woo worked in Y call centre for two years. Previously she had worked in X call centre for six years. Her colleagues in X call centre had often insulted and bullied her.

“I quit the X call centre because of the continuous bullying. For example, once when having lunch with a familiar group of colleagues, I was biting a long chilli pepper. Then one looked at me and laughingly said, “Hey, sister! Do you also eat a chilli?” while performing some sexual gesture with her tongue. I was so upset, but just tried to be patient. Also, I dislike fried chicken, which they all loved. This resulted in them, scolding and teasing me about my taste difference. They wanted me to join their group and eat fried chicken. They pushed me to hang out with them, but I didn’t because it’s not my cup of tea. That’s the reason they continued to bully me. I did respect their personalities but they didn’t respect mine. I hated this, then I gradually packed my stuff to prepare for my leaving. In fact, I loved working in X call centre. I loved talking with the customers, advising and assisting them. But I quit it because of bullying and ‘*kkirikkiri*’(clique) culture.”

(Ms Woo, call handler, 11/04/15)

Hence, when she got into Y call centre, she made an effort to wear a mask of ‘naiveness’ (*ttilppang*) to appear as a naïve and foolish character. Even if it was needed, she shed false tears in front of the manager to ask a favour while swearing at her in her mind. Her routine life in Y centre was full of the same contents with the song CHAOS. It seemed to me that she sang the song through her whole body desperately.

Ms Woo worked with female colleagues, who were around 15 to 30 years younger than her. However, being older did not protect her from the bullying. She commented on the ‘*kkirikkiri*’ culture. It consisted of a small group of four or five people ‘flocking’ together (i.e. a clique). Ms

Woo said this culture of a ‘clique’ was established in the centre because the company made the workers compete with each other. The centre selected a ‘the top call handler of the month’ each month (Figure 6.10) and Ms Woo almost always won (Figure 6.11). However, her success finally made her a target for her colleagues’ jealousy, hence the bullying from these small groups commenced.

Every morning, the call handlers gave bread, cookies, coffee and fruits to the managers in exchange for getting better customers’ data, which was useful for getting promoted to a higher grade and make more money, a maximum of fifteen thousand won (=about £86) a month. Meanwhile, the manager utilised the carrot and stick approach in their strategy of getting the workers to compete against one another. The manager intentionally gave better customer data (‘carrot’) to the well-experienced and top-ranked call handler, such as Ms Woo, and encouraged them to make as many successful contracts as possible. These call handlers, including Ms Woo, were ‘racehorses.’ The manager scolded other workers about why they could not follow the ‘racehorses.’ Since Ms Woo was often selected as a racehorse, step by step she became the target of bullying by other colleagues.

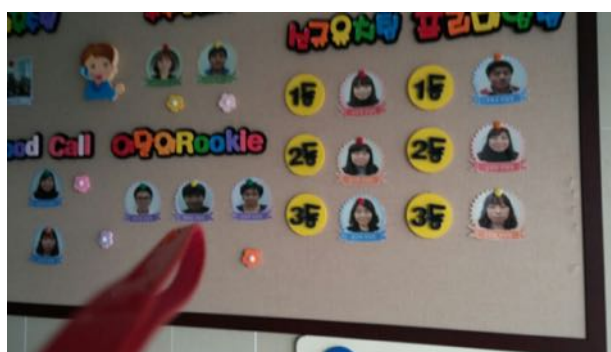


Figure 6.10 The exhibitions of the best callers of the month and best rookies (taken by Ms Woo)



Figure 6.11 The monitor image of the month’s best call handler. Ms Woo’s picture is displayed on the first place (leftmost in the photo) (taken by Ms Woo)

Whenever I met Ms Woo, she often took a break to enable her to have a cigarette. She had been a heavy smoker since she was 25. Before transferring to the current call centre, she used to smoke during work hours. But, after working in Y call centre, she had completely hidden her smoking habit from everyone because she did not want to provide her colleagues with ammunition to bully her. Thus, if she happened to smoke during her lunch time, she sprayed perfume on her clothes so as to hide the smoking smell, to avoid any possible gossiping and victimisation. Ms Woo hid the fact that she was a smoker during the entire two years she worked in Y call centre. However, while the amount of her daytime smoking decreased, this produced an adverse effect on her anxiety and stress levels, which resulted in the dosage and frequency of her medication being increased (Figure 6.12).

Prescribed medication		Dose per once		
		1 회 투약량	1 일 투약횟수	총 투약일수
<b>Anti-anxiety drug</b>	자낙스정 0.25mg (내복)	0.5	2	7
<b>Muscle relaxant</b>	스락신정 25mg (내복)	1	2	7
<b>Painkiller</b>	멜락스캡슐 (내복)	1	2	7
<b>Gastritis drug</b>	하이메틴정 (내복)	2	2	7
<b>Cough drug</b>	코데논정 (내복)	1	3	3
<b>Gastritis drug2</b>	알마겔정 (내복)	1	3	3
<b>Antibiotics drug</b>	종근당세파클러캡슐 (내복)	1	3	3

Figure 6.12 The actual prescription sheet of Ms Woo's medication

“(Why do you spray perfume after smoking?) Well, it’s for making an image, a naïve and foolish image. I wanted my colleagues to think I was a non-smoker so they would not criticise me for smoking. I realise I was being a fake, but I lived a lie to protect myself. I didn’t want colleagues gossiping about my smoking habit, I didn’t want the management to consider me as one of them, as a misbehaving, thoughtless worker...I had seldom taken anti-anxiety drugs while working in the previous call centre. At that time, when I got upset, the manager encouraged me by saying, “Take a smoke break outside” and would sometimes buy me a drink. But after working here at Y

call centre, I regularly took the anti-anxiety drugs. When I worked in X call centre, I only took the anti-anxiety drug when I had insomnia and was suffering muscle pain. But, now after working in Y call centre, I can often feel my heart pounding. I can only attribute this to anxiety. In the morning, when I get up, I drink a glass of milk, smoke, take a nutritional supplement, then smoke again, brushing my teeth, and finally go out to work. While going to the centre, I listen to the song, 'CHAOS' by the time I arrive at work I have changed my personality. But if I still feel anxious, I take an anti-anxiety drug in the morning. In the evening, I always take it. At the moment, I am regularly taking the drug twice a day. In fact, I don't smoke to relieve my stress. I smoke just as a habit. If I have time, I smoke. Previously, I smoked one pack a day. Now I smoke a half pack a day. Actually, I prefer to have schedules in my life which I keep very strictly, my smoking is also scheduled. This involves smoking at home in the morning as soon as I wake up, and never smoking at work. I have been following this rule for the past two years. I believe this is evidence of me not being addicted to nicotine. I control myself within my tight daily schedule. Going to a sauna, exercising regularly. All of those are scheduled. It is my strategy to protect myself. But, on a Friday evening, I don't require the drug. Instead, I drink a large bottle of beer, around two litres, and smoke one full pack of cigarettes. This really seems to work in, relieving my stress. On Saturday, I go to the local clinic to get the prescription for my anti-anxiety drugs. It is a cycle which I am unable to break."

(Ms Woo, call handler, 11/04/15)

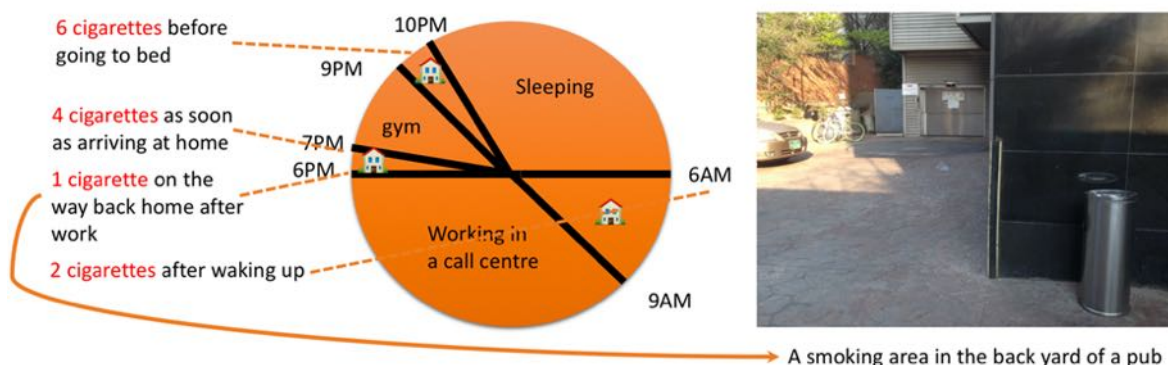


Figure 6.13 The picture of Ms Woo's hidden smoking area on the way home and her daily smoking schedule diagram

As Figure 6.12 shows, Ms Woo took anti-anxiety drugs twice a day while her smoking amount decreased by 50%, from one pack to half pack per day. The essential reason for the change of chemical types was her desire not to smoke in front of her colleagues as a top-ranked call handler and the bullying she experienced from other colleagues. She did not belong to any cliques and experienced bullying, disrespect and humiliation. The situation caused her to take an anti-anxiety drug regularly and smoked according to a timetable (Figure 6.13). Ms Woo strictly obeyed her rules every time and every day except for Friday evening, when she relieved her tension with drinking and chain smoking. Furthermore, she took a thick mask of naiveness, performing as a foolish old single woman and a non-smoker to protect herself from any possible gossip. She lived with this extreme tension. All of those rules including hiding the fact she smoked and taking drugs were part of her strategy to protect herself and her personality. For her, the personality was not given naturally but something she struggled to possess.

Ms Woo's daily life feels like an 'endless cycle of suffering,' like the other call handlers I described earlier. The difference is that she has created her own thorough timetable due to a number of damaging interpersonal relationships. The way she protects herself is to follow her own 'frame' every day. Building up a 'body scheme' that is familiar to that frame and following it without error is the only way for her to endure bullying and disgrace in the call centre. Ironically, as time passes, the more her body becomes refined by the cycle surrounding her, the harder it might be for her to escape it. It is only on Friday night that she can give herself a chance to perform improvisatory acting although the stage is her small flat and depends on alcohol and cigarettes. One Friday night, she sent me the message below. It said that Miss Lee in her early 30s, a manager of Y call centre, had been annoying her with carrots and whips, but had been fired because of personnel cuts. However, she said that she hated herself because she could not express the anger that she had felt to Miss Lee. All she did was drink and smoke alone at her flat on Friday night as usual.

“Hello, Mr Kim. Today I drank a lot of beer because I wanted to cry. But I couldn’t cry. I don’t know why. Miss Lee was fired today. I wanted to shout in front of her but I couldn’t. I even wanted to spray sulfuric acid on her face, but I couldn’t. I survived the company’s personnel cuts and Miss Lee was fired. Nevertheless, where can I get rewarded for my suffering, the past period of sorrow? I’m sorry I’m sorry.”

(Ms Woo, call handler, 19/06/15)

## 6.5. Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have presented the lived experience of female call handlers using the humiliation inherent in the action of having to put one’s hands up to go to the toilet as a central motif. I have shown how the female call handlers whom I met were being treated like ‘inexpensive disposable batteries’ or the human equivalent of battery hens whose body temperature was unwittingly controlled (cooled down) and visual range restricted to produce more profit for the company. Their sickness was often delegitimated in the call centre and many workers relied on chemical solutions to cope with the every day insults and struggles they experienced during work time and after work. These call handlers’ suppressed and passive attitudes were not only closely related to the unstable employment market, but also long-standing gender discrimination based on patriarchal Confucianism, reinforced by a remnant of the logic of national development – ‘factory work as my own work’ – from the 1970s and 80s. The result might be that some of them pressed the ‘mute’ button in their minds when facing the unreasonable requests of customers, managers and fellow workers.

Ms Woo’s message could be referred to as a symptom of a commercialised and modernised ‘*hwabyung*’ embodied in female call handlers that meant she could not express her anger or even cry, and relied on drinking. What is different from traditional ‘*hwabyung*’ is that the context of her symptom changed from home to workplace and she was paid for enduring her anger. However,

this is not just confined to her. As we have seen, female call handlers' bodies more often hurt than other general female workers.

In conclusion, the inescapable socioeconomic status of the call centre, even though being humiliated by the manager and customers, caused the call handlers to suffer from 'symptoms' as diverse as drinking, smoking, overweight, chronic headache, neck/shoulder/back pains, irregular menstruation, insomnia and depression. In the call centre, a worker's only claim to humanity lay in the number of calls he or she handled in a day ("*kolsuga ingyeogida*"). The worker who failed to make the goal, the target number of calls in a day, was a poor part of the whole machine. However, 'hands up' does not have to be a gesture of humiliation. In the next chapter, we shall explore the use of 'hands up' as a gesture of defiance.

## 7. 'Hands Up' in 'protest': establishing a labour union in a call centre

In this Chapter, I explore the use of 'hands up' as a gesture of protest in the context of the call centre industry. Particularly, I describe the development of the first call centre labour union in Korea. In section 7.1, I examine the rise of the call centre issues with increasing social interest in emotional labour in Korea before describing the background to the establishment of the first call centre labour union in section 7.2. I describe the difficulties of collective resistance in the unstable labour market in Korea and the personal profile of the first labour union leader. In section 7.3, I explain the progress of the establishment of ABC call centre labour union in detail, the personal struggles of its leader, Ms Jang, and its achievements. Finally, in section 7.4, I highlight the lived experience of three union executives, Ms Shin, Miss Joo and Mr Chang from the perspective of their embodied and emotional suffering.

### 7.1. Rise of the call centre and the issue of emotional labour

The title track of the Korean rapper Jerry.K's hip-hop album is about emotional labour and is called 'call centre' (Figure 1.3). The call centre has been one of the most frequently invoked workplaces concerning the issue of emotional labour in Korea. On 17<sup>th</sup> August 2012, a TV show (*suepeonji*) of KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) broadcasted one popular female singer (*Eunji Bak*)'s trial as a call handler.<sup>62</sup> The title of the show was "'Hwa (火)', the cause of Korean's representative disease, *hwabyung*." The programme showed how the customer burst into sudden anger (= *hwa*) and the celebrity put up with reactive anger while weeping quietly. This programme

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<sup>62</sup> It is retrieved 25 July 2016 from <http://www.kbs.co.kr/2tv/enter/sponge/view/pod/index.html>.

indirectly reveals how seriously the emotional labour issue is considered and that call centres are at the focus of the issue.

The development of the service industry and subsequent generalisation of the commercial philosophies of ‘the customer always comes first,’ concurrent with the ‘*gabjil*’ (being bossy) controversy in a Korean society based upon patriarchal Confucianism – all make call centres the focus of public debate. The issue is conceptualised through the notion of ‘emotional labour’ (*gamjeong nodong*), first introduced through printed media in Korea in 1996,<sup>63</sup> and in-depth discussion of emotional labour began in 2010<sup>64</sup> (Kim 2012). The recent images of female workers with respect to emotional labour, having a ‘sad look,’ through the public advertisement (Figure 7.1) and one documentary programme of the public broadcasting corporation (Figure 7.2) reveal how the call centre issue is being presented in Korean media. The statement on the public advertisement (Figure 7.1), produced by the Ministry of Employment and Labour, shows who is primarily suspected of hurting the call handlers; it says, “Seven million workers engaging in emotional labour, who have to smile although feeling sad, can become happy or sad by just one

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<sup>63</sup> The call centre industry has followed a similar time trajectory as the emotional labour discussion. From my interview with one of the main researchers in the Korea Labour and Society Institute, I was told that the call centre industry in Korea was introduced in ‘1997’, exactly when the South Korean economy was bailed out by the IMF through the Asian financial crisis. In 1997, as the IMF forced the Korean government to sell its public enterprises, the KT (Korea Telecommunication) Authority was promoted to be sold in the market. It meant that about 10,000 professional ‘114’ call counsellors in the KT Authority were at once exposed to the privatisation policy. After the privatisation of the KT Authority, many public institutions had outsourced the call services to the private call centres and many professional ‘114’ call counsellors got employed by the new private call centres, being established exponentially. The outsourcing of call centres became much more established since the leading conglomerates in Korea had followed the contemporary trend of the public institutions. For example, *Hyosung* ITX, one of the major call centre outsourcing companies in Korea, was established in May 1997 and flourished quickly and extended its business field including opening the branch called the Guro Contact Centre in Seoul Digital Industry Complex in 2007.

<sup>64</sup> The frequency of news articles about emotional labour amongst Korean newspapers is as follows: 1 (1996), 1 (1997), 0 (1998), 0 (1999), 1 (2000), 0 (2001), 0 (2002), 0 (2003), 0 (2004), 0 (2005), 7 (2006), 4 (2007), 5 (2008), 9 (2009), 25 (2010), 34 (2011). In particular, it was in 2010 when the relevant books like “Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feeling (*gamjeong nodong*)” (Hochschild 2003(1983)) and “Cold Intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism (*gamjeong jabanjuui*)” (Illouz 2007) were translated into Korean (Kim 2012).

word from you.” Thus, the suffering of female workers is mainly ascribed to customers, while the company’s responsibility disappears.



Figure 7.1 The public advertisement about workers in the field of emotional labour by the Ministry of Employment and Labour in 2015 (retrieved from <http://www.moel.go.kr>).



Figure 7.2 A self-painting of one call centre worker drawn during a group art therapy of the job-related stress. It is the captured image of the documentary programme entitled “Are you happy now as a worker?: The sick smile, emotional labour”, broadcasted on 21th May 2015 by KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) (retrieved from <http://www.kbs.co.kr>).

During fieldwork, I found the media often focused on how the call centre workers suffered from mental stress such as depression and suicidal thoughts, but it was very rare to attribute workers’ suffering to poor working conditions such as their short lunch times, no guaranteed break times and no right to hang up the call when being abused.<sup>65</sup> On 11th November 2014,

<sup>65</sup> A few major call centres develop strict protocols to protect call handlers from abusive customers. For example, the Samsung Credit Card Company ‘333 response manual’ was implemented in the company’s call centre from 2014. When the customer abuses the call handler, the worker gives them a warning - “this conversation is now being recorded and it will be stopped” - three times, and then hangs up the call if the customer does not stop the abuse. Subsequently, the customer is transferred to a call handler with over ten-year experience, and if the customer continues being abusive, the company sends the content proof of the official demand to stop irrational complaints to the customer. However, I was told by actual call handlers that although there is a protocol to hang up a call from an abusive customer, they often hesitate to hang up because of having a fear of the customer’s petition - called ‘minwon’ - to the company which must distress the call handler in charge in the end. Thus, the fact

however, a news report highlighted the plight of call centres in detail. It concerned a 30-year-old, male call centre worker's suicide on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2014. The report was mainly dealing with his last testament in depth (Figure 7.3). The worker described every unfair requirement of the company in his suicide note and wrote on the envelope, "Please report my last letter to the Ministry of Labour." In the letter, he depicted the company as a "giant trickster" (*geodaehan sagikkun*). In the end, due to the pressure and unjust treatment of the company, he made an irrevocable choice, suicide by burning charcoal in his enclosed car. On 14th March 2015, it was also reported that one female call handler attempted to commit suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills after having been abused by a customer and subsequently received unfair treatment by the company.<sup>66</sup> Although the National Human Rights Commission of Korea published the guidelines on the proper working environment regarding emotional labour in 2011, the call centres do not have legal responsibility to adhere to them.

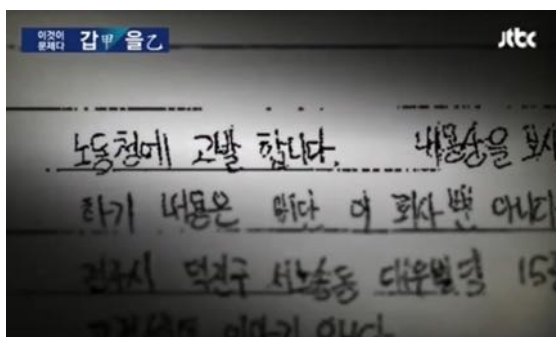


Figure 7.3 The image is a news scene broadcasted on 11th November 2014 by JTBC in Korea, reporting about the male call centre worker's suicide. It shows the suicide note; the first sentence means "I am accusing this call centre to the Ministry of Labour" (retrieved from <http://jtbc.joins.com>).

remains that call handlers have few strategies to protect themselves from abusive customers.

<sup>66</sup> The news was reported by the minor online newspaper, *OhmyNews*, being organised and managed by voluntary citizens. According to the news, after the event, she put the company in a trial to request for compensating her for psychological suffering. The court judged that the company does not have to take responsibility to pay indemnification for the female call handler's depression resulting in attempting to commit suicide. Although the court admitted that the company was responsible for protecting every worker from abusive customers but failed to give her proper protection, it stood by the company since it thought the company's unfair treatment for the call handler was not enough to cause her depression and subsequent suicide attempt (retrieved on 29 July 2016 from [http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002089000](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002089000)).

## 7.2. Background to the establishment of the first call centre labour union

### 7.2.1. Socioeconomic background: the difficulties of collective resistance in the unstable labour market in Korea

In March 2015, many NGOs and labour unions (24 in total) got together and made one representative association, 'Emotional Labour Network' (*gamjeongnodong neteuwokeu*). The organisation investigates actual working conditions relating to emotional labour, followed up by a public campaign and requests for better legislation. However, as it is just at the beginning stage, its capability and influence are limited. In February 2016, the Korean Financial Service Union (*jeonguk samugeumyungseobis eunodongjohap*) published the guidelines for an agreement plan with a company to secure call centre workers' rights. The union's guideline includes very detailed request lists, but the report also admitted the most essential issue still remains; to organise call handlers, in other words, to establish a labour union in the context of high rates of temporary employment and high worker turn-over. However well the guideline is prepared though, it is meaningless without the power of workers' unity.

