

“I Never Dreamt, Not in My Wildest Dreams, That So Many Soldiers Would Come to Me Like That”

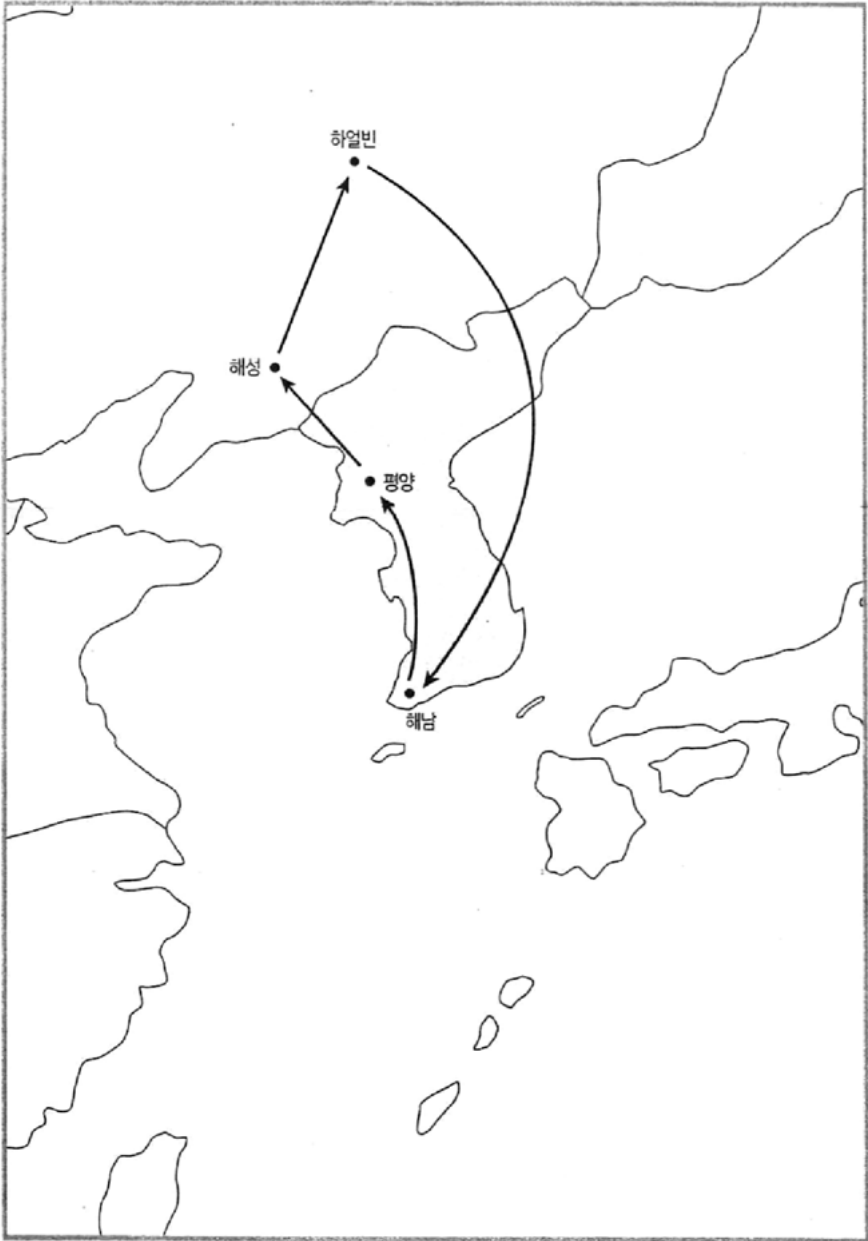
Gong Jeom-yeop



Gong Jeom-yeop.

1920	Born in Jeollanam-do Muan
1935 (Age 16)	Having been deceived, went to Pyongyang Employment Agency Forced into a life of a Japanese military <i>comfort girl-woman</i> in Haicheng
1943 (Age 24)*	Started living with a man from Boseong in Harbin
1945 (Age 26)	Returned to Haenam in Jeollanam-do with the man from Boseong
1947 (Age 28)*	Married Park in Haenam
1953 (Age 34)	Gave birth to a son
1955 (Age 36)*	Maintained a livelihood as a shaman Park passed away
1958 (Age 39)	Gave birth to a daughter whom she had with a fellow shaman
1962 (Age 43)	Daughter drowned
2004 (Age 85)	Lived in Haenam with son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughters
2016 (Age 96)	Deceased

*Approximately



Gong Jeom-yeop's route: Haenam – Pyeongyang – Haesung – Harbin – Haenam.

“*Wo-mae*.¹ When I, um . . . I think about this and that, or when I cannot sleep at night, I can still see it all clear as day. Whew-- [I think] it is a good thing that I made it out, but how did I ever survive such a place?”

“Destined for somewhere, I was in the car every day. Day and night, we went. And then, later, I did not know where I was, but we had come to a place so far away that it was scary. By what I saw in the snow, I would say that it was maybe about November according to the lunar calendar. White snow was falling. In the olden days, the soldiers used to wear yellow uniforms. Also the hats, they used to put on those yellow hats. The soldiers were training hard in the snow, so fearsome. I did not know then. [No one ever told me] that I would go to a place where I would receive soldiers. Anyway, anyway, I was told only that I would go to Japan to a factory. And I just believed it and followed. In that white snow, the soldiers, so many soldiers, were receiving their training. There were so many – countless. And it was not just on the Korean Peninsula; everywhere I went, there were soldiers. Again and again.”

“‘*Womae*, it is so cold-,’ I thought to myself, ‘If it is so cold in here, how cold-- must it be in the snow?’ But, *o-mae*, *omae*,² I never dreamt, not in my wildest dreams, that so many soldiers would come to me like that.”

The Silk Factory

There were so-- many people. Girls and young women. I just thought that there were so many people because it was a silk factory.

“[Whenever a marriage proposal came in,] it was never from a new groom, but always from a man who had failed to have children. And even then, the proposal was only for a concubine.”