"Labour union in a call centre? I think it is not easy to unite people because many of them are temporary workers, work for two years at the most, tied down by the two years' contract. So workers might easily become individualistic. In the first place, the contract is set like this, making it difficult for the union to gain a foothold. Anyway, workers are replaced in two years. Almost every call centre vacancy in the job seeking online sites are one-year contracts or two-year contracts. I think workers may not have company loyalty unless they continue to work in the call centre for over two years, and many of them just relieve their stress by drinking etc. and leave the centre once the contract comes to an end and then find another."

(Miss Bong, call handler, 03/03/15)

According to Miss Bong, it is difficult to unite the workers' power in the call centre.

Furthermore, as previously discussed in Chapter 6.1 (“Call centres, the last bastion in the era of unemployment”), in contrast to the female workers in their 20s who found it relatively easy to get employment in the call centre and then enjoy the freedom of the short-term contracts, female workers in their 30s and 40s perceived the call centre as a last bastion for employment and consequently became accustomed to enduring a poor working environment without complaining, while often continuing to work as an ‘unlimited period temporary worker’ (see Figure 5.15). Therefore, there seemed to be only two options for call handlers to choose – either to leave the centre and find employment in an alternative centre or just remain and endure the situation.

The reality of a Korean call centre gives rise to one question; Are these conditions in the call centre an exceptional case in Korea or is this prevalent in other Korean industries, with other workers living in similar conditions? Therefore, I examine the current socioeconomic background in Korea, particularly the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and its aftermath. First of all, the unemployment rate of young adults (aged 15 to 29) was 10.9% in April 2016, the highest since 2000 (Statistics Korea 2016). As a result, anxiety and fear of unemployment are now not only confined to call handlers. Jung (2009) insists that the anxiety/fear of unemployment in Korea originated from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis,<sup>67</sup> which triggered introduction of the

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<sup>67</sup> On 21st November 1997, the then Korean President Young-Sam Kim officially applied to the IMF (International Monetary Fund) for a bailout. The crisis began when the Hanbo Steel company went bankrupt due to an astronomical debt of 5700 billion KW from banks. The fundamental reasons for its bankruptcy were from the national economic policy centred excessive investment and subsequent collusive links between politicians and businesspeople; for example, the bad loan to the Hanbo Steel company was connected to Hyeon-Cheol Kim, the second son of the then President. Young-Sam Kim. After the Hanbo Steel company’s bankruptcy, many major corporations failed in succession. To make matters worse, the Asian Financial Crisis happened; the value of the Thai Baht plummeted on 2th July 1997, the value of the Indonesian Rupiah collapsed on 14th August, Taiwan faced a foreign-exchange crisis on 17th October, the stock markets in Hong Kong plunged on 23rd October, and subsequently Korean stock markets plummeted on 24th October. Then, disruptive capital withdrawal by foreign banks happened in Korea and finally, the Korean government ran out of foreign-exchange reserves and had no choice but to apply to the IMF for a bailout. The ‘IMF Crisis’ in Korea is fundamentally understood as the result of the abnormal state-led economic growth that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. Back then, the Korean economic miracle was built not only on employees’ hard work but also debt. Large corporations, called *chaebol*, had been borrowing a huge amount of money from

neoliberalism (*sinjayujuui*), 'flexible' labour market in Korea. In November 1997, the Korean government applied to the IMF for a bailout and the IMF demanded 'forceful structural reform': to request a fully flexible market; to convert a state-guided financial system to a globally open capital-market-based one; and to open fully all of Korea's markets to foreign corporates (IMF 1999; Crotty and Lee 2006:4-5). For the Korean government, in order to attract foreign investment and boost the economy, Korea's militant unions needed to be tamed. Therefore, in 1998, President Dae-Jung Kim organised the Tripartite Commission of labour, management and government (*nosajeong wiwonhoe*), which reached two major settlements: to legalise a massive layoff (*jeongni haegoje*) and to legalise temporary work agencies (*geulloja pagyeonje*). Both resulted in an increase in unemployment rates and extension of irregular jobs (Lee 2001; Do 2008).

As the graph in Figure 7.4 shows, after the 1997 crisis the rate of unemployment soared. The graph shows that the unemployment rate has stabilised since 2000 and seems to be very low, about 3 per cent. Many of the real unemployed are classified as inactive economic populations, however, and not included in the category of the unemployed. Therefore, there is a critical view that the actual unemployment rate should be estimated at about 10 per cent.<sup>68</sup> In the same vein, the Hyundai Economic Research Institute (2016) argues that the real youth unemployment rate (those aged 20 to 29) in 2016 was 34 per cent, higher than that (around 10 per cent) stated by the National Statistical Office. Furthermore, the proportion of non-regular workers among the hired workers was high (about 32.8 per cent) and was on an increasing trend (Statistics Korea 2016). The notable element is that the salary of irregular workers is small even if they do the same work as regular

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government-owned banks for many years. They expanded recklessly and were always able to borrow more although they were losing money. It was alleged that government officials often receive 'kickbacks' on every loan the corporations received (Gang 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Sang-Cho Kim, a professor in the Commerce and Trade Department at Hansung University, wrote the article "Secrets hidden in Korea's unemployment rate of 3.2% (in 2011)" 11 June 2017 from [http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/view/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0001592678](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/view/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0001592678).

employees.

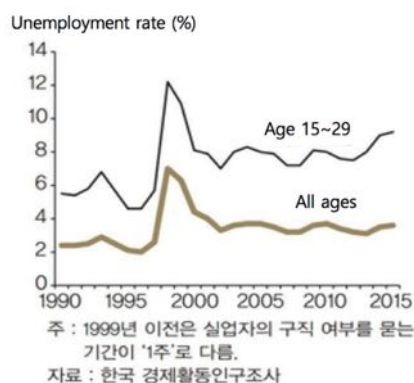


Figure 7.4 The Unemployment rate trends in Korea. The bold line is the general rate and the fine one is the young adult's rate. (retrieved 13 May 2016 from [http://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2016/03/15/2016031501375.html](http://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/03/15/2016031501375.html))

Most Koreans still refer to this crisis as the “IMF Crisis” and the letters, IMF, are often remembered with bitterness amongst Korean people. At the time, those three letters, IMF, were satirised as “I’M Fired.” On 23 August 2001, the Korean government officially bailed out of the management of IMF and the unemployment rate had decreased. However, the general tendency of the rate is steadily upwards. Right after the IMF Crisis, about 3300 corporations went into insolvency in one month, resulting in a huge number of workers losing their jobs without receiving their overdue wages. The crisis cast a dark shadow over Korea resulting in examples such as insecure employment, irregular employment, massive layoffs, youth unemployment, the polarisation of wealth, family dissolution, birth rate drop, and broken families (Jung 2009). All of those sufferings, unfortunately, resulted in a worst tragedy, a sudden increase in the suicide rate (Figure 7.5) (Chang et al. 2009; Kim et al. 2010). Since then, the dismal background emotion had been spreading, and the suicide rate became the highest in the world (28.9 per 100,000 people in 2012) after Guyana (44.2) in South America (WHO 2012).



Figure 7.5 The suicide rate of Korea. After 1997, the graph surged and followed the increasing trend (reference: OECD, retrieved on 13 May 2016 from <https://data.oecd.org/healthstat/suicide-rates.htm>).

The seemingly ‘shocking’ suicide news is often broadcast alongside the news of ‘massive layoffs,’ its actual relation academically confirmed (Chan et al. 2014). The typical example was the layoff of SsangYong Motor company in April 2009. The company planned to lay off 2646 workers, 37% of the total employees. The labour union went on strike from 22 May 2009 for 77 days. After the layoff and strike had hit Korean society, in addition to the deterioration of the general health conditions of the workforce which had been laid-off, 28 people associated with it died from suicide (Park and et al. 2016). As the number of suicides increased steadily, the whole society was overwhelmed by bitter grief. Many Koreans sympathised at the precarious reality of the lay-offs and the devastating effects on the families of those concerned. However, people might have realised the vulnerable labour market situation of Korea and what sufferings they would face when resisting the company’s order and governmental authority. The outcome was a ‘chilling effect’ on people’s desire to organise. Ms Shin in her mid-40s, a call handler with four-year experience and a union member of ABC call centre, gave a relevant testimony to those realities.

“To be honest, these days I have doubts about the union activity. When listening to the news, people got dismissed and committed suicide while participating in a labour union. As you know, amongst union members only a few of them engaged actively. Frankly speaking, I have worked as an executive of the union for one year and finished the term now, so I don’t want to devote myself to the union activity anymore.”

(Ms Shin, call handler, 07/07/15)

People’s fear of union activity in Korea has been sustained and reinforced by legitimate union repression, pro-business legislation, and negative stigmatisation policies mainly implemented by conservative parties and conservative media through the frame of ‘pro-North Korea left winger’ (*jongbukjwapa*). Firstly, in Korean society, union activities have often not been protected by law. For example, although the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (*jeonguk gyojigwon nodongjohap*) was formed in 1989, it was not legalised until 1999. Moreover, the National Civil Servant Trade Union (*jeonguk gongmuwon nojo*) was formed in 2002 but was not legalised until 2009. Master Yang, the third chairman of the Union, was dismissed due to his engagement in the ‘illegal’ union in 2005 (further details in Chapter 8). Furthermore, although the strike of a trade union is a legitimate activity in Korea, its street assemblies are often considered as illegal, and in severe cases, the union leader and executives are handled judicially and put in jail. The court often accepts the claims of the company, which insists that the strike of the union causes a financial loss for the company, and imposes a considerable penalty on labour union leaders and executives. Due to the unfairness of this judicial system, there is a fear of joining and actively participating in the union activity in Korean society.

Secondly, conservative parties and conservative media have been stigmatising labour union activists under the name of ‘pro-North Korea left winger’. The conservative regime is receiving full support from people in their 60s and 70s who experienced the Korean War. The regime attacks all progressive groups (including trade unions) that are against its political views through the logic of the Cold War system. In particular, based on the fact that South Korea is still confronted with North Korea, the conservative parties and the government manage to frame the leftist labour

movement as supporting the socialist state, North Korea, under the stigma of ‘pro-North Korea left winger’ (*jongbukjwapa*). This is still effective for conservative party supporters. The activities of trade unions often get tangled in these frames, making it difficult to gain public support. As a result, this serves as a factor that makes general workers reluctant to join trade unions.

## 7.2.2. Personal background: death after death

### 7.2.2.1. Cousin’s suicide

Given that to join a labour union and battle against a company in Korea is difficult and a cause of distress, it is not easy to understand why and how Ms Jang, a single mother of two daughters, established a labour union in a call centre for the first time. She told me later, “Only you and one executive of the union know why I decided to make a union in a call centre.” In my case, I had a chance to hear the decisive cause unexpectedly three months after I had initially met her. When I heard about the story, I understood why she was reluctant to tell it. It was about her closest female cousin’s suicide.

Ms Jang has only one sibling, a younger brother. She became much closer to other female relatives, particularly a cousin, Suki. Suki and Ms Jang knew each other very well from their childhood and supported one another for a long time. Suki got a job at a call centre that was the subcontractor of a famous major corporate in Korea. At that time, Ms Jang worked as a home-study teacher and was very busy due to the engagement of the National Home-Study Industry Labour Union (*jeonguk akseupji saneom nodongjohap*). One day Suki phoned Ms Jang and sought some advice on a problem. Suki had worked for one year and ten months at the call centre, but she often did not get paid for the extra work, and the most unfair thing she thought was that the major corporation decided to close the subcontract with the call centre. Suki looked forward to being a regular worker because she had worked as an irregular call handler for almost a year

and ten months and only two months were left before she would be entitled to become a regular worker<sup>69</sup>. However, due to the main contractor's abrupt decision, taking advantage of a weak point in the law, all of the irregular call handlers including Suki were about to lose their jobs.

Suki asked Ms Jang if there was anything she could do, especially regarding a labour union. Ms Jang recollected that she answered simply without much consideration, "The only solution is to establish a labour union." Before long, beyond Ms Jang's expectation, Suki began planning to establish a labour union along with two colleagues. Unfortunately, one of her colleagues reported the situation to a manager. As a result, Suki became an outcast in the call centre while the woman who betrayed her got an additional bonus. Suki became the target for bullying and was ostracised by her long-standing friends. The company went ahead with the layoffs. Suki suggested all her colleagues should meet up and have a final dinner together; however, they all refused Suki's invitation. It was not until a short while later that Suki discovered they actually did meet up for dinner, without informing her. This left Suki devastated, and was a major factor in her taking her own life.

"It was a big shock to me. I blamed myself for putting the idea into her head. She was such an obedient girl. How could I advise her to build a labour union without giving any consideration to the consequences? Even after giving her the advice, I did not help her at all. It was heartbreaking. I left Korea and stayed in Canada with my daughter for five months. One of my old friends in Canada heard of my situation and invited us to her house. I spent every moment with my daughter, I couldn't bear being alone with my thoughts. I held a deep-rooted grudge over what happened to Suki. I wanted to extract some sort of revenge, so I decided to establish a call centre union in her memory at any cost; this became a crusade. Eventually, I succeeded in establishing a union."

(Ms Jang, call handler, 25/03/15)

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<sup>69</sup> The relevant law was "Irregular Employee Protection Law" (*bijeonggyujik bohobeop*). It was enacted in November 2006 and the main subject was that if the irregular employees work for two years, the company should change the temporary position to a permanent position. However, when it was enacted, there were voices of dissent and concerns about it, because the law could actually protect the employer, who would lay off temporary employees prior to their two-year qualifying period.

When I heard Suki's story for the first time, I was also shocked. To build a labour union and join the union was the employee's right guaranteed by the Labour Law. Suki had suffered humiliation and bullying by the company and even her colleagues for attempting to do this. The betrayal and ostracism by her colleagues, I think, must have been the most devastating thing for her. I had the opportunity to talk about this story with one key informant, Miss Hyun, while keeping strict confidentiality and anonymity. We talked about call centre bullying and when listening to her experience, I introduced Suki's story briefly and listened to her thoughts.

“Initially she probably had pride and loyalty to the company. But, her pride must have been hurt. The sense of betrayal must have been devastating for her to take her own life. In fact, she took the lead in the battle against the company because she loved her colleagues and the company. So the reaction of her colleagues must have been so hard to accept. However, if this directive came from the manager of the call centre, it would have been seen as law. Her colleagues backed away (“*momeul sarida*”), this would have caused her great hurt, specifically as she must have felt they did not really understand the sincerity of her actions. If she did not love her colleagues, she would not have attempted to establish a union.”

(Miss Hyun, call handler, 28/03/15)

From the conversation with Miss Hyun, I could understand a little of the ostracism of Suki by her colleagues. In the call centre, the manager's word was 'law.' It represented how precarious employment was in Korea. Therefore, many of the workers were scared of any repercussions when disobeying the manager's orders, therefore they would just keep their heads down and attempt to remain in the background. Miss Hyun expressed that behaviour as “*momeul sarida*” in Korean, which etymologically portrayed a specific body posture; shrinking of a body with fear like a snake coils itself or a dog hides its tail between its legs. In other words, the employees shrank not only their bodies but also their will to protest in order not to be identified by the manager as a trouble maker. This underlying background emotion resulted in a horrendous death, which subsequently caused the establishment of the first call centre union in Korea.

#### 7.2.2.2. Parents' sudden death

Suki's suicide was the crucial reason for Ms Jang deciding to establish a union in a call centre. However, Suki's suicide was not the only sudden death of a precious person in Ms Jang's life. Both her parents also passed away unexpectedly. Even though her parents' death was not directly influential on her interest in labour union activities, it is noteworthy because the major socioeconomic events of Korea during the 1990s (particularly, the IMF Crisis) connected to her parents' death, which permeated into Ms Jang's lived experience. She said, "All those who were precious to me died early."

Ms Jang was born in 1973. She was the first child in her close and extended family which made her very popular. She recollected that she was a very curious child and always asked questions of everyone she met. She remembered the occasion her father bought a set of cartoon books about Korean history, which she loved to read over and over. Consequently, she became interested in history and began to question what she actually witnessed on the street, especially, adults' demonstration and assembly. During her childhood, she lived near Yeondeungpo in Seoul, a residential area, located between Guro Industrial Complex and the National Assembly building. Thus, she observed a lot of street protests and grew accustomed to the acrid smell of tear gas, particularly during the pro-democracy movement in June 1987, named "the June Democracy Movement" (*yugwol hangjaeng*).<sup>70</sup>

Although her father only studied in an elementary school, he was a proficient welding

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<sup>70</sup> The fundamental aim of the June 1987 Democracy Movement in Korea was to facilitate a change to the method in which the president was elected. The incumbent president Doo-Hwan Jeon had seized power during a military coup on 12 December 1979, this occurred soon after the previous president Jung-Hee Park's assassination in the October of that year. In 1987, having been in power for ten years, Jeon attempted to enforce an indirect presidential election system, which would have seen him passing the presidency to a former military commander and associate. The June 1987 Democracy Movement mobilised the citizens to take to the streets protesting against this concept, resulting in constitutional reform to allow direct presidential elections becoming enshrined in law on 29 June 1987.

technician and worked very hard, which enabled him to make a good living for his family. He was a kind and generous father, always finding time to give love and attention to his children. It was while Ms Jang was attending her first year of high school that her father had a fatal industrial accident. He died from being hit on the head by a steel plate whilst at work. It was such a terrible shock to the family, and she recollected that the injuries were so horrific she and her younger brother were not allowed to see their father's body during the funeral. Suddenly, overnight her mother had to become the family breadwinner. She opened a restaurant, working very hard to support the family, providing the funds to cover her daughter and son's college tuition fees. In 1997, however, the restaurant suffered due to the IMF Crisis, she attempted to keep going, but finally accepted bankruptcy. Ms Jang's mother bore a load of debt and became a credit defaulter. Thus, she wandered the country in an effort to earn money while attempting to escape her creditors. Then one day, in 2002, she got food poisoning after eating some seafood but did not seek medical assistance since her medical insurance certificate had been cancelled due to defaulting on her health insurance premium. Accordingly, two days after the symptoms occurred, her condition abruptly deteriorated and she was rushed to the emergency room. The delay in seeking treatment attributed to her untimely death, the cause of which was sepsis of *Vibrio vulnificus* bacteria.<sup>71</sup> Ms Jang felt devastated by her mother's sudden death which could have been prevented if she had gone to the hospital earlier.

She had never expected that she would lose both her parents in such tragic circumstances and never dreamed of the circumstances of her closest cousin's sudden death. The deaths of three family members might be regarded as separate events, but they had lived during the period of the state-centred rapid economic development, the IMF Crisis and its aftermath (Figure 7.6).

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<sup>71</sup> Infection with a bacterium, *Vibrio vulnificus* leads to rapidly expanding cellulitis or septicemia. Invasive septicemia often occurs after eating raw shellfish, particularly oysters. If it happens, severe symptoms and septic shock can lead to death (retrieved on 8th December 2016 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibrio\\_vulnificus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibrio_vulnificus)).

Insufficient or nonexistent occupational safety under the nation-building hegemony of rapid economic development in the 1980s, national financial crisis and the weak social safety net for the vulnerable in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the subsequent insecure labour market alongside high suicide rates in the 2010s; all those socioeconomic situations were the reality that Ms Jang had to experience, particularly through the death of precious persons.

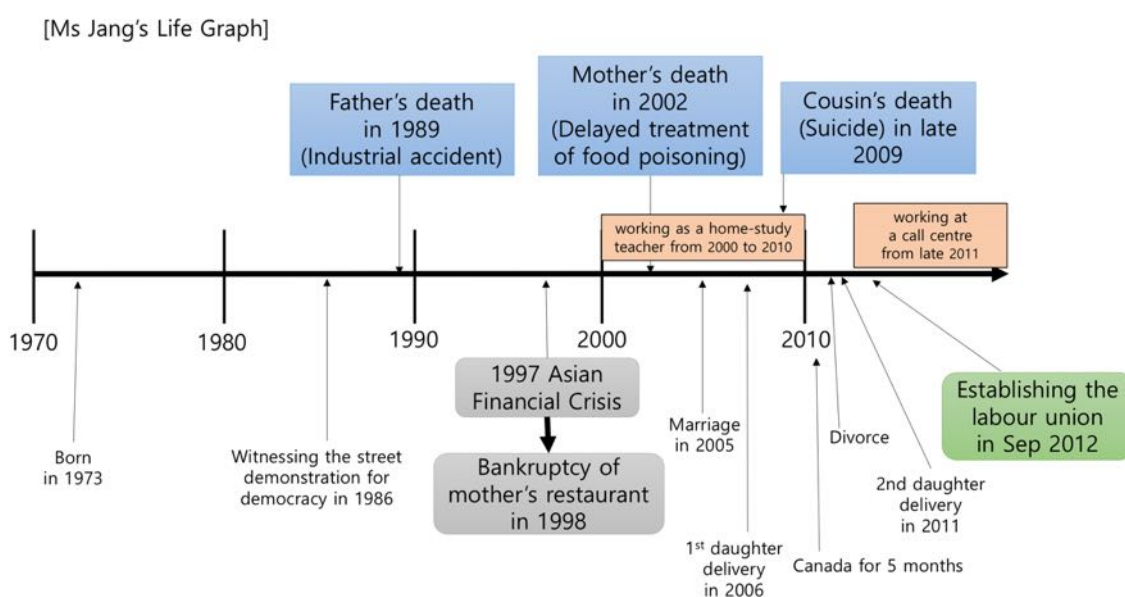


Figure 7.6 Ms Jang's life graph. Three deaths and relevant socioeconomic background

Considering her tragic family history and underlying socioeconomic background, her active engagement in a labour union seemed not to be a typical one but rather the opposite of a traditional gender role. All those tragic life experiences did not make her desperate and intimidated. From her childhood, her parents brought her up to have strong confidence. Her mother provided boundless support. When Ms Jang had to choose the type of high school between vocational and academic, her mother resisted the then trend to send 'non-exceptional' daughters to a vocational high school, instead advising her daughter to enter the academic high school and supplement this by enrolling to study in the Sociology department at a local college. During her college days, she

learned Marxism and became involved in the student union's social movement. Furthermore, after graduation, when her mother was struggling as a credit defaulter, she worked as a home-study teacher and engaged in the National Home-Study Industry Labour Union from late 2000.

### 7.3. Progress of the labour union and its effects

#### 7.3.1. First step for the union and subsequent struggles

After Suki's death, Ms Jang left Seoul to stay in Canada with her oldest daughter. At that moment, she was three months pregnant with her second daughter. During her stay in Canada, she discovered her husband was cheating on her in Korea. Immediately after she returned to Korea, she filed for divorce. This, of course, left her furious and desperate, however even as a single mother of two daughters, she did not abandon her pledge to build a call centre union. She looked for a reputable centre to work and finally got a job in the ABC call centre in late 2011. She remained anonymous in the background, keeping her plan secret for over a year. During this time she just collected evidence of unfair events (e.g. no overtime pay and training outside of regular office hours), which was later used to demand overdue overtime pay successfully. From May 2012, she secretly recruited leading members from each of three subcontractor companies (M, H and K).<sup>72</sup>

On 12 September 2012, Ms Jang finally established the ABC call centre labour union. Since she had intentionally kept her existence relatively unknown to prevent possible hijacking of her plans, many workers asked "Who on earth is Ms Jang?" Even the manager of her team asked her "Ms Jang! Is the name of the labour union leader on the signpost really yours?" In fact, Ms Jang was referred to by the slang expression, "*dued-bo-job*" which meant 'an awful person who has

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<sup>72</sup> The ABC call centre was composed of three subcontractor companies that were located on separate floors (1<sup>st</sup> floor was M, 2<sup>nd</sup> was H and 3<sup>rd</sup> was K). Ms Jang was employed by M company. She looked for someone who would be the union executive to represent each company.

never been heard of nor seen before.’ It was a sarcastic remark about Ms Jang and the labour union. Ironically, the number of call handlers who joined the union in M company where Ms Jang worked was much lower than the numbers joining from H and K companies. In H and K companies, the union executives had worked for a long time in the ABC call centre, and had played a pivotal role in gathering union members. However, the management of M company initiated a rumour that a newcomer or “*dued-bo-job*” was attempting to establish a labour union and was also an indolent grumbler. This rumour hampered Ms Jang’s attempts to galvanise the workers into wanting to join the union.

Furthermore, the management of M company made use of the rumour about Ms Jang and even built a story about Ms Jang’s character. Ms Jang showed me one document (Figure 7.7) which contained her colleagues’ testimonies to her misbehaviours in the centre. One day the manager called her to come to a seminar room. On her arrival five other colleagues were present as witnesses to a document. Based on the testimonies within the document, the company intended to expel her from the centre and to ultimately break the labour union. The document included claims such as;

“Ms Jang spent too much time using her smartphone while at work; the team leader had to constantly request her “to concentrate on call handling.” On one occasion, Ms Jang irritably answered, “your frequent interventions interrupt my concentration on the work!” There was always a tension in the air when Ms Jang was at work. Her behaviour has not improved and she still uses her smartphone frequently during office hours.

Ms Jang sometimes hurled her belongings abruptly or got upset simply because the headset cables became entangled. I actually wanted to request her to show some self-restraint, however I did not because I knew of her position within the union, and was afraid I would be singled out as a target for recrimination.

One day, the team leader relocated Ms Jang so she was sitting adjacent to her. Ms Jang protested profoundly, saying “Who on earth has the authority to decide the positioning? Is it you?” She continued to complain, interrupt and harass the team leader. Eventually

Ms Jang was allowed to return to her usual work seat.”

Throughout the document, Ms Jang was depicted as an uncontrolled, selfish and stubborn person and had become a union leader to abuse her power. Every expression and words chosen to describe her were negative, these included “in a rough voice,” “lost her temper,” “hurled the headset,” “stormed out of her seat,” “neglected,” “unilaterally,” “irritably.” When Ms Jang showed the document to me, she sighed deeply and said “it described me as a crazy idiot.” Her colleagues provided unfavourable testimonies. The positioning of Ms Jang’s seat was one of the first instances of bullying by the company carried out soon after the establishment of the union. One week after the declaration of the foundation of the union, the team leader moved Ms Jang’s seat to be next to hers. Originally, this seat was for newcomers to enable the leader to provide them support if required. As soon as Ms Jang sat there, one newcomer who previously worked there was relocated to another place. Furthermore, the three seats adjacent to Ms Jang’s new seat remained empty for five months, ensuring she worked alone and had minimal contact with colleagues. Often Ms Jang was unable to say a word to other colleagues all day long, but the team leader frequently interrupted her and sent many trifling messages to annoy her. However, it turned out that the company had actually fabricated the document, three of the five witnesses eventually joined the labour union, later confessing the truth. The remaining two workers left the centre once this became known.

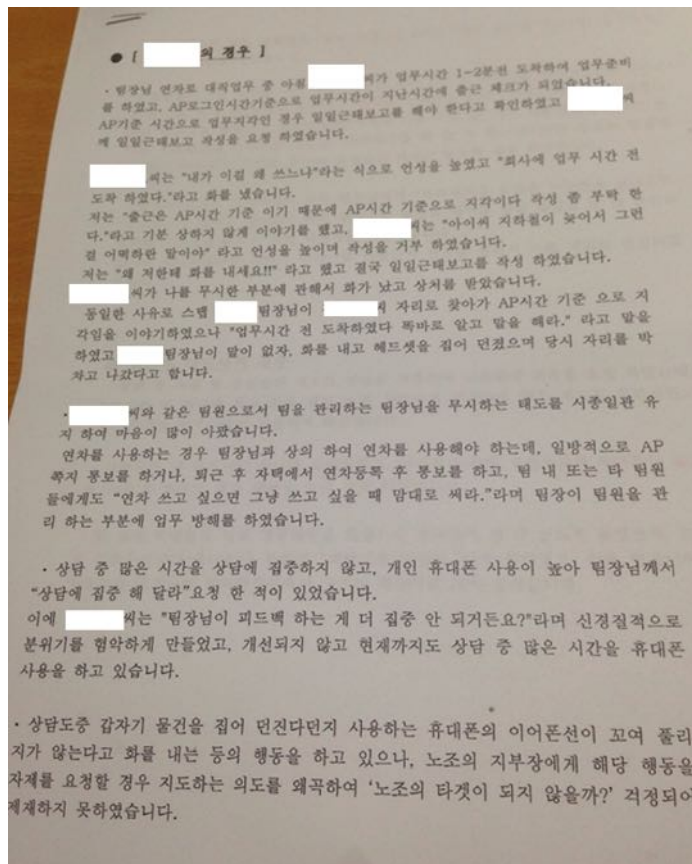


Figure 7.7 The document containing the testimonies of Ms Jang's 'alleged' misbehaviours in the call centre.

In addition to the fabricated document, the company utilised various tactics to expel Ms Jang. Firstly, the managers did not give her the time of day and often taunted her about the union's activities. Secondly, the company continued to isolate and separate Ms Jang and the other executives of the union from their colleagues. For example, the manager blocked call handlers from helping Ms Jang in any way whatsoever about working, scheduled the union members' lunch time so they had no contact with Ms Jang, and directed the team leader to constantly harass Ms Jang. Nevertheless, Ms Jang was able to endure all of those blatant attempts due to the support she received from other union members. Her statement below provides proof of this.

“After the foundation of the labour union, I experienced severe bullying from my colleagues and managers. This was directly due to the company’s repression. Although I expected this situation to occur, I found it difficult to endure. However, I took a firm stand against it. My cousin, Suki had endured the repression and bullying alone without any supporting colleagues while attempting to establish a union. In contrast, I had the support from other leading union members around me. Due to this situation, I was in a better environment, which helped me ‘see it through.’ I tolerated the bullying, which eventually resulted in the foundation of the union.”

(Ms Jang, union leader, 19/05/15)

### 7.3.2. Living as the union leader, a single mother and a woman

Ms Jang could not complain about her situation. However difficult it was, she considered, it must have been easier than the situation Suki found herself in. As a single mother of two children, though, she was actually having a hard time. She had committed herself to the union activity, even though there was nobody to help her nurture her children and assist with the housework; she had lost her parents and had divorced her husband. She left her feeling sorry for herself, on 26<sup>th</sup> December 2013 she took to her Social Network account and left the following message.

“I travelled to work by using an extremely crowded subway after sending my two daughters to school. My three-year-old daughter with a cast on her leg due to having a broken ankle to the nursery. My first grader daughter to the elementary school during the winter vacation. The older daughter cried after realising that she was going to school even though it was a vacation. The younger one cried not wanting to go to the nursery with her painful ankle. They are the apple of my eye, but I neglected them while I fought to establish the labour union. Ahh, the pay settlement for 2014 and the negotiation for direct employment will not be easy. I am worrying too much about that (sigh).”

(Ms Jang, union leader, 26/12/13)

Ms Jang thus had to sacrifice not only herself but also her children’s precious time with her. Since there was nobody to help her single mother’s life, the burden she bore in and out of home

was heavy enough to make her depressed. In fact, she made a confession that at that period she had no confidence to achieve something and felt desperation, particularly when the final negotiations with the company failed in August 2013. The labour union activity often necessitated her returning home late; she noticed a big increase in her smoking and drinking, putting this down to her stressful and strenuous routine. Her priority was unavoidably not her children but the union: to sustain the union and show leadership to achieve their aims.

On 26th August 2013, about one year after its establishment, the ABC labour union carried out the ‘warning’ strike for the first time. This involved withdrawing their labour for one hour in the morning directly after the breakdown of negotiations with the contractor company.<sup>73</sup> It was only a one-hour warning strike: not enough to strike an ‘actual blow’ to the call centre. Ms Jang considered this first strike very important at that point, though. Therefore, she decided to ‘shave her head’ in front of the union members during the strike to encourage them to unite together and to ignite herself as a ‘militant’ leader (Figure 7.8).



Figure 7.8 The scene of Ms Jang’s shaving her head during the first union strike on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2013 (taken by ABC call centre union, gradation effect added)

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<sup>73</sup> At that period, the labour union and company failed to resolve their differences. Therefore, subsequently the Seoul Local Labour Relations Commission (*seoul jibang nodongwiwonhoe*) took on the issue but it also failed to help both sides negotiate a settlement. In this case, the labour union was able to go on strike legally.

“I hoped to show my firm resolution with the declaration of the first strike to the union members, the subcontractor and contractor companies. I also wanted to motivate myself because at that time I was losing my confidence to lead the union members to the final goal and I was not quite sure of the benefit of this strike. I needed a ritual or event to ignite myself. So I shaved my head to give the members a shock to enable them to consider this strike was not just performative but serious. The general secretary of the union shaved my head as soon as the members got together at the lobby of the call centre. He cried while his hands trembled. The union members might have watched the shaving scene on TV and thought it was not their business. But I wanted to make them feel it was their business. They might have been puzzled, but I wanted them to realise we are all together in this.”

(Ms Jang, union leader, 11/06/15)

Ms Jang remembered that there were some people crying while her head was being shaved. In fact, during the shaving, she also kept saying to herself, “Don’t cry!” since she thought that she would empathise with them and cry when she was looking at the union members’ crying. Therefore, she closed her eyes with great determination during the shaving. She noted that she had no difficulty or hesitation to decide to shave since she had been thinking she had to sacrifice herself to a certain degree so as to beat the company. Nevertheless, she could not be free from internal conflict amongst her diverse identities: as a labour union leader of the first call centre union in Korea, a single mother with two young daughters and a middle-aged divorced woman with no parents.

“In fact, a myriad of thoughts were going through my mind. First of all, “Ah, do I really have to do this kind of performance? In the end, things came to this stage, a thorny path of life.” I talked to myself like this and was overcome with emotion, I almost cried. I was worried about my daughters who would be shocked at their mother’s appearance. Thus, one week before the strike, I told my eight-year-old daughter that one day your mother would come back home with a shaved head. I said, “I am working in a company, and the boss did bad things to me and the other workers. Now we are fighting with the company and your mum is the leader of them. So I might shave my head someday. You are an older sister, right? You should tell this to your young sister and take care of her.””

(Ms Jang, union leader, 11/06/15)

The most essential internal conflict inside Ms Jang was related to upbringing. Even though she did not hesitate to sacrifice herself, she felt distressed since her devotion to the union inevitably required her daughters' sacrifice too. Meanwhile, Ms Jang said that the decision to shave her head might have been more difficult if her parents were still alive, a husband, and parents-in-law who were very patriarchal in the social life of a daughter (-in-law) and wife, not to mention the union activity, especially shaving her head. Those situations might look good on the spur of the moment, but in other words, it revealed that Ms Jang had nobody to advise and support her for better or worse and no one she could rely on.

Furthermore, another internal conflict was living as a woman with a shaved head. She liked long hair and preferred a feminine style, never having had short hair before. Immediately after having shaved her head, she did not feel any discomfort and awkwardness. However, after one week when the union finally began negotiating with the company, the feeling changed. While every union member returned to their stable routine lives, Ms Jang, in contrast, went through "the most difficult period" due to her shaved head. After resolving the sharpening conflict with the company, she wanted to relieve her stress like the other workers, but found it difficult; her shaved head, very unusual and awkward (or even abhorrent to some) for a middle-aged woman, did not allow her to go back to the life before the strike. She became a different person due to the complete change of her appearance. She remembered that the post-strike period was harder to endure than the strike period itself. She felt, "I alone was left in the past and still living in the strike mode."

It took about three years for her hair to fully grow and for Ms Jang to recover her appearance. Now Ms Jang said that she would never contemplate shaving her head again, she would rather choose to go on a hunger strike, if the need arose. She had not considered 'cutting hair' as serious before the strike. However, she realised that she had to renounce her femininity for about half a year until her hair grew enough to cover her scalp; she was not able to wear beautiful clothes and skirts.

In fact, it actually made her 'depressed.' The problem was the reality as a union leader in which she was expected neither to reveal her internal conflict, nor mention her appearance.

### 7.3.3. Achievements of the labour union: "We feel reassured!"

After the labour union's establishment, there were obvious achievements which were practically beneficial to all of the workers. Firstly, the monthly test, an enormous burden to call handlers, changed into a quarterly test which was written within a limited range that were easy to study. There was a wage increase (5.6%), an increase in the bonus payment for the traditional Korean holidays (e.g. *seollal* (= Lunar New Year's Day), *chuseok* (= Korean Thanksgiving Day)), and securing official time for educating labour union members. Furthermore, the union succeeded in getting the company to pay the workers' 'back money' for their previous overtime work. This 'back money' payment was about twice as much as their usual monthly salary, therefore it contributed much to persuade non-union members why the union was a 'force for good,' and helped to increase the union membership rate. The payment of the 'back money' was wholly due to the evidence Ms Jang collected to prove irrefutably the case against the company, this included obtaining the managers' messages ordering overtime working. If there had been no definite evidence of the organisational power, the campaign for the payment of 'back pay' would have suffered the same fate as the failed case of NET call centre in the SDIC (described in 5.2.3). Another positive was that the general working conditions improved; for example, the call handlers were allowed to visit the toilet without any supervision. Until then, these fundamental needs had been under strict surveillance by the managers and the monitoring system. The company also introduced air filtration systems and plants into the workplace so as to reduce the high level of CO<sub>2</sub> (see Chapter 6.2.1) (Figure 7.9).



Figure 7.9 The inside of ABC call centre after the establishment of the labour union. There were many plants as well as air filtration systems (right of the left picture). Besides, many red jackets which represented the labour union can be seen hanging on the chairs so as to show their support for the union. The right picture is the seat of Ms Jang. She showed me these pictures and recollected that the scene where the red jacket which promoted and supported the union was “unimaginable when she first joined ABC call centre.” (taken by Ms Jang)

Moreover, there was another big change due to the existence of the labour union. It was not measurable but a very essential emotional aspect. Ms Jang explained it by referring to a union member’s comment, “We feel reassured knowing that there is someone we can rely on.” After becoming the leader of ABC call centre, Ms Jang had a new routine, this involved going round the 1<sup>st</sup> floor to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the centre to check whether there were any problems. During these rounds, she exchanged warm greetings with call handlers. The workers appreciated this seemingly minor activity very much because her existence itself helped them feel ‘reassured.’ It was the same for Ms Jang. She also felt the support she received from the members with their greetings and their hospitality helped her to overcome her own internal conflicts.

In addition, Ms Jang noted that the most invaluable achievement was for the union members to share the experience of their unity. On 19<sup>th</sup> September 2014, the union went on a sudden strike, occupying the main lobby of the contractor company from 12 o’clock to 7pm. Ms Jang remembered that she felt an extreme shiver seeing the inspiring scene when she shouted to give the ‘call to arms’ at exactly noon, “ABC call centre members! Get together!” Before noon, the union members were hanging around the lobby and pretending to be usual visitors amongst the

public. When they heard Ms Jang's shout, they abruptly got together, dressing in their red union jackets. The sight of the members assembled together was very impressive and accordingly it became the shared memory of their unity and victory.<sup>74</sup> Moving together not for the employer but for their own rights was an exceptional experience for the call handlers since the everyday reality in the centre was far from unity and closer to separation, competition and individualism. As Figure 7.10 demonstrates, the members realised that it was much easier for them to put their hands up when getting 'together.'



Figure 7.10 The picture of 'hands up' in protest. The photo shows the sudden occupation of the company lobby by the ABC union members (taken by ABC call centre union).

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<sup>74</sup> Through this sudden strike to occupy the lobby of the company, the ABC call centre union were provided with the opportunity to meet the vice-president and negotiate to set the task force team to deal with 'direct employment' for employment security as soon as possible.

## 7.4. Testimonies from the union members' own bodies

Along with Ms Jang, several union executives contributed to the labour union activities of ABC call centre. Although the engagements were voluntary, they were struggling with internal conflicts. In this section, I describe three union executives' challenges via the testimonies of their own bodies.

### 7.4.1. "A grilled dry squid on the fire": a 40s-female union member's depression

Ms Shin, mid-40s and a call handler with four-year experience, had been an exemplary call handler with excellent monthly marks. She worked hard in the centre because she had to make a living. She was married, however her husband found it difficult to hold down a job, and often remained home and drank. From her childhood, she was scared of her father. He was very tall, patriarchal, and often violent toward her mother because of frequent heavy drinking. She lived in fear of her father, as a result, she became very introverted and passive. Ms Shin looked back on her youth as very dark and frightening. She seriously considered becoming a nun, and at one time thought of committing suicide. Her father had been a successful businessman, however the business collapsed during Ms Shin's elementary school time and she was unable to study further after graduating from high school due to lack of money. Ms Shin hated her husband's incompetence and laziness as well as his heavy drinking mainly because his behaviour reminded her of her father. Her father made it impossible for her to study further to get a higher job-qualification and her husband drove her to work hard to make a living. In the end, as a woman in her mid-40s, she had to try her best to survive at the call centre, her 'last bastion.'

When the union was established, she felt excited and was interested in joining. However, for around three months she worried every night about whether she should join the union or not. She

was concerned about the company's reaction if she joined. It seemed that the company kept watching the people who were involved in the union. One day, the union members distributed leaflets in the lobby when workers were leaving the office for home. At that moment, Ms Shin looked up to the first floor to check if the manager was watching her. She recollected that she felt completely daunted. Meanwhile, her colleagues accused Ms Jang of being a newcomer, saying she didn't work well. She hated those kinds of accusations, unilaterally blaming the union without any consideration. Thus, she wanted to join to show her support for Ms Jang and swell the numbers of the union participants. Finally, Ms Shin joined the union but did not engage actively at first. Later, she was elected as the leader of M subcontractor company, one of the three companies of ABC call centre for one year (January 2014~February 2015). However, she always suffered from her own internal conflicts, particularly, her submissive demeanour and lack of self-esteem, which formed throughout her childhood. Ms Shin often described herself as a "grilled dry squid on the fire." The physical character of 'dry squid', a very famous and cheap side dish usually eaten with drinks in Korea, abruptly 'shrinks' on the fire (Figure 7.11). Ms Shin tried to describe her daunted, shrunken mind. She felt herself shameful because she was in her 40s, without any high educational qualification, she did not save money at all, did not have her own house, and her husband was unemployed. Furthermore, she had experienced the 'dry squid'-like demeanour during the first 'warning' strike and it was a traumatic experience.