“‘Tell him to marry you after you grow up a little and turn seventeen.’ That is what my father and mother wanted. But, me, I would have rather died. I was up-right by nature, and I would never ever become a concubine even if it means starving to death. I did not like to cause anyone trouble and I did not make people do what is not right.”

“I would have rather died than become a concubine, so I waited for a proper marriage proposal.”

1 A Jeolla dialect interjection that is used to express perplexity, surprise, pity, or even joy.

2 A Jeolla dialect interjection that is used to express sadness, surprise, joy, and other emotions.

“But then, out of the blue, some people, three men to be exact, came into our [home]. One was Japanese: he had a little mustache like this (imitating his mustache); he wore a hat too in a very stylish manner; and he wore, on top and bottom, a black suit just so and a white shirt with this kind of [bow] tie. The other two were Koreans wearing *hanboks* (Korean traditional clothes). Then people wore *hanboks*. Yes, they came: one who interpreted and the other, the head of the village.”

“Just like that, some guys came into our house and said that if I went to Japan, to a silk factory, I would be able to weave silk and make a huge amount of money, I would be comfortable and well, it would be easy to return home to Korea, and, if I made a lot of money and sent it to my parents, they would be able to buy rice paddies and fields.”

“As I listened to what they said, it sounded plausible enough. Now, my family was very hard off financially, so if I were to go to Japan, to the silk factory, I could make some quick money and send it to my parents. Then, they could breathe a little easier.”

“But, even so, I did not think I could do it. I could not summon up the courage to go to that place. I mean, maybe I could if I knew the language (Japanese) at all, but as it is. Because I did not think that I could do it, I hesitated.”

“When I said, ‘I can’t do it. I just do not have the confidence in myself to do it,’ my father yelled loudly, ‘You can see for yourself, can’t you? You do everything because you learn to do it. You do not come out of your mother’s belly knowing everything already! Others are going too, so you should go with them. Go. And learn what you can where you can. Then, from what you have learned, you can make money. Or, are you just going to loaf around the house for the rest of your life? And complaining all the time?’”

“As soon as my father said these harsh words, as he severely scolded me, I replied, ‘*Ah-ee-go* father, I will go, even if I die. I will go. What else can I do? I would have to go even if I die.’ When I said that I would follow them, the two [Korean] men (who accompanied the Japanese man) were only too quick to get excited. The Japanese man did not say a word.”

“I was sixteen years old then.”

“They said that I would go directly to Japan, but they took me to Pyeongyang instead.”

“There were many people. Girls and young women. I just thought that there were so many people because it was a silk factory. But, the men said nothing. They did not even talk to us about silk weaving. Nor did they show us the factory. Only then did I start to worry, thinking, ‘[Why] don’t they tell us to weave silk?’”

“As I observed carefully, they led the girls and women here and there when other men came around. And, according to what they were saying and doing, it did not seem like we were at a factory at all.”

“The men were clutching at [the girls’] bodies. So, I [knew] in my heart that it was not a factory. So, every day, every day, all I did was cry, and I could not stay there anymore. I begged to be sent far away, to some other place, to any other place.”

“I said I did not want to stay here where Koreans lived.”

“When I said I wanted to go somewhere far away, they obliged and sent me there. To Haesung. To Haesung, China.”

The First Customer

I, a person who had never slept with anyone, whose lower part was too tight for men to enter, received seven men as my first customers.

“One day, they said that something was approved, that they had gotten permission. ‘What permission?’ I asked. So this was how it was. They explained to me that because they had contacted my father and mother in my hometown in Jeolla-do, by telephone through legal means and received my father’s approval, the authorities issued a permit, and now I would receive customers.”³

“Even though so many [soldiers] came, since there were a lot of girls and young women, I did not think that each girl or young woman was to receive multiple customers like that. (With a dumbfounded expression on her face) I wondered if they came [to me] because they did not want to go to another person. Or, because they were told that it was my first time, they did not go to another but sought me out. What-- was going on? I could not tell. There was no time. One came and slept with me, and right after that person, another knocked on the door, saying, ‘Hurry up, hurry up. Come out. Blah, blah, blah.’ One man asked me to wash his penis. (Hitting the wall) As if I was not infringed on enough-- and I felt like dying already, he would not leave unless I wash his penis too. The person behind the door was knocking for the man to come out fast, but what the hell do I wash it with? When I said in Korean that I did not know how because I had never done it before, the man grumbled that I did not wash him.”

³ The Japanese military *comfort girls-women* had no conceptual idea about sexual slavery or sexual violence due to their young age and the patriarchal system of Chosun cultural understanding. Gong Jeom-yeop and other *comfort girls-women*’s use of the word “customers” as well as “licensed quarters” should not be taken literally nor seen as volitional participation in prostitution for monetary gain but rather as her learning of the use of the systemic term during her life/captivity at comfort stations.

“In November of the lunar calendar, it was terrible how much it snowed. It was the coldest season of the year. The snow poured out of the sky. It was too much. But, by all means, when they told me again to wash and come back, I washed myself, applied some ointment, and came back. When tears flooded endlessly-- out of me, and I just wanted to die, [a soldier] scolded me why I had to put him in a bad mood by crying so much.”

“I was lonely and unable to talk or have a conversation. If they were Korean, I would have said this or that. But, I could not even do that.”

“I was young, and I had never had a romantic relationship to speak of. But they took an innocent and inexperienced person like me and made me receive so-- many men that I almost died and had to go to the hospital.”

“In one day, I, a person who had never slept with anyone, whose lower part was too tight for men to enter, received seven men as my first customers.”

“*Omae, omae*, I should have just become someone’s concubine. If I had waited, I could have married a single man or, barring that, even being taken as a concubine would have been better. Then, at least, I would have been spared this humiliation.”

Scary Sunday

When Sunday approached, my heart would already start pounding like this.

“Each time I received a customer, he would put a *sakku* (condom) on his penis, like putting on rubber gloves, before we would do it. If the *sakku* did not tear, I would go to the washroom, [just] wash my private part, and apply ointment, a white slimy gel, before coming back. If the *sakku* tore, I would go to wash myself in hot water with disinfectant and apply the ointment. Then, I would come back. They told me to do this so that the next customer would not be offended. If I received the next customer without washing, the owner said that the customer might not like it and would ask for a refund and leave. Whew-- so they ordered me like I was a child. So, I just did what I was told. What else could I do? I felt like I could neither die nor live. [Helplessly] I did what my owner made me do.”