"Initially, when the union called a strike, a female manager stood at the exit. She approached me and said, unusually fawningly, "You don't go down and join them, do you?" I felt intimidated and pressured, too frightened to join in. I was worried about being dismissed. I felt I would be too old to get another job. Although I remained in my seat I was unable to take further calls, I just sat there crying. I remember a union member, a man, who gently stood up, putting his chair under the desk he walked past the manager and joined the strikers who had gathered outside the centre. His courage was touching. At that moment, I didn't have his courage, I just sat crying until a team leader pointed a finger at me, demanding that I stop crying and continue taking calls. Shamefully I held

back my tears and began to answer the phone. This bitter experience rankled at my heart. I am a dry squid. That's correct. My body was out of control."

(Ms Shin, 07/07/15)



Figure 7.11 The picture of a 'dry squid' in Korea (Left) and a 'grilled' dry squid (Right) (the pictures retrieved from [www.google.co.kr](http://www.google.co.kr)).

The above experience was so traumatic that it reminded her of her passive mind and current situations. She answered that she likened herself to 'a grilled dry squid on the fire' because when she thought about how she appeared to the outside world, she looked like something which had been 'shrunk': humiliated by the managers in the call centre, ashamed of her job as a call handler outside the centre, her family gave her nothing to be proud of. As Jackson (1989:141-145) insists, such a powerful metaphor could be the expression of 'the coalescence of body and lifeworld' within lived experience as 'a sensed totality of life' (see Chapter 3.2.2.3). Ms Shin compared her body with a dry squid and also her lifeworld with fire. They converged into 'shrinking', as a totality of life. In her intersubjective life, the fire represented managers, team leaders and cunning colleagues. Specifically, the character of shrinking was the 'body idiom' that Ms Shin could communicate through (Goffman 1963:35). Her metaphor was much more meaningful than any other academic analysis since it emerged from 'immediacy of embodied experience' (Csordas 1999:143). It revealed that her body shrinking happened immediately - almost preconsciously or automatically - when she faced fire-like reality.

Although Ms Shin admitted that she recovered her self-esteem after engaging in the labour union activity, she also got hurt from it and became somewhat sceptical about its success. Many

other labour union members were dismissed in the end, suffering from the financial crisis; some even took their own life. Thus, Ms Shin kept persuading herself to resolve internal conflicts and provide support to the current union executives. Her method of tolerating this was to become dependent on eating cookies alone at home. She said, “Cookie is like alcohol and cigarette to me!” In other words, the cookie is her agent of ‘chemical coping.’ When returning home at 8pm, she felt exhausted and was subsequently extremely hungry, so she would eat cookies while surfing the internet. She explained it as the “underdog’s cheapest way to have fun.” Staying alone and away from any fire-like situation, she filled up her body with sweet cookies that allowed her to fall asleep without any necessity of thinking or worrying. However, the effect of the cookies was temporary and it did not help her ‘dry squid’-like shrinking character to disappear but rather let it persist, while her body expanded.

#### 7.4.2. “Drink again before sobering up”: a 30s-female union member’s anxiety

My first impression of Miss Joo, late-30s and a call handler with six-year experience, was that she was breezy and straightforward. Almost every evening she would drink and smoke, her choice of alcohol was the strong Korean spirits ‘*Soju*.’ The person who offered me a cigarette<sup>75</sup> during

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<sup>75</sup> When Miss Joo offered a cigarette to me, I did not hesitate to take it and smoke together. At that moment, there were three female executives of ABC call centre union including Miss Joo and Ms Jang and all of them began to smoke together. In this situation, I did not realise that I was a non-smoker and I naturally joined the smoking practice. Interestingly, about 30 years ago, one female Korean PhD student in Anthropology at the City University of New York, had a similar experience regarding smoking in the field. Seung-Kyung Kim had done an anthropological fieldwork about the lives of female factory workers in Masan Free Export Zone in Masan, a southern city of South Korea from 1986 to 1988 (Kim 1997). At that moment, she was a smoker and kept this as a secret in the field. She described the reason in her book - *Class Struggle or Family Struggle?* - as below.

“Smoking among young middle-class women, especially college students, was considered a sign of liberation because it violated conventional ideas about how young women should behave. I did not expect to find a factory woman smoking...Smoking became briefly fashionable among women factory workers after 1988 because of the influence of college

the first meeting with the ABC call centre union was Miss Joo. From my initial encounters with Miss Joo, I was under the impression she was an outgoing person with an extrovert character, she appeared healthy both mentally and physically. However, one day when meeting up with the union executives socially, I witnessed Miss Joo taking medication along with the alcohol we were drinking. At that time, I heard that she had been taking a prescribed psychiatric medication regularly since autumn 2013; without this medication I discovered she suffered from depression, anxiety, panic attacks and even claustrophobia.

Miss Joo was experiencing depressive moods at the time of her initial employment at ABC call centre in June 2009. In October 2012, just after the labour union was established in the call centre, she experienced two breakdowns whilst taking the subway. Both incidents came without warning signs, whilst using the subway to travel to work, she experienced panic attacks, she felt pressure on her chest, and began to think she would die. Having no idea of what triggered these attacks; Ms Joo felt she could no longer use the subway system. Prior to these incidents it had never crossed her mind to seek psychiatric help, however after further two panic attacks at work and a sudden fear of climbing aboard a public bus service, Miss Joo advised me that she had sought help. Furthermore, during this period she began suffering from insomnia, which of course made her extremely tired and run down.

Coincidentally, the period when her mental problems were aggravated overlapped with the time of her engagement in the labour union activity. Nevertheless, she clearly insisted that there was no connection between them. Rather, she found the reason for her frail mental state came from

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students, but the fashion passed quickly, and most factory women still consider it improper for young women to smoke.” (Kim 1997:xvi)

One of my informants, Ms Zan, a factory girl in GIC during the mid-1980s (in Chapter 5), remembered that “At that period, the woman who smoked was stigmatised as a bad girl, delinquent girl and promiscuous girl. Factory girls like me were very naive. So they actually viewed smoking women unfavourably.” However, after 30 years, the situation regarding female smoking had completely changed. When I first met Ms Jang and asked the smoking habit of female call handlers, she answered right away, “without the smoking area, they would go crazy” (in Chapter 6.3.4).

her insecure and hopeless future.

“I don’t think my conditions such as insomnia, depression, claustrophobia and panic disorder became worse due to the labour union activities. Rather it had to do with persistent anxiety brought on by thinking about my life, I could see no improvement and I was getting older. My life is hopeless, specifically, regarding my financial situation. The older I get, the more I become sick and tired of living like this. I have achieved nothing in my life after graduating from college, I failed to get a regular job, study at a postgraduate school and save any money. I lost my confidence and now I actually feel ashamed of my career. After getting a job here at ABC call centre, I experienced many humiliating events, however I have managed to endure them by drinking and smoking. My emotion is too changeable; sometimes I am fine, but sometimes I fall into the pit of depression. I was often so temperamental that nobody would reach out and offer me help. I lived alone in my world, locking myself in so as not to get hurt.”

(Miss Joo, call handler, 13/06/15)

Miss Joo could not explain or understand why the anxiety of a hopeless life exacerbated her mental problems. However, she admitted that the labour union engagement helped her to open up to other colleagues. At first, she just wanted to help the union as one of the members; she began to engage with her co-workers, particularly her fellow union members. Then, she became one of the active members and subsequently a leader of H subcontractor company in January 2014. After being involved in the union activities, the biggest change in her life was to smoke together again. Miss Joo used to smoke with colleagues to share her suffering while gazing at the exhaled smoke (see Chapter 6.3.5), and when she was hurt from the ‘wandering’ workers who did not care about their relationship with her, her smoking changed into what she wanted to do alone to help her relax. The labour union, however, revived her smoking technique: ‘visualisation of smoking’ to share suffering. In other words, the labour union was her new smoking space and the new window of communication.



Figure 7.12 Miss Joo's paper cup ashtray, 'a tomb of sighs' on the windowsill of the union office (Left) and Miss Joo's smoking scene during the post-assembly party ('*dwitpuri*') (Right). If you see a paper cup filled with a pile of cigarette butts on the left picture, it might be difficult to say that her smoking has nothing to do with 'nicotine withdrawal symptoms.' However, as you can see from the picture on the right, her appearance of actual smoking can give a glimpse of what she experienced through smoking. It seems the cigarettes not only suppressed her nicotine craving, but also provided the shared experience of smiling and talking face to face whilst smoking together. Thus, smoking seems to supplement the deficiencies - 'life-induced withdrawal symptoms' (anxiety, depression, etc.) - that hopeless life cannot fill (gradation effect added).

Miss Joo frequently smoked in the union office together with Ms Jang and other union executives. She also enjoyed smoking while socialising and drinking with them (Figure 7.12). Now, her smoking was often associated with three components: drinking, meeting people and talking. Specifically, she enjoyed '*dwitpuri*'<sup>76</sup> which means a 'relieving party of post-assembly.' '*dwitpuri*' was a 'backstage' for her and other union members to unburden their roles and duties of the labour union executives for a while. She admitted that she often participated in street rallies and attended conferences and meetings of the labour union principally to enjoy *dwitpuri* after the events. She considered it as a place of communication, to build a tight fellowship. However,

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<sup>76</sup> '*dwit*' means 'post' and '*puri*' 'relieving.' '*dwitpuri*', a sort of after-party is generalised in Korea, particularly after specific assembly. The word is mainly used amongst college students, but it is naturally used in various social life regarding any kinds of party or a get-together after meeting or assembly. The main purpose of *dwitpuri* is to relieve any stress and conflicts and unburden oneself to others with alcohol.

*dwitpuri* was like a double-edged sword to Miss Joo. She attended the party too often, drank too much until late at night, and accordingly often suffered from a hangover, which resulted in being unproductive which was also seen as unfaithful to her colleagues at work the next morning. To make matters worse, after becoming a new leader of H subcontractor company, the load she had to bear became increasingly larger, and with the union becoming firmly established she was experiencing more conflicts with managers and even her own union members. The stress of the union activities along with her incessant partying and her persistent insomnia were all major factors in her becoming exhausted. However, she drank again, often before sobering up because she felt anxious.

“I drank before sobering up, because if I drink, I can relieve my anxiety. If I sober up, I suffer from headaches or rather it feels like I have a headache. When I am sober, I become more anxious, purely because I have too many thoughts going around in my head. All these thoughts are related to my hopeless future.”

(Miss Joo, call handler, 13/06/15)

Miss Joo thought her reality as a call handler, often being ignored in Korean society, would not change even though she engaged enthusiastically in the labour union activities and made some notable achievements. The achievements were just the basic rights of an employee. Her financial situation she found herself in, the fact she was in her middle age, and her career opportunities would not change; all these caused her to seek solace from drinking and smoking. She became confused whether her anxiety was caused by her hopeless future, her mental problems or her frequent drinking. Although the labour union helped her to escape from her own little world, given the fact that her body was exhausted both physically and psychologically, she would have benefited from taking a sabbatical from union duties for a short time. However, she could not take the required sabbatical; in truth, the labour union was the only place in which she felt valued, and of course it revived her bright and breezy character through *dwitpuri*.

### 7.4.3. “It’ really tough, but”’: a male union member’s burdens

In ABC call centre, the female workers accounted for about 90% of the workforce. Accordingly, the majority of the union members were women. Amongst the main executives of the union, there was only one male member, Mr Chang who was in his late 30s. He had worked in the call centre for four years, in January 2015 became the second leader of the union, directly after Ms Jang. He was a tall imposing man with a big personality, always smiling and very willing. Actually, as a new leader and the only male executive in the union, he had been engaging in substantial activities: subsequent meetings, debates, the street protests, the solidarity rallies; all of which always ended up with ‘*dwitpuri*,’ with many people, conversing and drinking. As the after-party usually finished late at night, he usually arrived home at around 1 or 2 am. His house was far from the call centre, one and a half hour by subway, on a working day he had to be awake before 6 am. Even though he always smiled and displayed a positive attitude, he gradually became physically exhausted. One day, he recognised that he had actually lost five kilogrammes in one month, it was the warning sign that his diabetes had become worse.

Before working in the call centre, Mr Chang was a military officer, a captain in the South Korean army. After twice failing the screening for promotion to the rank of major, he decided to leave the army hoping to find employment outside of the military. He not only sought promotion as a career move, another reason was to enhance his salary. Mr Chang was married with two children, unfortunately both these children suffered from congenital heart disorders, which had required several open-heart surgeries, and needed further ongoing treatment, which of course was very costly. However, his applications for several jobs were all unsuccessful, and the continued period of unemployment brought financial difficulty. Therefore, he had to “do whatever I could to earn money for the children.” That was the reason he took employment in ABC call centre, however the salary was less than half he received when in the military. In order to make ends meet, his wife began to work as an assistant nursery teacher, leaving the children in the care of

his mother-in-law. Prior to working in the centre, Mr Chang never expected he would become active in the labour union movement and also continue to work in the call centre for four years. Since he was very empathetic and had a strong sense of responsibility, he could not ignore the ongoing suffering of his colleagues. However, eventually, he was confronted with the internal conflict of the responsibility of between a father, a husband and a leader of the union.

On 6<sup>th</sup> April 2015, Miss Lee, a second leader of M subcontractor company, called me and advised that Mr Chang's physical condition became too serious and that another member, Miss Joo also seemed to be bad in a bad way. At that moment, Mr Chang and the other members were totally exhausted due to the constant meetings and street rallies, which often ran late into the night. In the case of Mr Chang, he often forgot to take his prescribed medication for Diabetes, Hypertension and Hypercholesterolemia, he drank and smoked much more than previous, eating irregularly and neglecting his general health. Being the only male on the union executive, Mr Chang was often confronted with tough physical treatment by the company security personnel (Figure 7.13). As far as some of the call handlers were concerned, the reasonable workers' rights were something to win by fighting with the company. One day, after joining a solidarity rally and subsequent *dwitpuri* with Mr Chang, I asked him if he felt the current burden being a union leader was physically challenging. He answered with a deep sigh.

“It's really tough, but, as you know, I am the only man in the union. Leading a union in the call centre while supporting a family is really stressful and strenuous. Who would dare take on this burden? I know if I didn't then there would be no one, therefore I just have to carry on attending the solidarity rallies and subsequent *dwitpuri*. All labour unions are having a hard time to survive, therefore we need to build a tight solidarity. The *dwitpuri* is extremely important as it brings together colleagues from other unions, this greatly helps to establish communications and build relationships. That's the reason I have to attend, even if I end up drinking and smoking, becoming exhausted, and it has a negative effect on my health, I just have to be there. I have no choice, unless the fighting with our employers comes to an end.” (Mr Chang, call handler, 27/03/15)



Figure 7.13 Mr Chang's medication for Diabetes, Hypertension and Hypercholesterolemia (Left) and the picture which was taken when Mr Chang was suppressed by the guardians of the contractor company (Right) (Left photo taken by the researcher; right photo taken by ABC labour union, gradation effect added).

## 7.5. Conclusion: stretching out and speaking out in the public

In this Chapter, I have presented the establishment of ABC call centre labour union and related union executives' struggles. Their successful activities of the call centre labour union so far show how hard it is physically and mentally to collect the workers' voices of defiance in a call centre environment. Paradoxically, this seems to demonstrate that the union establishment is almost impossible in the current unstable labour market environment unless there are some dedicated leaders with initiative and drive to endure and overcome the struggles. In the case of Ms Jang, the first union leader of call centres, there would have been no call centre labour union if she had not experienced the heart-breaking death of her cousin. The fact remains that the use of 'hands up' in a call centre as a gesture of protest has only happened to about 400 workers in ABC call centre, about 0.1% of the reportedly 400,000 call centre workers nationwide (Korea Labour & Society Institute 2014). The remaining 99.9% of call handlers are working in digitalised modern sweatshops as I showed in Chapter 6.

What difference does a union make? Borrowing Ms Shin's expressions, she felt that she was transformed from a 'grilled dry squid on the fire' into '*torai*' (a crazy person) who became able

to say what she wanted to say. Even though her voice and hands were still quivering whilst publicly speaking out, she did not suppress her reactive anger to the managers anymore so that felt that she became more '*dang-dang*' (see Chapter 5.4.1) with the sense that there is nothing more to lose ('*ipansapan*'). The other union members of ABC call centre were similar to Ms Shin's feeling, that is, feeling 'reassured' knowing that there is someone they can rely on. Furthermore, this kind of benefit from the union establishment can be found from the other labour union of DEF call centre. DEF call centre, dealing with cable broadcasting, followed the first ABC labour union's steps and built its union on 13 February 2013. The biggest change I heard about from one middle-aged female union member of DEF call centre was "Non-union members would feel uncomfortable whilst taking a break because they care about the manager's feeling, but the union members would take a break comfortably with the *dang-dang* mind." This short statement implied many things. The call handlers' shrunken bodies (like Ms Shin, a 'grilled dry squid on the fire') could stretch out through opportunity created by the labour union. However, my use of the 'hands up' metaphor, introduced here and in Chapter 6, has to do with certain symbolic meanings (e.g. humiliation, protest). In the following Chapter, I explore the use of 'hands up' in ABC call centre in a third way, as a gesture of 'healing.'

## 8. 'Hands Up' in 'Healing': the union's assembly for the stretching body exercise (*mompyeogi undong*)

In the previous two Chapters, through two different gesture of 'hands up,' I have given the sense of what it is like to be a female call handler; how it feels or what it means. Call handlers are often exposed to vulnerable situations - being humiliated by customers, managers and colleagues, finding it hard to be '*dang-dang*' so that they are likely to depend on easily accessible temporary solutions, resulting in their health deteriorating alongside their self-esteem. The labour union activity, although providing a foundation for the workers to rely on and feel reassured, has limitations in that it exhausts the union executives both physically and mentally. As a result, they also consume more alcohol, cigarettes, etc. In this Chapter, therefore, I show another form of 'Hands up,' this time in 'Healing.' This is the ABC union's weekly assembly of the stretching body exercise, called '*mompyeogi undong*' (hereinafter 'MPG exercise'). I show the details about MPG exercise (8.1 and 8.2) and its effects on participants' health and labour union activities (8.3 and 8.4). Through exploring the core value of MPG exercise and participants' experience, I argue that the 'shrunken' body posture and body idiom are correlated to sociocultural status and situated space, but could be relieved by stretching out one's 'stiff' body; subsequently one's daunted mind could be transformed into one with much higher self-esteem (8.5).

### 8.1. First participation in the ABC union's assembly of MPG exercise

The catchphrase of the MPG exercise, which first attracted my attention at the office of ABC labour union, was "The world where everybody can enjoy a healthy life, MPG exercise will make it!" When I first read it, I considered it a cliché, being somewhat sceptical of the health benefits

of the exercise. However, at the end of August 2015 when I last participated in the exercise assembly during my fieldwork, I felt that my physical and psychological condition had reached a peak. I never expected this result when I first embarked on the MPG exercise regime in February 2015. Rather I considered regular participation in the assembly as a tool to provide me with access to the female call centre workers. As I became more aware of the exercise during my time with union members, I realised that this exercise was of a very different character from general exercise for leisure and its motto was not a banal phrase at all but a real goal which implied the character of a civil movement alongside the labour movement.

After only sporadic meetings with the union members, which had been rather awkward, I was informed by the union leader, Ms Jang, that there was an exercise class, held every Thursday at 7 pm, where labour union members would be in attendance and which would provide me with an opportunity to get to meet them in a more natural environment. Therefore, on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2015 I joined the assembly of MPG exercise for the first time. I had met the union members before, but these meetings had always been in their office where I had felt strange and uncomfortable. The exercise class was convened in a room adjacent to the main union office. Rectangular shaped brown mats were spread on the floor, upon which small personal yoga mats were positioned alongside thick soft sitting cushions, large pillows and small pillows (Figure 8.2). There were 12 participants including me, everyone dressed in the MPG uniform except for myself. I was a little nervous. However, I had low expectations about the effectiveness of MPG since I considered it to be similar to other exercises such as yoga and pilates, which the media tends to portray something related to beauty and appearance in Korea rather than health.



Figure 8.1 The scene of MPG exercise of ABC call centre workers during work hours in 2016. The exercise session is now being held at 4pm for 20 minutes twice a week in the fitness room of the centre. The workers are practising ‘Whole Body Twisting’, ‘Whole Body Stretching Step 2’ and ‘Bending Back’, which they can easily do without any equipment (session taken by Miss Joo). In the picture, we can see the workers exercising in the fitness room. The afternoon break was not guaranteed until the ABC union was established, and workers could only use the fitness room during their lunch break or after work. The company strictly forbade the use of this room during working hours, so only a few people actually used this place. The purpose of the exercise sessions was mainly to control the increased weight. After the union was established, the workers were able to use their 20-minute afternoon break to exercise together. In January 2017, however, the fitness room was turned into a new office for managers despite strong opposition from the union. The call centre lacked the motivation to continue to operate the fitness room, which was not directly connected to more revenue (that is, more calls). The time spent on exercising, as well as the time to get to the fitness room, seemed a waste for the company. In the company, workers were not an investment in maintenance and repairs, but a disposable labour force who would simply waste it.