“When Sunday approached, my heart would already start pounding like this. When I think about it, really-- I was totally helpless.”

“[On Sundays] *Omae, omae*, there was nothing to say when hundreds of thousands were sent out. Although there were a lot of girls and young women, one house was just not enough. There were several quarters of that kind of place. Like, Quarter X and Quarter Y. There were many of *those* houses, I tell you. But because they sent out so many soldiers, to begin with, each girl or

young woman had to receive a multitude of customers. At one point, I received up to twenty-seven soldiers in one day, that is just shy of thirty.”

“Really-- at such times, (with an astounded look on her face, as if she can see the soldiers waiting outside at this very moment) they stood in one line that stretched and stretched, and without even having the time to take off their shoes, one by one, they hurried to put on a *sakku*, came in, had intercourse, and then went out again. The ones that could do it fast and leave were the best. Imagine how it would be when you are visited by one who was drunk and could not get it done quickly, that was the worst. You had one guy at the door knocking and knocking for the other guy to come out quickly, yelling and hurrying him on. They all stood in line: as one-- went out, another came in. As one put on his clothes and left, another took off his and came in. It was then that I was fed up the most.”

“Oh my goodness but I suffered so much. It is only because I survived that I can express that sentiment in words at least. Phew-, when I think about the fact that I survived, it seems like a dream. When I acted a little off because I became dizzy and my head felt like it was spinning out of control after having received seventeen customers in one day, a customer asked whether I was drunk. I told him I could not drink. Back then, I did not drink. Not even one drop. But, under the circumstances, even if you do not drink, you can have a headache that feels like it would never stop. So they say.”

“Even when I was out of breath, gasping for air as if I was indeed drunk, the bastards did as they pleased, hell-bent only on satisfying their rapacious appetites. It was at times like these that I really suffered to the point of death.”

“After you receive so many customers, everything starts hurting, but especially your back. And as for your stomach, it feels like it is on fire. (Pointing at her lower abdomen) Here, my intestines felt like they were going to burst at any minute. I tell you, they were going to burst at any minute and I would die on the spot. And a man with a short thing was okay. I say that a man with a short plump thing was bearable. But a man with a long, thin one, how could I bear the pain of it! Well, I had to apply ice packs so-- much. I suffered a lot when I received men with long dicks.”

“Oh, how I suffered! *Womae, womae*, they would apply an ice pack there (indicating her vulva) because I had to recover within a week, they said. *Omae, omae*, they used a whole block of ice. Do you know the mosquito netting for babies? There was a machine that looks like that. If you hang ice in it, after a few hours, that block of ice would all melt. And when the ice melts down into here (vulva), it freezes rock hard and the painful part of my body would go numb. All day long I would have to do this, over and over again, until the big block of ice all melted. Then, it would be a little less painful for the next few days. But if I received another man with a little bit of a long one again, which reached to the far inside, I would be excruciatingly sore there all over again.”

Backscratching

The hospital, the soldiers, the people of high position, and even the law col-
luded hand in glove with the owner. All of them were of one mind and one will
and were all in it together.

“[The owner] prepared every meal and I did not have to do the laundry or
work, but I was a little worn out from having to learn and then follow their
customs.”

“Quarters, where the number of [girls and young women] was the highest,
[had] twenty, otherwise, there were about seventeen or fifteen. A quarter with the
least number had thirteen. There was a Japanese licensed quarter where there
were only Japanese women. In the Korean quarters, there were only Korean girls
and young ladies. Also, there was a Chinese restaurant.”

“During the daytime, [military] people of high ranks came out to visit, and sin-
gle [ordinary] men often came. But, not so many people came [in the daytime].”

“People like us were [called] *gagsi* (a newly-married girl/young lady). [Not
only] were we called by the general name of *gagsi*, but also each of our names
was written down. On the bulletin board in the big-- room, all our names were
written down. Then, if there was a name that the men recognized, they would
ask for her. If it is Sadako, Sadako. if it is Jeong Ja, Jeong Ja. It was in this way
that the men would look up the names of the women they knew.”

“[I was] named Maeng-ok. My Japanese name was Sadako. My name is
Gong Jeom-yeop now. I am Gong Jeom-yeop, but there, they named me Maeng-
ok at the time.”

“When I was receiving a customer, I told the next person to wait since I was
with a customer. Then, the person would wait standing there like that in line, I
tell you. If he went to another *gagsi*, that would have been fine by me. But if the
man made up his mind to find me, he waited standing there all right.”

“When soldiers were sent out, there was a Japanese commissioned officer who
would provide everything – (pointing at her private part) *sakkus* to put on here and
a piece of paper.⁴ If it was a short thirty minutes, for thirty minutes. If it was fifty
minutes, for fifty minutes. They gave everything including the paper for money to do
it. So, the men brought with them everything they needed to come and to return.”

“It would be less than five dollars in current currency. Soldiers received a
discount. Just ordinary individuals paid ten dollars, but for the soldiers, it was

⁴ According to Gong Jeom-yeop, a piece of paper used in place of money was called a *menjo*
in Japanese at that time.

half of that: five dollars. If a soldier gave that piece of paper, no one, neither the *choba* (supervising manager) nor the owner, said anything.”

“That [piece of paper] was money. There was a place where the owner had to go to exchange that.”

“It was like a present-day bank. Some sort of an association or that kind of place where you exchanged it, but I never went there. The owner did this and that; it was not for us to bring it to exchange it by ourselves.”

“When soldiers came out, it was designated to be a day for soldiers only, since they came in droves. If many ordinary customers came on the same day, the soldiers would have been offended. So, when the soldiers came, we could never accept ordinary customers. On the days that [the soldiers] came out, on Sundays, we collected a lot of money since there were so many of the soldiers to receive, even though they did pay a much cheaper price, half the price that the ordinary customers paid.”

“They could not send out the soldiers without letting the owners know, so the owners communicated with each other. It did not matter which quarter or which owner, everyone knew. (In a low voice) And, they could not carry on without letting the law know, so the law was always in on it. When something bad happened to a customer, they called the police, then a cop would come down and take care of all business before he left. The hospital, the soldiers, the people of high position, and even the law colluded hand in glove with the owner. All of them were of one mind and one will and were all in it together. So, that is how it was: the law gave permission and allowed the customers out.”

“When syphilis was widespread among the girls and young ladies, only then were we told not to receive customers. Because if we did receive customers, it would have been a catastrophe. So, they called the hospital to come and take those that were infected. Then, the people from the hospital would come and took the girls and young ladies and [treated them] for three or four days there until they were well. How could they do all that without everyone being in on it and having constant communication [with one another]?”

Rat Poison

It got so bad that I tried taking rat poison, and I tried hanging myself.

“When I told them where it hurt, they injected me with opium from that little yellow bottle. They gave us each a shot and also medicine to take by mouth. . . . While getting that shot, the world became like heaven, the most comfortable and peaceful place to be in.”

“[I became] syphilitic, but syphilis did not show up on my genitals. It rather became a lump right away.”

“Through my stomach, it traveled and became a lump. The lump was about this big (the size of a fist), about this size.”

“The lumps grew right out of my sides. Here (showing the surgical scars on both of her groins), here is one, and here is the other. I have two scars in two spots.”⁵

“Those lumps were very painful. No matter that I was injected with the shot and took the medicine so that the swelling would go down, it did not work. . . . 606 arsphenamine was the most potent medicine at the time. It was the strongest and the most expensive.”

“Then they cut the lumps one after the other [at] the hospital to drain them, like this, and they applied the strong medicine there, into the surgical cut. It was so painful I thought I was going to die, so painful that I could hardly breathe. And then the cut area turned green, and when it was being disinfected, it was literally boiling, and the pain was hellish and more than I could bear.”

“[The girls and young ladies who were there together with me] said that getting better, even if it was after such an operation, was a good thing for me. By the way, those who did not go through this painful treatment, they would always contract syphilis, which affected their genitals. There were marks like an octopus’s suckers on them. They were all red and some things like grains of millet were inside. It was really gross. But, this made her unable to receive customers, because it hurt.”

“Only when new flesh grew over the surgical cuts could I receive customers again. If new flesh did not grow over, I could not receive them. It took about a month for me to recover. But, the days that I could not work were all-- written in an account. It all became debt. I cried my heart out. I cried in the hospital too. Who-- on earth would come, who on earth would come and take care of me?”

“There were many who were badly beaten after they tried to make an escape after they had been caught trying to jump over the wall. Lordy, even when told it is useless to try anything like that, there were people who dared. There were many. It became so-- bad that I, myself, tried taking rat poison, and I, for my part, tried hanging myself. Me, I did that too. I felt like dying. Dying.”

⁵ Syphilis often occurs in the groin area, and at that time the Japanese military *comfort girls-women* called it *yokone*. The nickname *yokone* is written even in modern medical publications regarding syphilis. Gong Jeom-yeop seemed to undergo this kind of *yokone* surgery twice, and there are clear surgical scars on both of her groins.

“Because I was practically dead, I tried to die in reality. I bought a small tube of rat poison and took off the lid and pressed it a little hard. Then, a red paste came out, like toothpaste being squeezed out of its tube. I cried a thousand times, no ten thousand times after I took it with me to eat it.”

“Up until that moment, I suffered and worked for about two years to make a load of money for the [owner], but I was not able to send one-- piece of coin to my father. I was told that I should receive as many customers day and night since I still had a long way to go [before I could pay off my debts]. It was absurd and I felt like dying. If Sunday was just once in a month, it would have been somewhat bearable at least. But, Sunday came three, four times a month, and I could not take it anymore. So, I took [the rat poison] to die.”

“I was totally out of my mind, as [the rat poison] entered the stomach. It was terrible. But, a person, who did not go to bed, must have heard the sound as I collapsed. Other girls and ladies at the same [comfort station] heard about it and came to the bathroom; they found me stretched out on the floor, dying. So, *aheego*, they told the owner to turn on the light right away, and they started blaming the owner for being responsible for causing such a good and gentle person to die. They called the hospital to have the ambulance take me there. They pumped the poison out of me and gave me an injection, so I came back to life. Then, I went back to that house [again], and since there were still many days left, since there were many months left until my debts were paid, I had no choice but to start work again.”

“*Aheego*-- if, at that time, the person [who had not been sleeping] did not notice, [if I did not go to the hospital], I would have died for sure because my insides would have been burnt.”

First Love

We were so-- so much in love. So, so much.

“There was a person who was very close to me.”

“That man, too, did not possess much knowledge and started working for a place where they made guns and knives secretly in the mountains. The man was my age, and he was from Boseong in Jeollanam-do.”

“That man was such a determined man that he did not even once sleep with a woman when he was there (at the prostitutes’ quarters). Although he came once in a while, he did not have sexual intercourse with anyone. So, I thought he must have been a eunuch, but he was not. He said that people in these kinds of places tended to have contagious diseases, so he thought he

should be careful. Besides, you can sleep with someone if you are not going to live [together] with them, but you have to be careful with a person with whom you can see yourself living [together] in the future. So, without sleeping together, it went on like that for three years. He visited once in a while, but he was only with me in mind and heart.”

“But one day, because the man was working in a big company in Harbin, I went to Harbin to see him. A close friend told me that if we went to Harbin, we would find many customers, and that money was in plenty supply there. Also, because it was a good place, big and wide, there would be many other *gagsi* as well, so off we went. I would have gone to Harbin even if it was just on account of my friend.”

“I want to go somewhere, anywhere. So, send me out just for a little bit.’ If I did not make much money for them, they would not have let me go. But, since I did make [a heap of money] for them, they did let me go. And I told them that, with the owner’s approval, even after I [transferred to another place] I would obtain permission as soon as possible to receive customers.”

“I was in Haesung for two years and in Harbin for a year, and also in Shanghai for half a year. So then, I had been away for several years.”