The exercise commenced at 7 pm. At first participants warmed up for about 10 to 15 minutes to the rhythm of the music, which were well-known protest songs. The movement, called ‘Whole Body Stretching Step 3’ (*onmompyeogi sam dangye*), was easy to follow thanks to the rhythmic music. It seemed to be effective in relaxing the participants’ bodies and also the atmosphere. People enjoyed chatting while shaking and stretching their bodies. Then, Master Yang, the main trainer, began to demonstrate ‘Whole Body Twisting’ (*onmon dolligi*), twisting the body from side to side repeatedly, while remaining in the standing position, shoulders back and half-raising arms with palms facing the front. ‘Whole Body Twist’ practice was followed by ‘Bending Back’ (*heori gupigi*), ‘Rotating Arms’ (*pal dolligi*), and ‘Bending Knees’ (*mureup gupigi*). Master Yang himself demonstrated all the movements carefully and explained several precautions to take. When we had finished the four routines which were done in the standing position, already one hour had passed. While taking a short break before the other routines which were done in the lying position, I felt a bit uncomfortable with some slight pain in and around my muscles. Particularly, due to my chronic right shoulder pain, I often frowned and groaned when I followed the ‘Stretching Upper Body’ (*sangchepyeogi*) step (Figure 8.2).

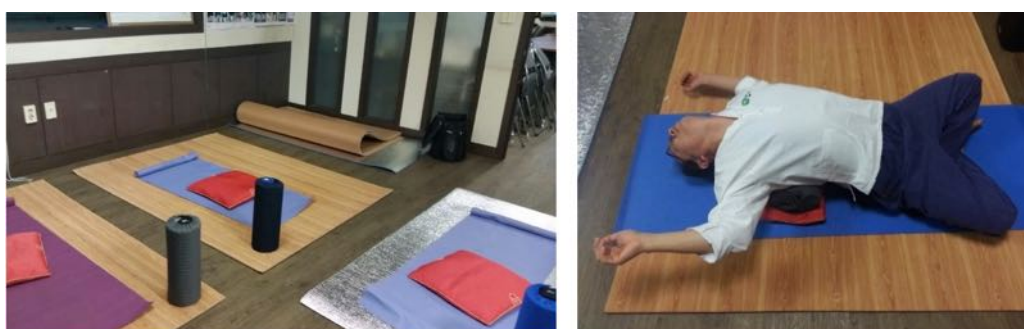


Figure 8.2 Prepared seats for MPG exercise at a room adjacent to the ABC labour union office (Left) and my photo of doing ‘Stretching Upper Body’ posture during 2<sup>nd</sup> participation taken by Master Yang (Right). The posture was to lie on the mat, placing a big round pillow under one’s chest and then bending the upper body backwards while stretching both arms. In the picture, my right arm was not completely extended because of pain and stiffness.

In spite of the discomfort, I was pleased to join the assembly for two reasons. First of all, practising and learning the exercise together was a great opportunity to build camaraderie with

the female workers. As I groaned and made funny expressions while attempting the difficult postures, they often giggled and became a little more familiar and relaxed in my presence. My poor performance provided some good material to chat about when they invited me to the pub after the class for ‘*dwitpuri*.’ Secondly, it provided an opportunity to check which part of my body was unhealthy and reminded me of my shoulder problem. However, I did not expect the exercise to help cure my frozen shoulder at all. At that moment I rather doubted Master Yang’s words – “Just follow the exercise. Then your shoulder pain will be relieved.”

## 8.2. The beginning of MPG exercise in the ABC labour union

According to Ms Jang, the union leader, the MPG exercise started on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2013 at ABC call centre at her instigation. She initially considered the sustainability of the union as the main benefit of the MPG exercise programme amongst the call centre workers. She contacted Master Yang on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2013 for the first time around the first anniversary of the union’s establishment. At that time she had shaved her head two weeks previously. Though the union seemed to be ‘on track’, she thought it was necessary to gather the next leading executives, to make more opportunities for the main union executives to communicate to other common union members. There had been other small group meetings amongst union members, such as learning how to play the guitar etc., but nothing to connect union executives and union members directly. The most important reason she chose the MPG exercise for this purpose instead of other exercises was the fact that many leading members and official trainers of the exercise were also members of the civil servant labour union. Particularly, Master Yang was the ex-representative of National Civil Servant Trade Union (*jeonguk gongmuwon nojo*). Since the workers in ABC call centre are principally dealing with official services closely related with civil servants, Ms Jang considered that making any connections with civil servants including labour unions would be beneficial for the call centre. Hence she decided to contact Master Yang in September 2013.

Ms Jang said that MPG exercise was quite well known amongst labour union activists because of Master Yang's dedication to spreading the exercise within labour unions. She had already considered the establishment of an MPG exercise class in the ABC call centre before establishing the union. However, there were some concerns about setting up the exercise classes under the auspices of the labour union. Amongst union activists, there had been ongoing controversial debates about the benefits of MPG exercise with regard to both health effects and the priorities of a labour union. In particular, regarding the purpose of the union, Ms Jang explained the controversy as follows.

“Amongst labour union activists, there are people who are against the exercise. They insist that the principal work of the labour union is to fundamentally change ‘the structures’ repressing workers rather than to champion individual exercise for self-healing, which seems to a rather complacent attitude. But I do not think that kind of opinion is necessarily correct. In a broad sense, every activity within the labour union ultimately has the same goal and the only difference is the method. So I do not believe the MPG exercise to be negative at all.”

(Ms Jang, union leader, 19/05/15)

Ms Jang, to be honest, was quite sceptical about the exercise's effectiveness. Although she knew that a lot of call centre workers had bent postures and subsequent back pain for which the stretching exercise might be helpful, she was not convinced how successful the benefits could be, and confessed that she had supported the exercise regime initially as a method of providing the further stability of the labour union rather than because of any advantages for workers' health. Nevertheless, soon after attending the MPG exercise herself, she realised the benefits of the physical effects. Before experiencing the MPG, she had found it difficult to hold aloft the protest picket banner for longer than five minutes whilst carrying out an one-person demonstration in front of the major contractor company building. After regularly following the exercise regime, she was able to hold the picket banner for longer than thirty minutes without any difficulty. She

discovered her physical strength improved by “simply stretching my own body.” Reflecting on her term as leader of the labour union, at the end of December 2014, she concluded that her most meaningful achievements at ABC call centre were firstly to establish the labour union and secondly to introduce the MPG exercise.

The process, however, for establishing the MPG exercise in the call centre did not initially go well. Since from September 2013 Ms Jang had been quite busy in negotiating wage and working conditions with the executives of subcontract and contractor companies, she could not afford to progress the steps to establish the exercise club in the centre. At this point, Master Yang very carefully intervened offering his assistance (e.g. producing promotional materials, advising where to buy the equipment, etc.) and checked each week as to the progress of the project. Meanwhile, Master Yang himself had been seeking ideas on how to introduce and spread MPG exercise amongst labour unions, especially located in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. For him, therefore, to establish the exercise club in ABC labour union was a precious opportunity not to be missed. He was convinced the stretching exercise would prove very beneficial for call handlers who kept the fixed bent posture for a long time, causing stiff muscles and pain. He also thought that it would provide a good opportunity to cultivate official female trainers from amongst labour union members. From his point of view, Ms. Jang’s suggestion was perfectly timed.

At first, gathering participants amongst call centre workers was difficult. Hence the first exercise meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2013 was attended by several union executives including the leader, Ms Jang. Amongst the participants (five in total), there were two union members, Ms Shin and Miss Lee, who had just joined the union. They attended the meeting by chance since they happened to be in the office at that moment taking dinner and were asked to just fill the empty space. They were later elected as club president and club manager respectively. As a result, both of them soon became the main executives in the union and gained the MPG official trainer certificate after one year. The ultimate goals of Ms Jang and Master Yang were successfully accomplished, at an early stage.

## 8.3. The history of MPG exercise and its implications for the labour union

### 8.3.1. The brief history of MPG exercise

According to the official exercise website MPG began in November 2003 in Seoul. Master Chul Kim is known as the founder of this exercise. He explained in his biography published in April 2006 that he had learned the basic skills about traditional healing art over four years (1974-8) from an old monk 'Muae' in his 80s. In Master Kim's book, the monk was left in the temple, Sangwonsa in Mt. Odae in about mid-1890s as an orphan and had grown up as a monk. Muae is said to have learned Korean traditional healing arts from Master Chunlee Choi over a period of 30 years. Master Choi was described in Master Kim's book as a nationally renowned traditional healer. However, neither the record about Master Choi nor about the monk Muae are reliable since they were all from Master Kim's anecdote and lack verifying evidence.

Master Kim and his first disciples opened an official training centre in Seoul in June 2006. In December 2008, Master Kim and several of his followers established a private foundation titled 'Momsallim Movement Headquarters' (*momsallim undongbonbu*). In April 2010 other first disciples of Master Kim, particularly Master Beom Lee and his followers got together to establish a non-profit institution named 'Momsallim Movement Society' (*momsallim undonghyeopoe*). Master Lee was known as a progressive activist in civil movements who had been imprisoned due to the protest against military dictatorship during his college years. In fact, Master Yang told me that Master Lee wrote all books and news articles published by Master Kim Cheol and played a central role in establishing theories of MPG exercise. Therefore, the fundamental reason for the division was a difference of purpose. Originally from 2003 Master Kim and the first disciples agreed that their movement for spreading the traditional self-healing exercise was a sort of 'copy-

left movement.’<sup>77</sup> However, in February 2008 Master Kim required some royalties, insisting on his copyright. Then, the disciples of Master Lee who wanted to keep ‘copyleft movement’ as originally intended built their own institution in March 2008 and gradually upgraded the exercise by making all their resources accessible and receiving other health specialists’ opinions. On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2013 ‘Momsallim Movement Society’ changed its name ‘Mompyeogi Exercise Association’ (*mompyeogi saenghwarundong hyeopoe*), mainly to distinguish their activities clearly from Master Kim’s private foundation and also to stress the basic principle of the exercise, ‘Stretching Body’ (*mompyeogi*).

### 8.3.2. Master Yang and his determination towards MPG exercise

In section 8.2, I explained why Ms Jang set up MPG exercise at ABC call centre under the auspices of the labour union. This story, however, is not enough to understand why the exercise is relatively well-known amongst labour unions and relevant activists and there are many official trainers who are engaging in labour movements. The involvement of the labour movement with the stretching body exercise owed much to the commitment of one person, Master Yang. In his early 50s, he was an ex-civil servant who had been fired in 2005 due to his labour union activities. At that time, the civil service unions were illegal in Korea. After his dismissal, he was elected as the representative of National Civil Servant Trade Union (*jeonguk gongmuwon nojo*) composed of 140,000 union members nationwide in February 2006 (Figure 8.3). In June 2007, he went on a hunger strike for 26 days, dropping in weight from 79 to 59kg. The hunger strike ended due to a deterioration in his health condition. When he started eating again in a hospital, one of the union

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<sup>77</sup> ‘Copyleft’ is a play on the word, ‘Copyright.’ It is basically “the practice of offering people the right to freely distribute copies and modified versions of a work” (retrieved on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2017 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyleft>).

executives introduced MPG exercise with the hope that it would assist his recovery. Thus, Master Yang bought a book entitled ‘The Revolution of Body’ (*momui hyeongmyeong*) introducing the principles and methods of MPG exercise. When he read it, it flashed through his mind, “Yes, this is what I am looking for.” First of all, he liked that the exercise was a non-profit citizen movement and considered it helpful to organise unions in the workplace if he successfully helped to spread the exercise. Moreover, he thought that it would serve as a counterweight to the capitalist medical system. As a result, he started to learn MPG exercise in September 2007.



Figure 8.3 The photos of Master Yang: the scene of the street rally protest in September 2006 as the representative of National Civil Servant Trade Union and the scene of MPG exercise training assembly of one civil servant trade union in November 2008 (Left photo retrieved on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2016 from <http://www.newscham.net/news/print.php?board=news&id=37385>; right photo provided by Master Yang; gradation effect added).

“The MPG exercise is a movement that starts from a simple principle that you can get rid of many diseases by correcting one’s body posture. It is an exercise method to do it without anyone’s help, it can continue in daily life at any time without cost. Thus I felt in my bones that it is a project that can be done with union member for a lifetime. I thought that once the exercise is vitalised, it would play a big role in recovering and improving the health of the people who are suffering from poor working environments and the monopoly of medical capital for commercial purposes. Above all, I became convinced that by creating a climate in which people understand the origin of many diseases and control it on their own, it will be possible to universalize medical knowledge that has been monopolised by some classes. Until now, I have created a training course for workers, conducted a special training course for almost every long-term strike site. It was possible because of my determination to recover the health of discriminated workers and strengthen the power of unions on strike. Some achievements have been made over the past eight years by the struggle to realise the spirit of MPG exercise, which is not for profit but the people. The reason for the expansion of MPG exercise for such a short period is that everyone can easily learn the exercise and can practise it freely in everyday life. The principle of MPG exercise is to become healthy by finding a correct body posture in daily life. When walking, sitting, lying down and sleeping, workers need to straighten their postures in everyday

life...It will help the health promotion of the union members as well as the operation of the union. I hope that the day will come when the discriminated irregular workers and the workers and activists of the long-term strike workplace fighting against discrimination – all of them learn this exercise, grasp the principles of it, practise it on their own, and finally liberate from mental and physical pain.”

(Master Yang, MPG exercise trainer, 02/04/15)

Master Yang’s commitment to the spread of MPG exercise is based on his recognition of the Korean reality that people are now suffering from ‘poor working environments’ and a ‘monopoly of medical capital for commercial purposes.’ Thus, his aim to spread MPG exercise was to help to recover and promote workers’ health that was being injured by discrimination in workplaces and to strengthen the collective resistance of trade unions to empower them to fight such discrimination. The experience of his health having deteriorated whilst being a representative of the National Civil Servant Trade Union and thus having difficulty in sustaining the protest, might have been the opportunity for him to feel how important it is to care about his body. MPG exercise that started as a non-profit citizen movement seems to have evolved into an important source of strengthening and sustaining the labour movement as the personal experiences and commitment of Master Yang have been combined. Now, it is an undeniable fact that Master Yang is the one of the powerful leading members of the MPG Exercise Association. Until the end of 2015, there were about 300 official trainers of MPG exercise nationwide and amongst them 70 were taught by Master Yang. In ABC call centre, he also trained four union members (Miss Joo, Miss Lee, Ms Shin and Ms Kim) for one year to become official trainers. He emphasised that his ultimate personal goal was to cultivate 10000 official trainers who would be able to replace hundreds of general hospitals.

### 8.3.3. The methods and core principles of MPG exercise

Master Yang explained that one of the advantages of MPG exercise is that its core principles and actual exercise methods can be easily learned and practised anywhere without tools. The MPG exercise is composed of two types of methods, 'Daily Exercise' (*saenghwarundong*) and 'Basic Exercise' (*gibonundong*). Particularly, 'Daily Exercise' is the standing position exercises without using equipment (Figure 8.1) while 'Basic Exercise' is the supine exercises using cushions and pillows, respectively (Figure 8.2) (see Appendix 4 for details). Master Yang emphasised that the value of MPG exercise can be explained in two ways; 1) the principle of healing one's body and 2) the purpose of the establishment of MPG Exercise Association. First of all, with regard to the theoretical principle of MPG exercise, it is clearly summarised and illustrated in its logo (Figure 8.4). It shows two people with 'Hands Up.' At the same time, the phrases surrounding the image mean 'Stretch back, Chest forward, Head up' (*heorineun seugo, gaseumeun pyeogo, gogaeneun deulja*), which reminds me of the posture of 'dang-dang' (Figure 5.26). As described by the sentences, the practical basis of MPG exercise is to stretch one's body. The reason for the emphasis on 'stretching' is that the exercise considers a balance of the backbone to be of fundamental importance for one's health. If the balance of backbone, especially the pelvic bone as the cornerstone, is destroyed, subsequently the muscles around it become strained and in the end nerves which are vital for one's holistic health get suppressed. Therefore, MPG exercise considers one's physical posture essential for health. Bad postures make people unhealthy. Master Kim, the founder of MPG exercise, also emphasised the importance of daily posture; "The problem is not that people are living in stress but that they live with the same postures when they take in stress" (Kim 2006:268). This perspective is suitable for explaining the relationship between female call centre workers' daily posture and one's physico-psychological stress.



Figure 8.4 The official logo of MPG exercise, showing two persons with ‘Hands Up.’ The two are depicted as if they were branches from a single root. The ‘hands-up’ figure of a person in the shape of a tree extending from the bottom to the top can be interpreted as a symbol of healthy vitality.

Master Yang emphasised that another core principle of MPG exercise is the interrelationship between body and mind. It not only emphasises the tight connection between body and mind but also highlights the immeasurable potential of the body to heal the mind. In the book of Master Kim, it says that “This exercise is for opening one’s mind by making a body healthy. If the body becomes refreshed, one can have ‘ample space of mind for leniency’ (*yeoyu*)...If one’s body is in bad condition, everything becomes a bother. If one’s body gets refreshed, one becomes full of drive in everything” (Kim 2006:68). This approach toward body and mind is very simple and clear. The character of the exercise emphasises the active role of the body in controlling and even healing one’s mind. Applying Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the phenomenology of the body, the MPG exercise is to change one’s ‘motor intentionality’ or ‘body schema’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):102, 113). The exercise is to reverse a system of the motor or postural functions, particularly, recovering from shrinking and bent postures in a (mental) stress such as that caused by humiliation. In order to escape from a ‘ready to be humiliated’ body schema, MPG exercise intends to stretch out one’s stooped and stiff body, giving buoyant ‘motor memory’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):141).

The core value of MPG exercise was to provide citizens and workers with the easiest and the most accessible practical exercise to heal themselves without depending on doctors and medical services. The official slogan on the MPG website clearly shows the object of setting up the society. The slogan says “The world where everybody can enjoy a healthy life: MPG exercise will make it.” In the preface of the MPG exercise guidebook (Momsallim Movement Research Centre 2009:13), it declares its ultimate goal ‘Humanitarianism’ (*hongigingan*, 弘益人間), which means

‘to promote public welfare.’ In reality, this means to devote themselves to making the world in which people live healthy without any cost to medical service providers. From an interview with Master Yang, I got a clearer explanation of the mission of the exercise. Yang informed me of the reason why he and the MPG society had been struggling to disseminate the exercise to the public.

“This exercise originates from our longstanding traditional art of health. So the goals of the MPG Exercise Society is to promote this proud tradition, disseminate it both at home and abroad, and to encourage the official trainers to engage in social service activities to help people improve their health. Through these processes, the society ultimately expects that people enhance their health by the self-care exercise, based on focusing on the causal treatments rather than the symptomatic ones which the current medicine is often based on, following the trajectory of capitalism. In other words, it attempts to contribute more equal societies by popularising medical knowledge which has been occupied by certain groups or classes such as medical professionals.”

(Master Yang, MPG exercise trainer, 02/04/15)

#### 8.4. The outcomes of MPG exercise assembly in ABC call centre union

There were roughly ten regular members of MPG exercise. The ABC call centre workers were about 400 at that time, meaning the participation rate for the exercise was only 2.5% of the call centre numbers. Hence, it has to be said that only a small group of the workers obtained the benefits from the exercise. I found that the fundamental reason for the low attendance was due to the late starting time of the exercise, 7 pm - after the working day was completed. The stretching exercise did not seem an attractive enough way for the exhausted call centre workers to spend their free time. They decided they would rather take a rest. Also many regarded the MPG exercise to be the same as other common fitness exercises (yoga, pilates, etc.). The fact that it was organised by the labour union could have been another barrier to workers’ attendance. Nevertheless, the participants, even though they were a very small proportion of the whole workforce, clearly demonstrated that the MPG exercise was beneficial to learn and practise for

the physico-psychological benefits it produced.

#### 8.4.1. The benefits for individual participants

The MPG exercise's personal benefits were very explicit and also deeply co-related. First of all, every participant reported experiencing physical improvement soon after embarking on the regular practices. Miss Lee in her mid-30s, a call handler with five years' experience, said it relieved her from a backache and right wrist pain (diagnosed as 'carpal tunnel syndrome'<sup>78</sup>) after three month's practising the MPG programme. She also reported a general improvement in her physical strength and wellbeing. Prior to embarking on the programme Miss Lee said she used to go to bed at 9 pm because of her physical weakness. However, through the programme she became stronger and was able to fulfil the labour union's physically challenging schedules (as one of the main executives), including working late at night. Miss Joo also received relief from her chronic backache, which had previously seen her twice admitted to hospital.

Ms Kim's case was more dramatic. She was in her early-30s, a call handler with four-year experience, worried about her obesity, and had been suffering from debilitating migraines combined with 'forward head posture' (*geobungmok jeunghugun*).<sup>79</sup> She joined the exercise club from May 2014 being introduced by Miss Joo (the second representative of the call centre MPG exercise club, as well as a main union executive). She enthusiastically attended the weekly

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<sup>78</sup> 'Carpal tunnel syndrome' occurs when the median nerve, controlling sensation and movement in the hands, is compressed. The common symptoms are numbness, a tingling sensation and pain in the hand and fingers (retrieved on 21th December 2016 from <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/carpal-tunnel-syndrome/Pages/Whatisit.aspx>).

<sup>79</sup> 'Forward head posture' means the anterior positioning of the cervical spine. This posture problem causes numbness, a tingling sensation in the arms, and a burning pain between the shoulder blades. The extended use of computers or smartphones, weakness of back muscle strength, etc. are known as common causes (retrieved on 21th December 2016 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forward\\_head\\_posture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forward_head_posture)).

exercise meeting and practised it by herself at home. After three months of this regular exercise, she said she was completely free of the migraines. She believed it was the result of her adjusting her sedentary posture in the call centre, which also assisted in relieving her forward head posture. Gaining great momentum from her healthy achievement, she made a decision to lose some weight, eventually losing five kilogrammes. Ms Kim was selected as the third representative of the club on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2015 and became an official trainer in November 2015 after passing the formal test.