“After I went to Harbin, the man paid my debt, what little of it there was left, and took me out of there. Then, I lived with the man.”

“I was with him for three years, without sleeping together when I was receiving customers. Then I lived with him for another three years after I left the prostitutes’ quarter. So, I was with him six years altogether.”

“We were so-- so much in love. So, so much.”

“But I did not get pregnant. Of course, it was hard for me to be pregnant at that time. I mean, I did not take any medicine, but I was always sick and so it is no wonder that I could not get pregnant.”

“[The man] always wondered when we were going to make a lot of money so that I would be able to have herbal tonics and become a healthy human being again. We had a real, real hard time. So, we loved each other desperately with our hearts. We had a precious love together. There is no man like him.”

“He was my first love. That man.”

“I cannot forget him. That man. I can never forget him. He said I was his first love, too. He had never been in a relationship with a woman before.”

Farewell

I told him. Go and find a nice place to settle and make a living for yourself. So, he did it (stole the straw bag of barley) himself and [ran away] alone.

“After I had lived with the man for about two years, the country was liberated, so I got out of China.”

“While getting out of China . . . by car [with household goods], we were robbed of every single thing by [Chinese mounted bandits]. But, it was said that they not only robbed people but also killed them by stabbing them with knives. I was in shock, at first, and then enraged after being robbed of our money. I could not sleep all- night at all, and my eyes (putting her fists around her eyes) were swollen like this. My anger surged up, all the way up to my eyeballs, and my eyes were all swollen, so I could not see anything in front of me. The man [my first love] put a rope around his waist, and then also a rope around (pointing to her waist) [my] waist telling me to follow him wherever he went. So, I followed him like a blind person while coming across the 38th parallel.”⁶

“Since we lost everything we had, we were penniless. We had nothing with us.”

“No doubt my family had moved and were settled somewhere else, hopefully somewhere nice, but I could not figure out where they were and I did not know any acquaintances. But, I knew that in Masan-myeon⁷ lived my father’s younger brother. So I went to find him.”

“I asked him to lend us a bag of rice or barley so that we could exchange it for money and do some business selling salted seafood. We could then save some money and after that, we would pay back the original loan amount to my uncle, and we would live with the money left over, even if we had to eat only porridge for every meal. I wished he would have done that for me, but he would not. He said what could he possibly get back if he gave to people who had nothing.”

“[My uncle] treated us so harshly that the man suggested this – that we steal a straw bag of barley at night and hide it in the mountains in the back, and then take it with us somewhere and start a business. Then, after saving money from the business, we would pay the debt to my uncle and apologize to him. I should have done that. That is what I should have done. I should have done as he proposed, but, up until then, I had ne-ver in my life stolen anything nor lied about anything; that was the kind of person I was. So, I said I would rather die than do that. What do you say to that? I asked. And then [the man] asked me would I still not be able to do it, would I still not be willing to do it, even if he were to break up with me over it. [I] said that even if we were going to split up over it, I had no choice: I could not do that. So, if he really had to do it, then he should do it by himself and go.”

⁶ Gong Jeom-yeop calls the border between Joseon and Manchuria the 38th parallel.

⁷ Jeollanam-do Haenam-gun Masan-myeon (Masan Town, Haenam County, South Jeolla Province).

“I told him to go out by himself somewhere and make a living somehow and to forget about me. To just cast me aside. I am a woman who cannot even have a baby, if he stays with me, he will ruin his life. So, go alone and live your life. I told him. Go and find a nice place to settle and make a living for yourself. So, he did it (stole the straw bag of barley) himself and [ran away] alone.”

An Old Man

He was twenty years older than I. And he looked it – like an old man.

“[An old lady in the neighborhood] told me about the man who would become my son’s father, who was living in another man’s house, but who knew nothing but work. Although he was old, he worked hard; so it would be good for me to live with that old man. I counted up the [old] man’s age, and I figured out that he was twenty years older than I. And he looked it – like an old man.”

“The old lady, who arranged the match between us, gave us a rice cooker, two rice bowls, two sets of spoon and chopsticks, and a comforter to live on. The old man was living as a laborer where, after a year of work, he was to receive a rice field of about 1,487 square meters. This would be like the annual salary given to a farm servant. Since that annual salary was not enough [for a livelihood for two], the house owner gave us a straw bag of rice and about one full handcart of firewood. So, we [lived] in a tiny room in another person’s cottage.”

“There was no wedding.”

“While I was living there, the man, [together] with whom I came across the 38th parallel, came back [again] to find me.”

“He came to me to propose living together again, but it had not been that long since I started living [together] with the old man. Even though he was old, how-- could I just abandon him and follow the man?”

“At the time (when we were living in China), I was forced to be doing that thing, that dirty business, but now, as I got to thinking, I was like a housewife, though it had not been that long.”

“Anyhow, since you never got married, you can start fresh and get married, have a baby, and live your life. I can’t have a baby, and it seems I will not be able to have a baby no matter what.’ But it is no good ruining someone else’s life. I told him everything. I always did even when we were living [in China]. ‘You cannot live just for love.’ If I were to live only for love, then I could not part from him, indeed I could not. But, I knew I could not live only on love. On top of that, I was always ill and felt tingling pain in my muscles and joints,

and my heart was suffering; it was all too hard. Also, my thing (sexual organ) was as black as coal, and I had not recovered no matter how many times I applied ice packs to it. I told him in detail about my situation so that he could steel his heart against me and meet a good woman and live a good life with her. I told him to go get married and live his life.”

“[The man] said that he could never part from me. Never. Even if he were to die--.”

“He said that it would be okay even if we had nothing. It would be okay if we never have children or grandchildren. Maybe, later, we could adopt someone else’s baby and raise him. Let’s do that, he said. He cried his heart out, but eventually, we did split up, and time has passed, and now I am old like this.”

“When we were crossing that 38th parallel together, with my having lost my eyesight temporarily, we walked for over a month. When we were suffering together so, I was sure we were meant to be [together]. But even though we were meant to be together, I had to harden my heart against him and split with him.”

“I think I made the right choice, but at the same time, I also think that I made the wrong choice. In any case, whenever I am having a hard time, [I think] of him.”

“I later found out that he was doing well, and that made me feel good, even though I was not doing well. Yes, it is good, but if I had not been able to have my son, I probably would have been singing the blues more than now and crying day and night, but, whether I like it or not, at least I have that son of mine.”

“At least because I had that son of mine, people call me mother. If I had not had him, who would call me that?”

A Shaman

I pray. I am a person who prays.

“I thought I would never be able to have a baby; I really thought I would never be able to do that. But, after I came back to Korea and met my son’s father, I ate the meat of five goats, strong goats. So, I became healthy, like a normal person. And I became a good person.”

“My eyesight became better, the tingling pain went away, and the heavy menstrual pain also got better. And that is why I got pregnant with my baby. If not, I would never have been able to conceive him.”

“[But] it took a while for the baby to be conceived. It happened when I was thirty-four years old.”

“After the baby was born, when the baby was three years old, the old man was about fifty-five or fifty-six years old when he passed away.”

“[When he passed away], he was less than sixty years old. Even though he suffered from serious illnesses, he kept working, which made his illness worse. So eventually all he could do was roll around in pain; he could never do any [practical] work. So it was up to me to go to work, but I did not know how to work for wages, go begging, or [even] be in domestic service. I wished I could do all of those things, but I never had done those kinds of things before. Until that time, as long as I had lived, even though I never had anything to speak of, I never went near anything like work. That was why I had to learn this (shamanism); I had no choice. And since my father and mother were shamans, it was not as if I had no knowledge of it at- all. So, after I learned it, it is the thing that I have been doing until now.”

“I learned it for about five months.”

“If you want to learn this kind of thing, you need to learn for several years before you can graduate. There were so- many things I had to learn: to wear a conical hat like a Buddhist priest at a Buddhist temple, to wear a uniform, and to read all- kinds of sutras. I had to read it in the mountains, and at home, read at children’s birthdays. And even though I did not completely learn everything, I paid a lot of money to the husband and wife who taught me. Every day, I cooked steamed rice to make wine and cooked rice to feed them, while copying from books to learn . . . I learned a lot and thoroughly.”

“I am not a fortune-teller. I am a shaman. A shaman who learns from books, I tell you. I am a shaman who performs exorcisms. So, there is not a person who does not know about me [in this village.] Of course. It has been twenty years now since I came here. At the time when I became a shaman, my village used to buy my services as a shaman, and this village hired me and sold to the village people by using the sales method of rice patches. So, I came here with my two-year-old son then and have been doing this (shamanism) ever since. I go around praying for birthday wishes to come true. I go when that 100-year-old man asks me to come. . . . I do not go around telling anyone’s fortune. People say all sorts of crazy things, like fortune tellers are possessed by demons, but I am not that kind of person. There is no one who is possessed in my family. My family members are all shamans. My father, mother, my uncles, and my aunts.”

“I pray. I am a person who prays.”

Tiresome Men

Whether they were young or old, the men went crazy for me. They hounded me to live with them. It was so- tiresome.

“I gave birth to a daughter. But, when she was five years old, she followed some kids going to take a bath in the river and drowned there. I wanted to save her, but I could not save her, and she died.”

“When [my son] was six years old, [I had a baby girl].”

“After [the old man] passed away when my son was three years old, I met another man and gave birth to a daughter. If not, I could not have born her.”

“I had her with another man. When the old man passed away, I had to work as a shaman, but I had no one to carry all the accouterments of my trade for me across the long distances that I had to travel. At that time, after the Korean New Year’s day, every house did a yearly exorcism to ward off evil. Doing the yearly exorcisms was the toughest, toughest time of all. Also, the distance that I had to cover carrying all the stuff to do it with was quite far. I had to do an exorcism for seven or eight houses a day. Really, I had to do them all. If I began at noon, I could do a few houses in the afternoon, and a few houses at night, but I would not be able to finish until the next morning. And then, the next evening I would have to start all over again. So, how could I manage all those things without a man?”

“The man (the daughter’s father) had also met a widow and had born four children in his past. I tried to leave because [the children] hit him day and night, my son that is, because he was young. When the adults went out to do exorcisms and left the children behind at home, they tried to kill my son. But, [the daughter’s father] did not let me go. He bought medicine that he kept at his bedside, saying I could go only after I held his funeral. I felt very sad, but I had no-- choice: to spare my son’s life, I left the house with the baby. I told him that I would give the baby [the daughter] back after I raised her and took her with me. I told him not to come to our home and not to look for us. Then, I raised [our daughter] until she was five years old. But, she followed other kids going to take (a bath) at the river and died. That is what the children told me. I went to the river and fished her out of the water so that she would live. But she did not live.”

“After that, I got another man. They said that the man had two wives and their kids, so, [I] tried like the dickens not-- to live with him. He was heavily in debt and had no money. On the other hand, I saved a lot of rice, and money too. So, smelling the money I had, he went around trying to persuade people to persuade me to live with him. When I was young, I rejected the very idea of becoming someone’s concubine; ever since I was little, not regarding anyone who became a concubine as a proper human being, I said I would rather die than become a concubine. But even so, he came into my house. That man.”

“Just to make me pay his debt--. Before three days had passed since [the man] came into my house, moneylenders began to hound us.”

“I had no-- choice but to pay the debt of that tiresome man. And it was a lot of money too. But as soon as I paid all-- his debt, without even a word that [the man] was leaving me, he crawled back out of my house and left. *Womae, womae*, I am a woman who has had that kind of wrong done to them. I lived through a hell of a lot. But, after the man left, whether they were young or old, the men went crazy for me. They hounded me to live [together] with them. It was so-- tiresome that after that I cut off all-- contact with men. And before I knew it, I became so old, as you see me now. You know, being old is a blessing; it is a comfort not to have to see that kind of tiresome thing.”

“*Womae*, but it was not easy living alone.”