The personal benefit from the MPG exercise was to improve one's self-esteem. Ms Kim was a good example of this. She said, "Becoming healthy and correcting my slouching posture, I found my self-esteem improving subsequently." Miss Lee also appreciated the elevation of her self-esteem after practising the exercise principally through relieving the chronic pain from her wrist and back and also improving her physical strength. She said that she overcame the barrier of her life, weak physical strength, then gaining the strength and self-confidence to challenge everything. Compared to Ms Kim and Miss Lee, who experienced the self-esteem improvement accompanying with physical benefits, Miss Joo's case was a little different. She said she experienced high self-esteem through better interaction with other workers. Miss Joo, having worked in the call centre for six years, had steadily lost her self-esteem. First of all, she had been unable to find a job which related to her qualifications and had no alternative than to accept the work she found herself doing. Secondly, she was often verbally abused by staff of the company, to which her call centre was subcontracted, by younger managers of ABC call centre, and by impolite citizens through the phone. Last, she was upset by her sudden disconnection from younger colleagues, once very close to her, who had temporarily worked with her for several months to earn some pocket money and then left. As a result, she had been taking psychiatric medicines due to claustrophobia and insomnia, concurrently suffering with chronic alcoholism, smoking and an irregular diet. To protect herself from any emotional damage due to human relationships, she locked herself in her own world. However, after attending the meeting she became the MPG star because of her perfect postures, which gave her great pride in herself. This

pride subsequently became a robust foundation for further passion, helping other participants correct their postures, eventually becoming an official trainer, gaining the highest mark in the formal MPG trainers' test. The easy and simple exercise programme provided her with the opportunity to enjoy the interaction with others (for example, giving a tip to relieve one's muscle pain or provide muscle massage). Hence, Miss Joo ranked improvement in her interpersonal relationships, as the first benefit of the MPG exercise.

The exercise also had social benefits. Exercising together did a lot to loosen any uncomfortable atmosphere between participants. Inside and outside of the call centre, female workers were almost always cautious about their bodily performances not to mention about speaking. Every movement, particularly 'hands up,' had typical symbolic meanings (suggestions, protest, disagreement, etc.), while inappropriate gestures or behaviours in the street could cause embarrassment or sometimes humiliation. However, during the MPG exercise meeting, neither movements (funny postures) nor sounds (groaning, laughing) caused embarrassment. Rather even silly or funny performances became a good chance for participants to relax with laughter. There were less strict rules, norms, rituals of bodily performances with regard to negative emotions such as embarrassment. Without any moral judgement and prejudices, they saw each other's bodies, attuned themselves to others and could share the same experience (sometimes 'painful') when stretching their bodies, counteracting the long-term effect of a sedentary workplace environment. Meanwhile, the fact that the MPG exercise was easy and simple helped the participants enjoy the interaction with others.

#### 8.4.2. The benefits for the labour union

The union leader Ms Jang set up the MPG exercise club in the labour union principally in order to sustain the union. Master Yang also shared the purpose with Ms Jang from the beginning. As a result, the labour union received diverse benefits from managing the MPG exercise club; for

example, producing main union executives, connecting common union members with the union executives, and applying the MPG exercise regime to the union's activities. Miss Lee was a typical example of someone who became a chief union executive encouraged by the MPG exercise. She had been working in ABC call centre for five years. She had worked as an optician before, from 9 am to 9 pm except for Sunday, but changed her career to a call centre worker with a working time from 9 am to 6 pm because she wanted to have more free time to prepare for another better-qualified job in law. In other words, Miss Lee considered the call centre working as a temporary job. However, even though the finishing time of the call centre was more exact and earlier than before, the intensity of work was much higher than she had anticipated. She had not been able to afford to study for higher qualifications and became trapped in the call centre. She said, "I just endured and endured for a living", and had never kept any activities in the labour union in her mind. Nevertheless, in the end (from January 2015) she became the labour union sub-leader as the representative of one of three subcontracting companies in ABC call centre. The attendance in the MPG exercise meeting was critical for her to join the activity in the union.

At first, Miss Lee had hesitated to become a member of the labour union for one year after its foundation. She made the decision to do so because of the general trends of the centre and had no enthusiasm about it at all. Incidentally, on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2013, the very first day of the MPG exercise meeting, she was in the office to meet one of the executive members for dinner. At that moment, she was asked to fill the empty space for a while, an opportunity for her to become the manager of the meeting. She recollected why she took on the manager's role without hesitation, saying, "Because I have grown up with my grandmother together, I hardly ever refuse the elderly's requests." Furthermore, "I had learned Korean calligraphy before, then had suffered from right wrist pain, called 'carpal tunnel syndrome.' I had heard that this exercise was good for the pain, and had no resistance at all. Rather, I thought it could be a good chance to heal the wrist pain."

After the first meeting, Miss Lee attended the MPG exercise meeting loyally every week, because she felt a responsibility as the club manager and also felt sorry for Master Yang who

came a long way to the centre every week, one hour by train. As a result, after three months' attendance, Miss Lee recovered from her chronic wrist pain and back pain. Hence she thought she owed the benefits to Master Yang, then she did her best to follow any of the Master's requests. She said with laughter, "In retrospect, Master Yang was not only the Master of MPG exercise, directly showed us what he thought was right, particularly regarding workers' rights. Once I asked him where he had been and he replied he had attended a rally, and asked me to join it, then I went there." The more she attended rallies with Master Yang and heard about the current issues from him, the more she became acclimatised to the atmosphere of rallies and related issues. In addition, Master Yang repeatedly emphasised that he conferred a benefit on call centre workers since they were workers and should be healthy for themselves, so he taught the call centre workers free (at that moment, the cost was KW 100,000 (=about £67) per month per person). Through the continuous contacts with Master Yang, Miss Lee "had transformed her body and mind." Finally, she became the main executive in the labour union and also got the MPG official trainer certificate after one year.

Meanwhile, regarding the practical application of the MPG exercise regime to the labour union's activity, there were two examples; the useful relaxation exercise during a strike and the usage for individual picketing demonstration on the street. Firstly, the MPG exercise was appropriate to relax tense union members, most of whom had no experience at all regarding a strike. Especially, the 'Whole Body Stretching step 3' (Figure 8.5) was actually effective to counteract psychological tension, not to mention physical stress. The ultimate purpose of the relaxation was not only relief from the unfamiliar strike experience, but also establishing a connection between common union members and union executives without awkwardness. To practise the simple and easy bodily performance together was an effective icebreaker.



Figure 8.5 Practising MPG exercise (“Whole Body Stretching step 3”) whilst on strike (taken by ABC labour union).

Secondly, Master Yang developed “The tip for one-person picketing protest” (*irin siwi yoryeong*) (Figure 8.6) by applying the specific posture of MPG exercise regime, ‘Whole Body Stretching step 2.’ In the protocol, he explained the expected effect not only in terms of health (e.g. muscle relaxation, headache, frozen shoulder, digestion, constipation, etc.) but also in terms of its propaganda value for the labour union. To explain the propaganda effect concretely, Master Yang suggested three perspectives; firstly, the ‘Stretching Whole Body’ shows resolute determination; secondly, it attracts citizens’ interests, lastly, it has a ripple effect on spreading the protest through the nation. His protest protocol was sent to diverse labour unions, not only the ABC call centre union. The call centre union used the protocol and the participants often stated that it really worked to help keep them determined, keep the posture without tiredness, attract the attention of passersby.

The Tip for ‘One-person Picketing Protest’ with the <i>Whole Body Stretching</i> posture of MPG exercise		
Posture	Exercise Effect	Propagation Effect
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stretch out both arms above your head</li> <li>2. Stand up straight with your feet hip width apart, giving strength to the sphincter</li> <li>3. Chest forward, your stomach flat</li> <li>4. Straighten back and knees</li> <li>5. Keep your chin upward whilst keeping your teeth clenched</li> <li>6. Breathe through your nose</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The entire body is relieved of muscle pain including neck, shoulders, chest, back, knees</li> <li>2. The muscles of internal organs and intestine are released</li> <li>3. It can relieve symptoms of headache, frozen shoulder, rhinitis, dyspepsia, constipation, and menstrual cramps</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The propagation effect is excellent with attitude expressing aggressive and spirited determination</li> <li>2. It promotes public interest, encourages more participation</li> <li>3. It helps to propagate and spread one-person picketing protest</li> </ol>

Figure 8.6 The tip for ‘One-person Picketing Protest’ and its effects developed by Master Yang



Figure 8.7 The introduction of the ‘One-person Picketing Protest method by using the MPG exercise regime at the regular meeting of Korean Confederation of Trade Union. The instructor at the very left in the picture was Master Yang (Left) and ‘One-person Picketing Protest’ in front of the contractor company of ABC call centre applying MPG exercise posture (Right).

Master Yang emphasises that a person taking the posture of ‘Whole Body Stretching’ looks “determined.” Given that the bent and shrunken posture can be considered as “daunted,” the ‘One-person Picketing Protest’ (Figure 8.7) can achieve health and propagation effects. In his words, if it has benefits of health and propagation, it can be said that there is a possibility that the stretched out ‘hands up’ posture for being seen as determined can help to transform a person into one who is truly determined. Applying this to the inside of the call centre and everyday life, if you practise the MPG exercise regularly and follow the core principles of it - ‘bad posture makes people unhealthy,’ and keep a straight and good posture, “you can be viewed as a person with self-confidence or a ‘*dang-dang*’ mind.” The possibility of being transformed into such a person is also created. This probability will be even higher “if you get your physical well-being so that it helps you to improve your self-confidence in everyday life.”

Master Yang, on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2015 sent a message to the labour union after it experienced difficulty in demanding the contractor company’s direct employment of call centre workers. It was “To my dear companions, ABC labour union, I could die without any regrets if you recover your health

through MPG exercise, and then with that ‘*gigae*’ (氣概 = grit) you change the world totally. Cheer up!” His statement exactly implied the existential reason for MPG exercise amongst labour unions. Through counteracting the long-term effects of a sedentary workplace environment, the exercise was expected to improve workers’ health, subsequently elevate their self-esteem and ultimately infuse them with ‘*gigae*,’ unyielding spirit.

Meanwhile, Master Yang commenced the regular MPG exercise curriculum from September 2015 in the Korean Confederation of Trade Union to foster the official trainers who will be the seeds to spread the exercise within labour union members nationwide. The project was to follow the successful example of the MPG exercise programme at ABC call centre. Amongst other call centres, the labour union of DEF call centre in Seoul started the MPG exercise assembly from October 2014. Following the precedent of the ABC union, its union executives also played a pivotal role, then cultivated one official trainer in November 2015.

#### 8.4.3. The dispute to prioritise the labour union over MPG exercise

Many of the labour union executives completely agreed that the MPG exercise meetings were of great help to the union. However, there were disputes about the position of the exercise amongst union members. A typical criticism I heard was “Is it right for you, an executive of the union, to spend time doing this trivial exercise in this serious situation?” During my fieldwork, I happened to witness the conflicts between the union executives, particularly when the union was in a critical situation, having struggling to secure the permanent working position through being ‘directly’ employed by the contractor company. Ms Shin, a former executive of the union, gave her opinion about the issue.

“I do love to practise the stretching exercise. But people around me told me, “Is it

appropriate for you now to do stretching?” The MPG exercise was considered much less valuable than the labour union duty, though I’d love stretching my body. I dislike this kind of atmosphere. Actually, when I heard that there is an assembly of MPG exercise in the evening, I got really excited. But it had always been cancelled if there had been union meetings, so I often did MPG exercise only twice a month. The fact that I was unable to keep up the exercise irritated me. I hoped I would keep it as steady as possible. I am doing MPG exercise not for the union work, but caring about my health. I was somewhat disappointed about that. It also seemed that the general union members and non-union members having participating in the assembly were also a little sad about irregular practices.”

(Ms Shin, call handler, 07/07/15)

Ms Shin, depicting herself as a ‘dry squid on fire’ (Chapter 7), told me that she got disappointed about prioritising the labour union activities over MPG exercise. However, she did not express her opinion in the union. Even within the union, as she did to the manager at the call centre, she hesitated to communicate her opinion clearly about MPG exercise. This even led her to question her trust in the union executives. She felt annoyed about the atmosphere in which the individual’s small desires were easily ignored for big things. She confessed to me when I interviewed her that she does not believe the managers, but also cannot completely trust the union executives either.

MPG exercise was often regarded as less ‘valuable’ than the labour union matters. There was a tacit agreement amongst the union executives that union activities should take priority over the MPG exercise meeting. In other words, attendance at the exercise meeting was not seen as an acceptable excuse for exemption from the union duties. First of all, there was an absolute lack of time for each union executive, overloaded with a mountain of problems to solve and fights with employers. Secondly, the participants in the exercise meeting had a lot of fun, actually laughing a lot together in contrast to the seriousness of confronting union issues so that MPG exercise was likely to be considered frivolous. Hence, the executive could be regarded as irresponsible if she or he spent time doing the exercise, especially during a serious situation.

Almost every union executive had to work in the call centre during the daytime, which was exhausting in itself. As I described before in Chapter 6.4.1 (“My mouth became dirty”), the exhausted call handlers often became easily irritable to others, and the union executives were not the exception at all. Ms Jang, the first leader of ABC labour union, pointed out that the exhausting call handling tended to make some executives ill-tempered, and the subject of their complaints sometimes became the MPG exercise. In fact, I had witnessed a dispute over MPG exercise at a union executive’s birthday party. This was a struggle between those who felt the effects of MPG exercise was beneficial and those who did not. After the controversy, Miss Lee wrote her feelings in a social network shared by the union executives.

“Why did everyone (who had complained about MPG exercise) suddenly leave (the birthday party) this way? Please tell us why you left. Am I not supposed to be comforted by you and the members of MPG exercise after having suffered from customers, union members and managers all day long? I also have a family, personal life, I want to finish my studies, so every single day is important for me. However, I am engaging hard in this union...It’s a really sad day.”

(Miss Lee, sub-leader of ABC union, 27/03/15)

Nonetheless, most of the participants in MPG exercise assembly, including Ms Shin and Miss Lee, said that they got comfort from Master Yang’s devotion, teaching and personality. Due to his commitment (e.g. travelling every Thursday on a train that took 70 minutes, at his expense), they were able to overcome the disappointment of putting the union first over the exercise. Ms Shin said that although Master Yang also emphasised the priority of the union activity, he found it important to regularly practice MPG exercise so as to keep his body healthy and stressed it would ultimately have a positive effect on the union activities. Ms Shin, having depicted herself always being “*jjogeuradeun*” (literally, meaning ‘shrunken’) due to her lack of authority at work, low pay, low social status and lack of economic power, became able to recover from her shrunken body and daunted mind after meeting Master Yang and learning the MPG exercise. Alongside the

benefits of the exercise, his long union experience had been a pillar of strength for her as well as other participants in the exercise assembly.

In conclusion, despite the underlying prejudices towards MPG exercise the meetings in the call centre continued. The exercise had many positive aspects for both the individuals and the labour union, so consequently it was considered very fruitful for the sustainability of the union. Furthermore, after my fieldwork I was told that the union began to hold the exercise assembly during work hours from 4 pm to 4.20 pm, an official afternoon break time, twice a week at the fitness room of the centre from September 2016 led by four official trainers (Miss Joo, Miss Lee, Ms Shin, Ms Kim) alternately in pairs (Figure 8.1). As a result, the participation rate of union members and non-members increased and the assembly continued to be held without cancellation due to the union's sudden schedules.

## 8.5. The call handlers' body appraised through the core value of MPG exercise

The catchphrase of MPG exercise that Master Yang loves to repeat is “*her-se-ga-pyeo-go-dl.*” It is the acronym (bold letters) of the Korean sentence “*heorireul seugo, gaseumeul pyeogo, gogaereul deuleora*” meaning “Back Stretched, Chest Forward, Head Upward.” Master Yang explains the phrase with introducing the typical walking posture of ‘*yangban,*’ the traditional gentry or ruling class of dynastic Korea, particularly during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). The *yangban*'s walking posture is displayed in a museum in Seoul, Korea (Figure 8.8). It is explained as “First, lock your arms behind your waist. Second, straighten your back. Third, take long steps,” which is very similar with the catchphrase of the MPG exercise. Master Yang insists that although the posture principally reveals the power or authority of the gentry, it is a very healthy posture. He suggests that following the *yangban*'s walking posture, gives a person strong self-esteem like

them. In other words, he connects the healthy posture with high social status by giving an example of the *yangban* walking.



Figure 8.8 The typical walking posture of *yangban*, traditional ruling class in dynastic Korea (retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> December 2015 from <http://blog.naver.com/calflowe>).



Figure 8.9 The photograph of comparing the attitude of treating cleaning workers between the president of the USA and one member of the National Assembly of Korea. It is published by one Korean internet newspaper on 27 November 2013. The article criticises the member's arrogant attitude and shows the agony of female cleaning workers of subcontractor companies. This picture is an example to show the connection between social status and body posture in Korea (retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> December 2015 from <http://www.gobalnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=5488>).

Master Yang's metaphorical approach is very understandable since the interaction ritual or norm culturally embedded in body postures, generally speaking, is very influential in Korea and also the connection between social status and a posture like the *yangban's* walking is actually quite significant, often provoking criticism (e.g. see Figure 8.9 and 3.4). As explained in previous chapters 6 and 7, the 'Hands Up' postures for permission to go to the toilet, or to show one's complaint and claims toward the employer and citizens on the street, are perceived as embarrassing or even humiliating since they collide with the long-standing shared body comportment of workers. The ideal comportment of workers is close to what the factory girls in the 1970s and 80s in GIC showed: unquestioning obedience, being daunted rather than '*dang-*

*dang*' (see Chapter 5.3 and 5.4). The immediate emotional response and bodily hesitation of call centre workers when contradicting expected body comportment rules could enlighten them about their embodied social status. The lived experience of Ms Shin during the first warning strike of ABC call centre is a clear example; "too frightened to join in...I am a dry squid...My body was out of control" (see Chapter 7.4.1). The emotional response, particularly embarrassment, as Goffman (2005(1967):111) emphasises, plays an essential role in self-presentations and interaction rituals of female call handlers as an 'emotional due' in a workplace (Hochschild 2003(1983):229). Therefore, it is one of Goffman's 'traffic rules of social interaction' (as discussed in Chapter 3.2.2.2) as well as a 'body idiom' (Goffman 1966:35) or 'perceptual syntax' (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962)) to communicate in certain situations.

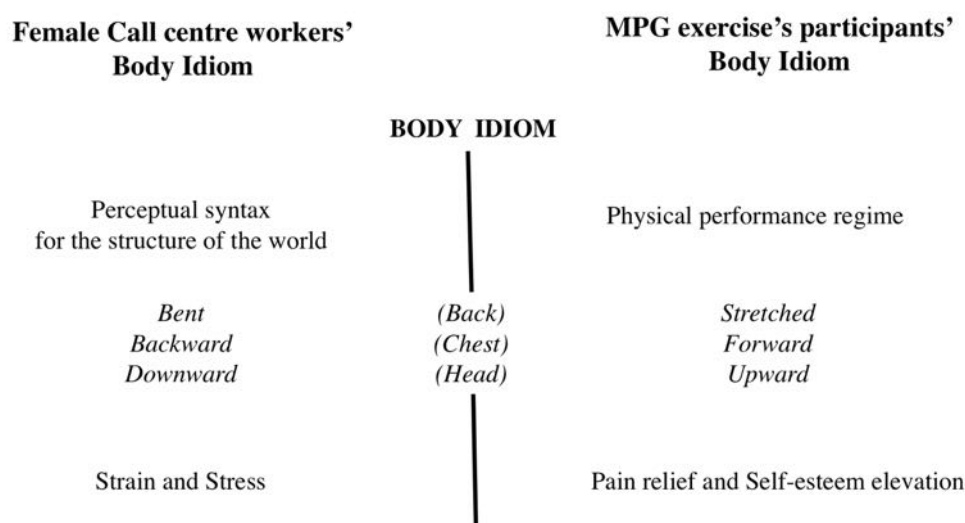


Figure 8.10 The comparison about body idiom between female call centre workers and MPG exercise

In Figure 8.10, I compare the 'body idiom' that I have observed amongst female call centre workers and MPG exercise participants. People cannot stop communicating through their body idiom regardless of whether they are talking or not. In the call centre, workers are supposed to be vigilant of the working environment and follow the appropriate or demanding body idiom. Hence, in order to grasp the structure of the world, it is important to observe its perceptual syntax guiding

the body to live. The observed syntax and body idiom, particularly through the female call centre workers' bodies is 'Bent, Backward and Downward,' which is well shown in Figure 2.5 depicting the female workers' postures (looking down, bending upper bodies, unable to have eye contact with customers) with their daunted faces.