“When it is time for your period, you feel pain in your back and your stomach. While I was sleeping, I could smell the cigarette smoke. Where is it coming from? (Imitating someone poking a hole in the rice paper of a door and then blowing cigarette smoke into that hole.) It was like someone was blowing the smoke that woke me up. But, as soon as I woke up, my back seemed to shrink and my lower stomach hurt like it was being cut in two. As if I were giving birth, I lay on my face and crawled around saying, ‘*Womae, womae*, I am going to die, I am going to die. *Aheego*, my stomach. *Aheego*, my back.’ I lived like that for over three years, but I never slept with [another man.] I was so-- sick, so sick of men.”

Investigation

Ahee-go, how on earth can I talk about receiving many customers [in front of men]! I mean, really!

“There were so many investigations. People came from the township office, from the military, and even from the press, the journalists came.”⁸

“I moved here and there [in China] for five to six years.”

“Even though I had been there for five to six years, because I felt ashamed, hot under the collar, and disgusted with myself, I told [the people who came to investigate] that I did that only for four years. Although I am not so quick with a lie, because I was so embarrassed, I covered up the two years.”

“Having to say even four years made my face flush with shame; it was horrible. It is a little less hard when talking amongst us women. But, when men

⁸ After Gong Jeom-yeop reported her past as a *comfort girl-woman* to the government, many different people came to verify her statements.

came to investigate and wrote about my stories, it was the worst. It was so-- so embarrassing that my face flushed crimson red, and I was so ashamed that I could have died on the spot.”

“*Aheego-* how I wish that [investigators] would not come anymore. But, it is much better [now] because you are a woman. I feel more comfortable telling you these things. *Womae, womae*, but I felt my face flushed so much that in my mind’s eye, it became so red that if I looked into a mirror, it would crack.”

“Ahee-go, how on earth can I talk about receiving many customers [in front of men]! I mean, really!”

Resentment

If my father did not do what he did, why would I have gone?

“[After I came out of China] I went to see my father’s younger brother at his home.”

“He was shocked and thrilled to see me. ‘I heard that you were dead, so until now, that is what I thought. Where were you and what took you so long?’”

“He knew what I did. (In a low voice) He knew I went there, I tell you.”

“*Aheego-* he told me that my father sent [his permission] from here.”

“Once the permission was given, he could not lie about it because of that permission. My father told all of my family and relatives. So, [my uncle] knew that I was a *comfort girl-woman*.”

“[My uncle] said that [my parents] moved to Muan, Heuksan-myeon.⁹ So, I went to find them. When I went there, they were living in a single rented room in another person’s house.”

“Even now, you do not have a house of your own? You have to live in this little rented room?”

“I heard that you were already dead. Are you really alive? Or is it your spirit that has come?”

“Why on earth would my spirit come here? I came here because I am alive. I came to find you because I am your child, if I was not, would I be here? How far do you think [China is from] here? I already came out of China, I came out a long, while ago.”

“Do you know how-- much I resented you, [my father]?”

⁹ Jeollanam-do Muan-gun Heuksan-myeon (Heuksan Town, Muan County, South Jeolla Province).

“If my father did not do what he did, why would I have gone? (Silent for a moment) It was when I received the most customers that I [resented my father] the most. I thought he had already passed away. I did unspeakable things, so what gave him the right to live as if nothing had happened? (Getting louder) ‘You told me that you thought I was dead, but it is you who was dead. I thought you had passed away, father, but how come you are not dead but still alive? Me, I have come back, but you have no idea how much I have suffered.’”

Interviewer’s Commentary: Self-Censorship and Lies

Choi Kija

Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni*’s blackened skin, juxtaposed against an undershirt faded to a yellowish color, had a strong smell of poverty and a life force that had enabled her to tenaciously overcome that poverty. Every time she jumped out into the courtyard in her bare feet, wearing that sunlight-faded undershirt, to welcome me, I felt a strong affection for her and what she had lived through.

Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* lives in Haenam, on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, where Ttangkkeut (Land’s End) village is located. During the long time that it took to arrive in Haenam, rather than feeling the burden of having to extract the memories of a *comfort girl-woman* with painful experiences, I rather had expectations, leading me to ask, ‘What kind of a woman will I meet this time, and what kind of a life would she have led?’ This may have been because of a sense of mystery and excitement surrounding Land’s End village or because of the confidence I had in already having experienced meeting other *comfort girls-women* in the past. My previous experience of meeting other *comfort girls-women* (during the collaboration with Pulbit Publishing Co. in publishing Testimony Vol. 4) made me realize that the group called *comfort girls-women* consists of individuals, each with her own uniqueness. And instead of making me afraid of meeting them again, it aroused a bit of curiosity in me. I wondered what unique color the grandmother in Land’s End village would have.

Gong *halmoni* lives with her son, daughter-in-law, granddaughter, and great-granddaughters in a house that was newly renovated with the national subsidy that she received several years ago. Before the renovation, the house was so small that she had to live alone, but now things have become a little bit better. According to her self-praise, this is because she did not lie but lived an honest life. She self-praised herself, saying, “She is finally being blessed in her later years.” She also praised the government for helping a poor, elderly woman, saying that she does not know how she will ever be able to repay the

favor. No matter what the reason, she seemed blissfully happy to be living with her son, which goes to show just how lonely she had been all this time. She said that her son worked by day to breed dogs and to help with all sorts of matters in the village, but the money that he brought home did little to contribute to their living standards. Actually, the family was living on the small national subsidy given to *comfort girls-women*. Moreover, despite the fact that she was in her eighties, Gong *halmoni* did not rest for a second from supporting her family by feeding the dogs, doing sesame farming, and other such activities. Her crooked back and tanned skin represent all the hard work she has done throughout her lifetime, but the fact that she continues to have a positive attitude in life is testified by what she says about herself. She says that she is a healthy person with good vision and hearing.