I consider the perceptual syntax - 'bent, downward, and backward'- of the female workers is not only a description of static posture. As we saw in Chapter 3.2.1, Merleau-Ponty insists that "motricity is not a servant of consciousness," rather body itself has a motor power and it is intentionally moving in situated space (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):139, 140). Generally, in habitual movements, the body does not need conscious reflection on its form and shape before action (Dolezal 2015a:22). Thus, I think the body idiom of the female workers represents the 'motor intentionality' of the workers' bodies; prone to being bent, downward, and backward compartment (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):113). In the case of the female workers, they are prone or ready to get their heads downward, chests backward and backs bent, which, in terms of emotion, makes them more 'shame-prone' (Dolezal 2015a:91) (cf. Figure 8.11). Although the workers' daily body performances might be preconscious struggles to avoid humiliation and keep what Goffman (2005(1967):19, 91) calls their 'sacred' personhood, keeping the postures and continuing to bodily talk through the employees' idiom in the workplace can cause strain and stress both physically and psychologically. As already shown in Figure 6.6, the body idiom apparently leaves painful scars in every part of the workers' bodies.



Figure 8.11 The hieroglyph of the word 'humiliation' in Chinese. The Korean word, *guryok*, which is equivalent to 'humiliation,' comes from Chinese word, '屈辱.' The first word, '屈' defines 'bent, crooked' or 'bend.' In detail, '出' means 'protrude' and '尸' buttocks, when combining both meanings, it reveals 'bend over, causing the buttocks to protrude.' Namely, the word for 'humiliated' emotion is connected with the specific body posture like the figure (retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> December 2015 from [http://www.kanjinetworks.com/eng/kanji-dictionary/online-kanji-etymology-dictionary.cfm?kanji\\_id=KUAT23](http://www.kanjinetworks.com/eng/kanji-dictionary/online-kanji-etymology-dictionary.cfm?kanji_id=KUAT23) )

MPG exercise represents a conscious movement to counteract the workers' body idiom, initially from physically stretching their bodies. While continuing to practise the MPG regime - '(back) stretched, (chest) forward, (head) upward,' the participants get benefits such as physical improvement and elevating self-esteem. Following Merleau-Ponty, MPG exercise can be considered to reverse the workers' long-standing 'motor intentionality.' After starting the exercise, the participants were more caring about their bent postures during work time, often stretching their bodies to counteract their embodied workers' typical postures. Their change of bodily expression is sometimes seen by others during face-to-face interactions and they are also aware that they are sometimes seen differently. Merleau-Ponty suggests that "being seen by others is necessary in order to have a complete view of oneself" (requoted from Dolezal (2015b:16)). Namely, one recognises one's body through recognising the fact that the body is 'seen' by others. This subjectivity and inter-subjectivity is primarily based on the 'visibility' of the body. The visible change of one's physical posture through having been seen by others, therefore, has an important role to play in building up a different subjectivity. Throughout the MPG exercise assembly and participants' repetitive interaction with others in the workplace, they can begin to change their body idiom. Considering Merleau-Ponty's statement - 'body is the point of view upon the world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):73), this change of one's body idiom means a change in how to perceive the world, ultimately moving toward having true grit (*gigae*).

## 8.6. Conclusion: Supple body over daunted mind

It is common sense that body-stretching is good for our health. However, it is doubtful how many people actually do regular stretching and realise that it could affect their work and interpersonal relationships. For me, when I first heard the principle of MPG exercise - "Bad posture makes people unhealthy," I considered it a cliché and overlooked its significance. Ms Jang did the same. In contrast, Master Yang, who had lost 20kg weight in 20 days due to his

hunger strike and exhausted his physical strength completely, found out how important this seemingly simple principle of MPG exercise was. It seems not to be easy for a person who does not face an extreme situation to grasp how this body posture correction and muscle relaxation exercise has major physical, psychological, and even social effects. It is ironic that the person who had experienced hunger strike and major frustrations as the representative of a nationwide trade union, found hope in a simple stretching exercise that many members of the labour union dismissed as representing complacency and a distraction from genuine labour union duties.

The fact that body stretching is likely not considered important enough to practise in daily life might come from two factors with regard to the call handlers. First, they might take the simple bodily pain for granted as a kind of duty that they must endure. About 90% of ABC call handlers have shoulder pain, for example. Second, it is related to the atmosphere in which employees' sickness becomes not a natural part of life but 'delegitimated.' Many call handlers often feel in a bad mood and emotionally exhausted after work, and try to relieve their 'bad mood' first rather than physical pain. While call handlers concentrate on emotional recovery and believe that it is more important, they likely overlook the physical pain in their muscles and joints, and might not recognise signals of chronic illness. Many of the call handlers I met often relied on painkillers and plasters rather than practising exercise or depended on other temporary, but quick and easy methods such as drinking, smoking or binge eating. They could forget the harshness and exhaustion of their lives for a while but failed to change their situations and the pain of their bodies as well.

In this reality, Master Yang's cry for MPG exercise by saying "Let's stretch out your body first" sounded revolutionary to me. His emphasis on "Back Stretched, Chest Forward, Head Upward" was not only for improving physical health but also to enable the daunted mind to be relieved by stretching the stiff body. The labour union of ABC call centre is a paramount example of how a 'supple body' can overcome 'daunted mind.' Therefore, MPG exercise is not a case of a 'psycho to somatic' approach but a 'somato to psychic' approach, one which combine the stretching

exercise ('hands up for body healing') with the labour movement ('hands up for protest'). I observed from Master Yang and labour union executives of the ABC call centre union that the body is not just a medium of perception or passive subject of sociocultural structures but is also a starting point for a person's holistic transformation. In other words, 'Hands up' against physical gravity is the simple but essential way to start to overcome cultural gravity.

## 9. Conclusion

“Are you born with ‘*geum sujeo*’ (=gold spoon) or ‘*heuk sujeo*’ (=dirt spoon)?” In 2016 Korea, people often use those figurative words of ‘spoon theory,’ which hypothesises that people are born with one of four spoons in their mouths - gold, silver, bronze or dirt. This theory metaphorically shows the imbalance of wealth in Korea. It also reveals that people regard the wealth of their parents as the primary factor in their success. For people considering themselves born without a gold spoon, rising through the class ladder in Korean society is perceived as nearly impossible. As the word ‘Hell Korea’ (*heljoseon*) is dominating Korean media and people’s accounts of the current situation of socioeconomic challenges, the ‘spoon theory’ seems to reveal the citizen’s frustration and anger towards the unfair societal system. During my fieldwork, most of the women I met said that they are born without a gold spoon, only a ‘dirt spoon,’ and are now working in the call centre to survive in this ‘hell’- like country.

The call centre industry, in a way, is one of the iconic jobs of high-tech capitalism alongside the development of Information Communication Technologies. Seen from the outside, it seems a modern industry since people work with a computer and telephone, sitting on a seat, seemingly not physically challenged or being abused and getting their hands dirty. In Indian call centres, for example, many employees are female college students, who study in the daytime and work on night shift, calling a call centre as “an air-conditioned college” where they can work in ‘a financially rewarding and liberal environment’ with men and formulate transnational identities (Basi 2009:13, 31). However, as I have showed, when looking at the underside of call centre working it can be described as an iconic job only of the ‘working class’ (Jones 2011) or a ‘female job ghetto’ (Belt 2002). Low wage, high-stress levels, and employee burnout, restricted career paths – all these features make the call centre the ‘sweatshop of the 20th century’ or ‘tomorrow’s dark satanic mills,’ where ‘architectural, technological, and regulatory tactics’ are interconnected

(Winiiecki 2007). It can also be the typical workplace of 21st century 'Taylorism' (Chapter 6.2.2) because of the following characteristics: direct and electronic supervision, regimentation of time, extremely repetitive work, automatic call distribution and performance-related payment system.

While searching these characteristics of the call centre in Korea, one day I heard a mind-blowing statement on the street. Thinking about the awakening talk of the 'fishbowl story' (Chapter 4.6.1), I was making every effort to figure out the different colour of the 'water' in which the call handlers were living. In this context, when I participated in the National Women Workers' Assembly with ABC call centre union members on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2015, I wrote down carefully what I heard from its speakers. At that moment, Ms Jang, the first leader of ABC union, sitting next to me, asked me what I was doing. I answered, "I am taking a note of what I think sounds important." After some seconds, she replied, "Everything is important to us. You don't seem to be as desperate as we are." I could not say anything. Even though I was out there on the street with them, chanting together and listening to the same speeches, I was unable to perceive the world as the way in which they saw – 'dyed water.' The fact remained that I was still paying attention to some 'stones' that I considered important. I realised the usual routine for me can be seen as an entirely different colour to them.

There are many things that I had not been aware of during my pilot study but became aware of during my main fieldwork. One of them is the gesture of 'hands up' of female call handlers. Before meeting ABC call centre union members and experiencing the MPG exercise, I had not fully understood the various meanings of call handlers' hands up; particularly the humiliation, courage or prejudice and indifference they have to overcome. However, apart from an extremely small number of female call handlers, the majority seem to follow the inertia of their body in a repetitive daily cycle, often depending on temporary solutions like drug foods. It must be nearly impossible for the external observer to comprehend the embodied disposition completely which implies the totality of their lived experience in every situation. Thus, most of the suffering they experience, both psychological and physical, is also nearly invisible to others. I have sought to

observe and listen to those that tend to be invisible and overlooked amongst female call handlers, and it can be summarised as several categories in conclusion as follows.

### 9.1. Chemical employeeship: from ‘caffeine’ (at GIC) to ‘nicotine’ (at SDIC)

The Seoul Digital Industrial Complex (SDIC) is a large, iconic industrial area in Korea. It was established in 1998 to develop cutting-edge information and communication industries where the previous Guro Industrial Complex (GIC), the first national exporting complex for labour-intensive goods, had been managed from 1964. Here, I explored the lives of factory girls, the iconic workers of low wages and hard work in the sweatshops of GIC during the period of Korea's economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s. I also sought to understand the lives of current female call centre workers in SDIC, who are comparable to the factory girls with respect to the wages and social reputation. If so, what has changed and what remains?

How has the life of female call handlers in service industries of the 21st century changed from one of factory girls who had worked under the ideology of nation-building as the “industrial soldiers”? Apparently, the characteristics of labour have changed from ‘physical labour’ to so-called ‘emotional labour’; the working equipment from sewing machines to computers and telephones; the dress from the blue factory uniforms to personal clothes. However, Ms Zan in her mid-50s, having worked as a factory girl in GIC in the 1980s, exclaims “50 years ago, life as a factory girl, 50 years after, life as an irregular worker.” From her perspective, the life of female workers has not fundamentally changed. What can indirectly represent these changes well is to understand what kind of disposition is required of by the employers and how they treat the employees. In my research, drug foods are the starting point and vehicle to achieve a deeper understanding of the disposition.

The top priority of the capitalist ordered system could be deeply related to how effectively to boost the performance of workers at low cost. Thus, the profit motive of the owners could colour

the decisions about the disposition of their employees. From what I have gathered during the research, the most admirable disposition of the workforce is ‘tireless industriousness’ and ‘obedience.’ Historically, the essential thing for employers is the sustainability of a full workforce. This workforce should be provided with whatever is necessary to ‘fuel’ it, and ‘drug foods’ are age-old agencies to help employees “work longer and harder than they could have without the drug” (Jankowiak and Bradburd 2003:24). In the 1970s and 80s in GIC, the most prevalent labour enhancer amongst factory girls was a high-dose caffeine drug, called ‘*Timing*,’ which synchronised workers’ body rhythm with their work hours. *Timing* is the concrete evidence of the kind of dispositions factory owners demanded of their workforce in that period such as industriousness.

Now, in the 2010s in SDIC, particularly in the call centres, the most distinctive drug food is cigarette. Considering the exceptionally high smoking rates of female call handlers in the context of the societal stigma attached to female smoking in Korea, it can be inferred that the owners still require call handlers to increase productivity and efficiency for more profit. As the corporation’s pursuit of profits interlocks with workers’ financial vulnerability, employers force the long-standing body politics of women, which values the ‘body to conceive’ (i.e. foetal protection from harmful chemicals) to yield to the demands for the ‘body to labour.’ This history of female worker’s chemical coping from caffeine (at GIC) to nicotine (at SDIC) indirectly shows what Korean society has been demanding in the field of labour, particularly for low-educated, low-wage women; it is a ‘docile and tireless body.’ That is why some of the female call handlers refer to themselves as “*kol-suni*” (*kol* = first letter of a call centre in Korean (*kol-senteo*), *suni* = common feminine name) likening it to “*gong-suni*” (*gong* = first letter of a factory in Korean (*gong-jang*), used to disparage a factory girl). For them, nothing has changed.

Investigating the evolution of drug foods from caffeine to nicotine, I came up with the concept, ‘chemical employeeship,’ which means that the basis for employment and staking claims to payment is to have a certain disposition to work longer and harder with the help of any chemicals

that can increase output and hence the employer's profit. This concept emphasises that chemical use must not be simply perceived as an individual's unhealthy behaviour, but rather an attempt by the employer to increase profits. I also wanted to reveal that chemical coping seems to 'depoliticise' workers; that is, rather than putting up collective resistance to unfair treatments, they depend on individualised consumption of drug foods. Meanwhile, the call handlers' lived experience of suffering, particularly humiliation from customers, managers and colleagues, shows their chemical use is more than a simple tool to cope with certain situations. It is an attempt, as one informant put it, through "drinking, overeating, smoking...to heal oneself...elevating self-esteem." No matter how harmful and socially condemned, they need to comfort themselves at once and make themselves feel better about themselves. Regarding smoking behaviours, what is essential for female call handlers who smoke might be to overcome not 'nicotine withdrawal symptoms' but 'life-induced withdrawal symptoms.' Those are symptoms through everyday life struggles (e.g. worry, overpressure and exhaustion) that people feel an impulse to alleviate quickly by smoking.

## 9.2. Pain at the margin: from endurance to delegitimation

As I have sought to understand the disposition of call handlers through their use of drug foods, I have also explored it by looking at the 'pain' they have. In call centres, the throat and wrist pain, as well as general fatigue, are so common that the reporting of these symptoms tends to be regarded as unreasonable. The problem is that pain is invisible unless the sick person articulates it. Many call handlers whom I have met look 'fine' at first glance as if they had no psychological or physical defects whatsoever. Until becoming acquainted with and deeply understanding them, I might have been unable to figure out how much they depend on drug foods, fatigue reliefs, pain relief medication and patches, and even prescribed psychiatric medication. Take the case of Ms Woo. Because of her neat and bright appearance, I could not imagine how much had she been

suffering from physical pain as well as psychological stress. Every morning she smokes two cigarettes and sometimes takes an anti-anxiety drug right after waking up to alleviate sudden 'anticipatory anxiety' about the work that day. In this way, her pain becomes invisible, whether it is psychological or physical.

Meanwhile, the call handlers I have met mostly endure their pain as something inevitable ("a kind of duty"). The employers also often disregard the workers' illnesses and even delegitimize them by managing marking systems related to payment. In this respect, the pain of workers is overlooked by both employees and employers; that is, pain at the margin. There are some researchers revealing that the physical pain of call handlers is due not only to the physical strain but also psychological strain. Sprigg et al. (2007) show the upper body & lower back musculoskeletal disorders influenced by the psychological strains (e.g. job-related anxiety and depression) amongst the workers of 34 call centres in the UK. Another research project conducted in ABC call centre reveals that the more a call handler performs 'surface acting,' (i.e. pretending to welcome and sympathise with the customers) (Hochschild 2003(1983):33), the more the worker gets pains in their neck, shoulder and wrist (Korea Labour & Society Institute 2014:313). It reveals that emotional challenges at work influence workers' physical pain. Thus, the pain should not be overlooked as mere bodily symptoms, rather considered as a sort of 'litmus paper' to indicate whether a person suffers from psychological strains. The frequency of the pain amongst the call handlers could indirectly show how they are treated by the companies and what disposition the owners require of them. Following the dispositions ordered or at least preferred by the owners (e.g. docility, industriousness) probably requires the workers to acquire specific body scheme (or idiom), which could result in chronic pain.

Many researchers have struggled to measure the correct percentage of pain prevalence in every joint and develop certain scales (e.g. Emotional Labour Scale (Brotheridge and Lee 2003)). Although call handlers continue to give 'lived' testimonies as to the reality of their working environment and illness, the researchers look for more 'objective,' 'accurate,' and 'larger' data as

if numbers are more believable than testimonies. When the health survey was conducted in ABC call centre, Ms Jang told me that she was sceptical about it and thought to herself, “Why are they conducting the similar survey again? I am a little tired of it now.” Some workers’ outcries about painful experiences such as from sexual harassment and abusive humiliation to facial palsy, brain haemorrhage and suicide – all these testimonies are not given enough attention, rather being probably regarded as personal misfortune. The representative example is one male call handler’s suicide; he tried to inform Korean society of the tyranny of the call centre company by leaving his suicide note (see Figure 7.3), which failed to attract enough attention to bring real improvement in the call centre. One day, during the street rally of the ABC call centre union, Miss Joo asked me how much more they have to suffer in the call centre and scream on the street in order to appeal to society about their bad situation. She feels that indifference and inhospitality towards their pain outside the call centre are the same inside the centre.

There have been voices of concern from other researchers when I convey the lived experience of female call handlers to them; “Is it really that bad? Isn’t it an exceptional case or a bit exaggerated? Don’t sympathise with them too much.” These concerns made me continue to engage in self-censorship throughout my research. It also inspires me to think that the tacit norms working within a call centre might not only be considered valid within it but also outside the centre. Furthermore, the tacit norms of society are the background of indifference to the workers’ chronic pain in the centre. In other words, the chronic pain of female call handlers is easily considered as common or inevitable by the employees and employers as well as people in the same society. Therefore, I have approached the tacit norms and the required dispositions of the workers that encourage or require them to have a stressful posture causing chronic pain through the concept ‘cultural gravity,’ which means the cultural force operating to demand the worker’s body be docile and industrious. I suggest the cultural gravity operating in the call centre is a composite of historico-culturo-emotional physics. The elements of this composite are these; firstly, the nation-building history after the Korean War (1950-1953), propagandising ‘loyalty’ and

‘industriousness,’ such as establishing several national industrial complexes including GIC and SDIC; secondly, the traditional Confucian culture emphasising ‘obedience,’ a virtue for youth, women and subordinates to follow while supporting the patriarch’s rights; lastly, the body schema (or idiom) to protect oneself from humiliation by customers, managers and colleagues, usually pulling a body ‘bent, backwards, downwards’ (see Figure 2.5 and 3.4). Just as people are not usually conscious of the force of physical gravity, the employees’ as well as the employers’ response immediately to each other under the influence of the cultural gravity was as if ‘invisible (or intentional) threads’ are linking each other (Merleau-Ponty 2007:334; 2012(1962):108). The result is the shrunken and rigid workers’ body with chronic pain, invisible, tough.

### 9.3. What the body remembers: looking through the value of MPG exercise

One of the essential occasions that maybe realise the researcher’s body is the best field-note is to experience MPG exercise with the ABC call centre labour union. Through the embodied dialogical encounter with female call handlers, while stretching together, I feel I have changed from a positive physician to a phenomenological anthropologist. In other words, my ‘body’ has changed and subsequently ‘my point of view upon the world’ has changed (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):73). In the end, the simple research question during my pilot study (“Why do female call handlers smoke so much?”) has been transformed into the issues of the call handlers’ specific bodily practice and its meaning (‘Hands Up’ for humiliation, protest and healing). In this thesis, however, I do not mean to focus on the medical benefits of MPG exercise and insist that this exercise is a sort of panacea to heal one’s body holistically. Rather, I have described the positive benefits of MPG exercise to emphasise how the call handlers became unhealthy through the physical strain and psychological stress they suffered and by following the subordinate’s body idiom (‘bent, backwards, downwards’) (Figure 8.10).

The benefits of MPG exercise seem to become clearer when compared to one of the most

common habits of female call handlers, smoking. In the call centre, smoking is used as a tool for relieving emotional stresses, a social contact lubricant amongst female workers who smoke and an excuse for unofficial break times (Kim 2013). However, the smoking practice has nothing to do with any fundamental solution, rather it is a makeshift drug food, which could result in adverse effects on smokers' health. Furthermore, the ongoing social stigma attached to female smoking in Korean society could further reduce their self-esteem. In contrast to this, the MPG exercise has definite physical benefits (e.g. relieving musculoskeletal pain and general physical strength improvement) and psychological merit (e.g. improving self-esteem). These benefits will have a 'long-lasting' positive impact on their health as they can have a positive feedback relationship with each other. In terms of sociability, while the smoking behaviour can help to improve sociality 'within' smokers in the centre, the MPG exercise could enable sociability with many more colleagues through practising together with fun, teaching each other, becoming a trainer to be able to help other colleagues as well as friends and family. Unfortunately, all these benefits of MPG exercise are usually not available to most female call handlers. The fact remains that they often rely on the temporary solution that can be harmful to their health.

Meanwhile, MPG exercise assembly has played a pivotal role in sustaining the ABC call centre labour union. It is a sort of antidote to the burdens of union executives such as physical and psychological exhaustion, reduced self-confidence, discord amongst members and solidarity with other unions. Particularly, Master Yang's efforts to directly combine the stretching posture with the labour movement ('one-person picketing protest') shows the value of MPG exercise in enhancing physical strength as well as strength for the union's voice. What I identified and experienced during the fieldwork was that the daunted mind can be relieved by stretching the stiff body. Master Yang's advice on the body posture ("back stretched, chest forward, head upward") reversely highlights that female call handlers are likely to live with bad body posture, which is deeply associated with the docile and industrious dispositions that the owners demand.