When the Korean Council called to visit Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni*, the public officer in charge of her, working in the Women's Welfare Division at the Haenam district office, was greatly concerned that a man might come to interview her. When she first reported herself to the government, the officers from the Ministry of Health and Welfare who came to investigate were men. Now, on the evening that she was first raped, she had "received" seven customers; but when she tried to say that in front of the male investigators, her face flushed, and her heart pounded so much that she lied and said that she only received three men. On the day that she first met me, Gong *halmoni* said, "Since we are all women, I can actually tell you this," but still she kept repeating several times that she was embarrassed, even when there were only women present. Then, she asked the public officer from the Women's Welfare Division whether the woman (who came to investigate two years ago from the Korean Institute on Chongsindae, hereafter the Institute) was single or married. When the officer answered that she was married, Gong *halmoni* said, "*Aheego*, I felt so embarrassed to tell my story because I thought she was single . . ." and let out a big sigh of relief. Then, she asked me right away. "Are you single? Or are you married?" At that moment, I quickly calculated in my mind that my status would determine the success or the failure of the interview, so I lied after a slight hesitation. "*Halmoni*, I am married. Do not worry and feel free to speak." Later, when I was criticized during the report of my activity to the research team, I had to give an excuse that I had no choice but to lie, not only to ensure the success of the interview but also to put her at ease. While the interview progressed, Gong *halmoni* persistently asked me what my husband's name was, what he did for a living, and where my husband's family lived, and every time she asked, my lie grew bigger and bigger like a snowball. She, who was a shaman, even prayed for me to have a son every time she met me. If she happens to read this essay, she might feel a sense of profound betrayal.



Gong Jeom-yeop.

Maybe thanks to the lie, the interview went smoothly. Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* was an amazing storyteller. It was as if she were chanting a narrative song: she had a melodic intonation and a range of facial expressions, she used her entire body to aid her descriptions, and she was richly expressive of her emotions. Listening to her story was like watching a drama: I was hypnotized by her so that, at times, I laughed with her, and at other times, I cried with her; I was completely pulled into her story. The vivid memories and descriptions of her life at the comfort stations after more than sixty years were surprisingly copious and bold. This was in sharp contrast to the way that the majority of the other *comfort girls-women* bound their past experiences tightly in their memories. The interview with her progressed favorably as she led it to the point where I hardly had to ask a question. Also, she spoke for three or four hours straight without any rests and only stopped when the recorder I brought with me ran out of tape. The story of how she met and parted from her first love, told heart-wrenchingly for over an hour, was especially long. But because the extent of the narrative was so great, we could not put it all into the final edited version, and I feel that that is a shame.

Toward the end of it, however, the interview under Gong *halmoni*'s leadership ran into a wall. In our last interview, saying that she had never told anyone this until now, she said that, in truth, she had not gone to a comfort station in China

from the beginning, but she had stayed in Pyeongyang for a year and a half. Changing my attitude from that of a mere listener, I began to press her relentlessly about that year and a half in Pyeongyang. At the same time, there was much confusion and many doubts that arose in my mind. What was the meaning of her experiences in Pyeongyang for the *halmoni* who even had experiences of being a *comfort girl-woman*? Why could she still not tell her Pyeongyang story as actively as she had told her other stories? What made her control and censor herself when she was speaking about her own experiences there?

It seemed that Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* was strongly internalizing the stereotyped images of *comfort girls-women* that Korean society has approved of, for instance, images like ‘taken by force’ and ‘the pure daughters of Chosun.’ Thus, although she was aware of the reality during that time when there was no other choice but to be sold by her father because of their poverty, it might still be very difficult for her to go as far as to acknowledge it. She seemed to feel that people wanted to listen to a dramatic story like this: “Only when I arrived there, after having been deceived by the Japanese who said that I would earn money if I went with them to a factory, did I find out that it was a comfort station.” But she thought that they did not attach any importance to a story like this: she wandered for a year and a half here and there at the Pyeongyang Employment Placement Agency. In addition, it seemed that she had some anxiety that her Pyeongyang story might threaten her ‘official identity’ as a *comfort girl-woman*. So, until now, her Pyeongyang story was an experience that had to be covered up by silence and an experience that was treated as socially taboo. However, on the other hand, the fact that Gong *halmoni* cautiously brought up the Pyeongyang story at our last interview might have been because she wanted to question the stereotyped images of *comfort girls-women* that our society had generated. As I had been confused and plagued with doubts in my mind after hearing her Pyeongyang story, she was also confused by the discourse on *comfort girls-women* that made her censor herself when speaking about her experience in Pyeongyang. Although her confusion made her bring up the subject of Pyeongyang, she could still not come clean completely. When the subjects of experiences do not have the authority to lead the discourse, does the confusion, which comes from having the very language with which they explain their experiences stolen from them, make them waver inside?

I am not confident that this edited version of her testimony is representing the unique color of Gong Jeom-yeop *halmoni* very well. She was a woman who unraveled her story boldly and graphically enough to make me feel unnerved while listening to “those horrific” experiences. But she was also a woman who always had to be comforted by a shot of soju after each interview because of the anguish and distress. And nowhere in her edited testimony was I able to

make room for that fact. I also could not include the fact that, in her memory, the seemingly interminable suffering she endured at the comfort station coexists with the longing for her friends with whom she got a tattoo on her wrist as a sign of their never-to-be-forgotten friendships and about whom she did not know whether they were alive or dead. And I could not put into the edited version her warm heart that I experienced every time I visited her. She presented me with sesame oil that she made with her own hands for both my mother and mother-in-law, as well as her warm-voiced and skillful singing that reminded me of ‘Finding Our Own Sounds,’ despite the fact that these characteristics came from her unique color. Since the testimony book about *comfort girls-women* is limited in pages and only allowed to reproduce an individual’s experiences and memories just through text, it was not easy to lift up Gong *halmoni*’s unique color and deliver it to the readers. But the bigger wall that we ran into while making this edited version was not the limitation of content in terms of amount and medium, but that we had to limit the *comfort girls-women*’s individual experiences and memories within predefined frameworks that the current Korean society demands in 2003. No, maybe even long before I made this edited version, she might have been hurt by the wall of reality that *comfort girls-women*’s experiences could be verbalized in Korean society only after her Pyeongyang story and my self-censorship and lies, such as, “Do not worry because I am married,” were shuffled. But, compared to ten years ago when Kim Hak-soon *halmoni* testified for the first time, Korean society has learned that there are many different colors of *comfort girls-women*. And so, while acknowledging that numerous limitations and frustrations have been put before us, we continue to meet *comfort girls-women* to tell their stories to the world.