Having learned and practised MPG exercise regularly, I began to be able to see the body posture

of call handlers. I had paid so much attention to their thoughts, feelings and the meaning of their behaviour before that I had been unable to listen to what their body (posture) was saying. The expression, “a grilled dry squid on the fire” by Ms Shin (Figure 7.11) is an acutely observed metaphor to show the importance of body posture, comparing hers with a dry squid, describing her submissive demeanour and lack of self-esteem by emphasising her body idiom characterised by ‘shrinking.’ Body parts have often been deployed to represent certain social classes and the division of labour such as a head for the upper classes dealing in mental duties and the extremities for the lower classes doing physical jobs (Douglas 2010(1966):153). Meanwhile, considering the meaning of the body idiom of female call handlers (‘bent, backward, downward’), the posture of a body and a certain direction of motor intentionality can be regarded as representing its social class; for example, stretched posture for upper class and bent posture for lower class (see Figure 3.4). This cannot be said to be a perfect law or true of every female call handler. However, according to the lived experience that I have learnt from the call handlers, the point is that the attitude of always bowing one’s head and suppressing anger, even though these responses happen immediately without consciousness, sometimes makes them feel extremely humiliated. In addition, it could be of great difficulty for them to act against the simple body response and give their voice. As a result, their bodies are exposed to strain and stress both physically and psychologically.

#### 9.4. The spread of ‘*hwabyung*’ in the digital industry

In Korea, ‘fire’ has been symbolising ‘anger’ for a long time and is regarded as an important ‘internal pathogen’ from the perspective of Oriental medicine, causing the sickness is ‘*hwabyung*’ (Suh 2013). Currently, the forces causing women to suppress their reactive anger seem to be found in both the patriarchal family and the workplace. In the 1970s and 80s, economic development was based on the low-paid but highly productive female labour force in the textile, garment and

electronic industry. The labour force was centred on physical labour so that the factory girls used to take a high-dose caffeine medicine to keep awake and maintain productivity. In the 2010s, the situation seems to have changed, particularly looking at the call centre industry. The female call handlers are supposed to introduce products, sell them and consult about inquiries and complaints over the phone with a smiling voice. The labour is surely physically challenging, but compared to that of the past female workers, it demands call handlers to manipulate and suppress their emotions more actively and directly. In the past, whereas the factory girls had worked with enduring abuse from the employers and the male supervisors, the call handlers now continue to take or give calls to the customers and are ready to endure abusive words (“swear-pan”) from them for improving the calls-per-day rate. Thus, it has become an important ability for them to cope well with abusive customers and to control their own anger. As the service industry has expanded and the call centre industry has subsequently evolved, the subservient abilities of housewives within the patriarchal families in the past have been redeployed in the workplace, with ‘*hwabyung*’ spreading amongst marginalised female workers beyond family boundaries.

The spread of ‘*hwabyung*’ in the call centre industry is not only a change in the type of labour but also a change in the overall economic system of Korea. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and its aftermath triggered the rise of neoliberalism, particularly its flexible labour market, to spread in Korea under the IMF’s intervention. About 3300 corporations went into bankruptcy in one month, with a huge number of workers losing their jobs, which resulted in insecure employment, temporary employment, massive layoff and youth unemployment. These changes of the whole economic system have also had an influence on the difficulty of establishing a labour union due to the high rates of temporary employment as well as high turnover and strong oppression of governmental authorities against labour unions. As a result, the organisational rate of the labour union has decreased to about 2% in SDIC, where it had reached 20% in the late 1980s and early 90s during the period of GIC. Such a difficult and challenging process of establishing the first labour union in the call centre is the definitive evidence. Because of the complex subcontracting

systems and employment structures (Figure 5.15), the channels to claim rights for workers including call handlers have become narrower. After all, the call handlers have few alternatives but to endure unfair treatment from the employers and abusive customers as well.

The essence of *hwabyung* comes from the long-standing Confucian culture, emphasising obedience as the virtue of ideal women. The Confucian propriety, even having been first introduced in 1431, is still influential as the interpersonal values in daily lives of Koreans. In particular, the value of 'national loyalty and filial piety' was propagandised during the period of nation-building in the 1970s and 80s. In celebration of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of GIC in 2015, the government and local authority expressed admiration for the factory girls' commitment and self-sacrifice. This government propaganda highlighted Confucian propriety and may have been intended to pacify workers' complaints and resistance; if one follows instructions and works diligently ('obedience upward'), the owners should treat you well ('benevolence downward'). In this circumstance, there would be no need to complain. The problem here is that the obligation of the worker 'precedes' the obligation of the employer, it is not 'reciprocal' as it was in the original values of Confucianism. This unequal relationship is now reinforced by employment contracts favourable to employers (e.g. temporary contracts for a limited period).

During fieldwork, I met various professionals in different fields (e.g. a psychology consultant in one call centre, a male call centre manager and a public health professor). The majority of them saw the call handlers' 'low self-esteem' as the most fundamental reason for their psychological sufferings, of which many could be categorised as *hwabyung*. The professionals found the 'low self-esteem' to be caused by underlying personal problems (worker's depression, family discord, marital disharmony, personal debts, obesity, etc.), lack of pride in their job and abusive customers, but none of them pointed out the company's unfair treatment and excessive surveillance and control. In other words, the psychological distress of call handlers is seen as their individual responsibility. Turning all sufferings like poverty and illness into individual responsibility and depoliticising them is in common with neoliberal policies (Harvey 2007:181). Women who

suffered from *hwabyung* in the past might have been regarded as victims of an oppressive patriarchal Confucian culture. However, female call handlers today who endure humiliation and anger to maintain their jobs and may suffer from psychological distress, such as *hwabyung* as a result, are likely to find the company attributing their distress to low self-esteem. In this way, the pathology of *hwabyung* seems to be largely transformed into neoliberal logic.

### 9.5. Three ‘Hands Up’ and their lessons

This thesis shows in detail the specific characteristics of the call centre in Korea compared to the UK and India. I have also covered various surveillance systems and their effects on workers’ health as well as the call handler’s experience of diverse humiliation and the various drug foods they use to protect and heal themselves. In particular, I have described Confucian culture and its influence on the suffering of female call handlers. This thesis contributes by showing these details of Korean call centre compared to those of other countries. I think it is also valuable to describe the process of establishing the labour union in the call centre and the lived experience of union executives in ways which have not been well researched before now. Another significant point is how the thesis has dealt with the use of drug foods, workers’ body posture, and their dispositions, which the medical profession frequently perceives as very personal, trivial, and peripheral. The approach I have adopted has been possible primarily due to the lessons I learned from the ABC call centre union and Master Yang during my fieldwork.

During the one-year fieldwork, I have seen three different types of hands up amongst female call handlers. The first is being humiliated by hands up, the second protesting by hands up and the last self-healing by hands up. However, those do not happen with the same incidence. The hands up for protest is observed amongst about 0.1% of allegedly 400,000 call handlers, the hands up for self-healing 2.5% of the ‘0.1%.’ Whereas hands up of humiliation involves all call handlers in the workplace. Nonetheless, the method of collective resistance of the ABC call centre labour

union through combining MPG exercise with the labour movement is very new, and sounds revolutionary to me. Master Yang shows this possibility by introducing a 'one-person picketing protest,' stretching out arms to show one's determination as well as improving health and self-esteem. He goes one step further from the idea that bad body posture harms one's health. He thinks through his experience that socially vulnerable people are more likely to have a bad body posture so that recovering health by correcting bad posture is the first step to escaping from the vulnerable status. In his view, the life of a female call centre worker is precisely such a case. His insight was a major shock to me, as I had been trying to find the reason for societal problems from the 'mind' rather than the 'body.' The words of Merleau-Ponty piqued my interest: "I am not in front of my body, I am in my body or rather I am my body" (Merleau-Ponty 2012(1962):151). The lesson that I have learned from this is that body is inseparable from mind and world; the body is not only the centre of perception but also the starting point for change. For me as an anthropologist, therefore, the body is the best field-note.

## Appendices

[Appendix 1. The lists of organisations that the researcher contacted during the fieldwork]

<b>Organisations</b>	<b>Description</b>
Seoul Worker's Health Centre ( <i>seoul geulloja geongan gsenteo</i> )	a public health centre located in SDIC 3 for promoting workers' health
Guro Worker's Welfare Centre ( <i>gurogu geulloja bokjisenteo</i> )	a public welfare centre located in SDIC 1 to provide employees in SDIC with welfare programs and labour law-counselling
Worker's Future ( <i>nodongjau mirae</i> )	a branch of the Korean Confederation of Trade Union ( <i>minjunochong</i> ) in SDIC 2 to protect employees' labour rights, particularly workers who have no labour unions
Kumcheon Public Healthcare Centre ( <i>geumcheongu bogeonso</i> )	a public healthcare centre in SDIC 3 to manage residents' (including workers in SDIC 3) health and providing diverse health promotion projects (e.g. smoking cessation clinic)
WomenLink ( <i>hanguk yeoseong minuhoe</i> )	a non-governmental organisation in Korea to protect and improve women's human rights with respect to labour rights, reproductive rights, sexuality and LGBT issues.
Hope Alliance-Labour Union ( <i>huimangyeondae</i> )	a network labour union organised to protect labour rights of temporary employees who cannot afford to build labour unions by themselves.
Wonjin Institute of Environment and Health ( <i>nodong-hwangyeong-geongang-yeonguso</i> )	a leading research centre in Korea in the field of Occupational Safety and Health
Centre for Health and Social Change (especially 'Gender and Health' team) ( <i>geonganggwa daean</i> )	a non-governmental research community to develop alternative health policies against commercialised and neoliberalistic public health strategies
Guro Citizen Centre ( <i>guro-simin-senteo</i> )	a civil society organisation in SDIC2 supported by Seoul Metropolitan government where MPG exercise programs for residents and workers are held
MPG Exercise Association ( <i>mompyeonggi saenghwarundong hyeopoe</i> )	the central organisation of MPG exercise in Korea located in Seoul
Wonju branch of the Korean MPG exercise Association	one of the biggest local centres of MPG exercise where Master Jang manages
ABC and DEF call centre labour union	the first and second labour unions of the call centres in Korea

[Appendix 2. The lists of the events that the researcher experienced during the fieldwork]

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Events</b>
17 <sup>th</sup> January 2015	Workers' Health Right Forum
12 <sup>th</sup> February, 7 <sup>th</sup> March, 16 <sup>th</sup> April, 19 <sup>th</sup> May, 23 <sup>rd</sup> July 2015	ABC call centre union's street rally
24 <sup>th</sup> February, 24 <sup>th</sup> March, 28 <sup>th</sup> April, 26 <sup>th</sup> May 2015	Outreaching Healthcare Service of Seoul Workers' Healthcare Centre to a local call centre in SDIC
7 <sup>th</sup> March 2015	National Women Workers' Assembly
25 <sup>th</sup> March 2015	ABC labour union conference of outsourced research reporting
3 <sup>rd</sup> April 2015	General assembly of Hope Alliance-Labour Union
17 <sup>th</sup> April 2015	One-day pub event for sponsoring 'YG Electronics' Labour Union
24 <sup>th</sup> April 2015	"Garibong Five Street" Exhibition, Seoul History Museum
10 <sup>th</sup> April, 24 <sup>th</sup> May 2015	Outreaching Welfare Service of Guro Worker's Welfare Centre in Guro Digital subway station of SDIC 1
29 <sup>th</sup> May 2015	Outreaching Welfare Service of Guro Worker's Welfare Centre in Gasan Digital subway station of SDIC 3
3 <sup>rd</sup> June, 30 <sup>th</sup> June 2015	Documentary film "Factory Complex" VIP preview and open preview
19 <sup>th</sup> June 2015	One-day pub event for sponsoring 'Y-broadband' Labour Union
22 <sup>nd</sup> August 2015	National Summer Camp of 'MPG exercise' Official Trainers
28 <sup>th</sup> June 2015	Annual Memorial Service of Deceased Workers from Industrial Accidents

[Appendix 3. The personal assessment sheet of call quality from Ms Shin, a call handler at ABC call centre]

평가시기		상담원형			범	장기손사
항목	배점	체크	취득	평가기준		개선사항
상담 도입 (23)	첫인사	5		항목(인사말, 소속, 상담현명)을 누락없이 반가움이 느껴지는 첫인사로 고객을 맞이함	- 고객을 반기는 미소 및 생동감있는 어감 구사 부족	
		4		고객을 반기는 미소가 미흡함 / 성 없이 일률적인 어조로 진행되어 반가운 전달이 미흡함 / 화답인사 누락		
		2		인사말, 소속, 성명중 1가지 이상 누락하여 정해진 형식에 맞지 않음		
		0		첫인사를 누락함		
	3		통화목적을 정확하고 간결하게 전달함			
통화목적 및 감사표현	1		정해진 멘트는 모두 구사하나 성의가 미흡함 / 일부만 함께 구사하거나 통보식으로 전달함			
	0		통화목적 전달을 누락함			
본인확인	10		수신 대상자가 본인인지 여부와 상품명이나 계약정보를 정확하게 확인함			
	7		수신 대상자 또는 상품명 또는 계약정보 확인 중 1가지를 누락함			
계약확인 및 녹취안내	3		수신 대상자 또는 상품명 또는 계약정보 확인 중 2가지를 누락함			
	5		고객이 가입한 상품 명을 정확히 구술하며 녹취 안내를 진행함			
	3		고객이 가입한 상품 명과 녹취 안내 중 1가지만 안내함			
	1		고객이 가입한 상품 명과 녹취 안내를 모두 누락함			
상담 서비스 능력 (33)	음성/역양/호응어	17		고객의 상황에 맞는 감정어입과 미소 띤 음성으로 다양한 응대어를 활용하여 친절한 상담을 진행함	- 미소 및 리듬감있는 어감구사 부족하고 정중한 어미 표현 부족으로 다소 건조한 상담 진행됨	
		15		고객의 상황에 맞는 감정어입과 미소 띤 음성을 연출하나 단조로운 호응어를 사용함		
		13		고객의 상황에 맞는 상담을 진행하나 전반적인 친절도는 평이함		
		10		고객의 상황을 살피려는 의지가 미흡하고 감정어입이나 미소 없이 건조한 상담을 진행함		
		5		고객의 반응을 살피지 않고 통영스러운 어투로 일방적인 상담을 진행해 친절함이 전달되지 않음		
속도 발음	5		적절한 속도와 명료한 발음으로 상담을 진행함			
	3		의사소통에 무리나 부분적으로 속도가 고객에게 맞지 않게 빠른거나 느린 경우			
	1		전반적으로 속도 및 발음이 고객에게 맞지 않음 / 고객이 재차 되묻는 경우 / 발음이 명료하게 전달되지 않음			
	3		상황에 적절한 멘트를 충분히 활용하여 상담을 부드럽게 이끌어감(통화목적/감사표현)			
상황별 멘트	2		상황에 적절한 멘트 활용이 1-2회 누락된 경우			
	1		상황에 적절한 멘트 활용이 3-4회 누락된 경우			
	0		상황에 적절한 멘트 활용이 5회 이상 누락된 경우			
	5		차분하게 고객의 말씀에 끝까지 경청하여 응대함			
경청	4		중간개입 및 합당한 응대가 1-2회 발생함 (말걸침 포함)	- 말걸침 발생(1:09, 1:12)		
	3		중간개입 및 합당한 응대가 3-4회 발생함 (말걸침 포함)			
	2		중간개입 및 합당한 응대가 5-6회 발생함 (말걸침 포함)			
	3		올바른 언어표현을 활용함			
언어표현	2		오류 표현 1-2회 발생함 (비전문적인 표현, 어미 생략 및 호칭, 요즈제, 사족어 3회이상)	- 비 전문적인 표현 [(문자메시지)넣어드렸습니다-전송해드렸습니다], [잠시만요-잠시만 기다려주시겠습니까]-요즈제 등		
	1		오류 표현 3-4회 발생함 (비전문적인 표현, 어미 생략 및 호칭, 요즈제, 사족어 3회이상)			
	0		오류 표현 5회 발생함 (비전문적인 표현, 어미 생략 및 호칭, 요즈제, 사족어 3회이상)			
	10		간결하고-해결려한-투명으로 고객 질문에 맞춰 정보가 제공된 경우/해상치 못한 질문에 유연하게 대처함			
상담 실무 능력 (36)	설명력 및 상황대처 능력	8		더듬거리거나 마뭇거리는 모습이 나타나며 정확한 설명으로 전달력이 저하됨	- 연락처 안내 누락	
		6		예상치 못한 고객의 물음에 적절한 답변은 안내되나 미흡하게 대처하여 당황함이 나타남		
	필수 안내사항	4		조리있는 설명 부족으로 설득력이 저하됨 (오해를 불러일으킬 소지가 있는 애매한 답변을 함)		
		18		예상치 못한 고객의 물음에 적절하게 대처하지 못하거나 답변이 제공되지 않음		
	정확성	15		조리있는 설명 부족으로 고객을 설득시키지 못하고 고객에게 끌려감 / 고객이 전혀 이해할 수 없는 설명이 반복됨		
		13		필수 확인사항 및 안내사항을 모두 진행함		
	전산능력	10		필수 확인사항 및 안내사항 중 1가지를 누락함		
		5		필수 확인사항 및 안내사항 중 2가지를 누락함		
	마무리멘트	4		필수 확인사항 및 안내사항 중 3가지를 누락함		
		2		필수 확인사항 및 안내사항 중 4가지를 누락함		
	총괄 (8)	4		필수멘트를 정확하게 전달하며 고객의 문의에 올바른 답변을 제공함	- 부연인사+감사인사로 종료됨 - 설명 누락	
		2		필수멘트를 이행하나 일부 누락하거나 부정확한 내용을 전달함		
	특화 능력	1		필수멘트를 모두 누락함		
		4		상담이력 및 전산일력을 누락 없이 실행함		
	전회예절	2		상담이력 및 전산일력 중 1가지를 누락함		
		0		상담이력 및 전산일력을 모두 누락함		
	총괄	3		당사 연락처를 안내하며 상황에 적절하게 성의있게 구사함		
		2		마무리멘트 중 일부를 누락함		
	총괄	1		당사 연락처와 마무리멘트를 누락함		
		5		부연인사+성명+감사인사의 형식에 맞는 끝인사를 성의 있게 구사함		
	총괄	3		형식에 맞는 끝인사를 구사하나 성의가 미흡함 / 화답인사 누락		
		1		정해진 형식에서 1가지 이상 누락함		
	총괄	0		끝인사를 모두 누락한 경우		
		2		고객 문의에 능동적인 자세로 상담을 이끌어가며 추가 부연설명으로 적극적인 의지를 전달함		
	총괄	0		고객 문의에 성의있게 안내하나 다소 적극적인 의지가 미흡하여 평이한 수준임		
		-2		고객 문의에 의욕 없이 소극적인 상담을 진행함		
	총괄	0		고객이 먼저 전화를 끊은 후 전화를 끊음 / 고객과 동시에 전화를 끊음		
		-1		고객보다 먼저 전화를 끊음		
총점		100	83	분석유형	손사 해피콜	
총괄		평이한 상담이 진행되었습니다. 다소 정중한 어미 표현 및 미소 표현 부족하여 건조한 상담이 진행되어 아쉽습니다. 해피콜의 특성상 미소 띤 음성과 생동감있는 어미구사 정중한 언어표현이 필요함을 당부드립니다. 또한, 담당자 연락처 및 끝인사시 설명 누락되었습니다. 누락없이 이행하여 신뢰감을 줄 수 있도록 노력 바랍니다. 수고 많으셨습니다.				

## [Appendix 4. The detailed process of the exercise]

MPG exercise is basically composed of two categories; ‘Basic Exercise’ and ‘Daily Exercise.’ Basic exercise provides practices to stretch one’s body and composes four postures, all of which need equipment such as sitting cushions, small and large round pillows. They are Stretching Lower Back, Relaxing Lower Body, Stretching Upper Body and Stretching Whole Body. Daily exercise is easy to practice in ‘daily’ life without the need for equipment. It composes six postures; Whole Body Twisting, Bending Back, Rotating Arms, Bending Knees, Sedentary Upper Body Twisting and Supine Whole Body Stretching. The order of MPG exercise is from Daily Exercise to Core Exercise, generally from standing position exercises without using equipment to sedentary or supine exercises using cushions and pillows. However, for convenience’s sake, Sedentary Upper Body Twisting (in Daily Exercise) is often arranged in Basic Exercise and on the contrary to this Stretching Whole Body (in Basic Exercise) is practised while doing Daily Exercise since the posture is a standing posture without requiring any equipment.

MPG exercise	Name
1.Basic Exercise ( <i>gibonundong</i> )	1.1 Stretching Lower Back ( <i>heoripyegi</i> )
	1.2 Relaxing Lower Body ( <i>hachepulgi</i> )
	1.3 Stretching Upper Body ( <i>sangchepyeogi</i> )
	1.4 Whole Body Stretching Step 2, 3( <i>onmomyeogi 2, 3</i> )
2.Daily Exercise ( <i>saenghwarundong</i> )	2.1 Whole Body Twisting ( <i>onmomdolligi</i> )
	2.2 Bending Back ( <i>heorigupigi</i> )
	2.3 Rotating Arms ( <i>paldolligi</i> )
	2.4 Bending Knees ( <i>mureupgupigi</i> )
	2.5 Sedentary Upper Body Twist ( <i>anja sangchedolligi</i> )
	2.6 Supine Whole Body Stretching ( <i>nuwo onmomyeogi</i> )

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