A GENTLE VOICE IN THE DARKNESS: THE MUSICAL GENIUS OF KIM MINGI

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Kim Mingi's first album of songs appeared in South Korea in 1971 when he was a student at Seoul National University. Shortly thereafter the album was confiscated by the government authorities, and Kim Mingi himself was seized, interrogated, and beaten by the government's enforcement agencies. During the next two decades he continued to be subject to regular harassment by South Korea's various military regimes and his songs publicly banned. In the end, however, it was Kim and his songs that triumphed. Both he and his music became symbols of heroic dissent for Korean students of the 1970s and 1980s, and one song in particular, Achim isûl<Morning Dew>, emerged as the unofficial anthem of the anti-government student movement in this period. Whenever students gathered to protest, Achim isûl was invariably the first song to be sung, the song that most stirred the emotions and forged the bonds of comradeship. And in the tumultuous summer of 1987,which opened the door to political reform and ultimately civilian government in South Korea, it was again Achim isûl that seemed to rise spontaneously from a vast crowd of hundreds of thousands of students and average citizens who converged on Seoul's City Hall Plaza to honor a university student killed in clashes with the government riot police.

The songs presented here were recorded in 1992-93 and issued in the spring of 1993 in a set of four tapes or CD's. A few are of recent vintage, but most were written by Kim Mingi in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Some, like Achim isûl were popularized by the singer Yang Hûiûn, but many have never been heard before by the general public. Kim Mingi, who first began composing songs to help Yang, then struggling to make a name for herself, has consistently eschewed commercialization of his songs. Over the years he has never received any royalties or remuneration for them, despite their widespread sales and performance in the student underground or under other singers' names. He reluctantly agreed to produce this new set of tapes only after he was persuaded that by doing so he might be able to provide financial support for the small experimental theater, Hakchôn, that he now runs in Taehakno. As a result, Koreans and non-Koreans alike can finally, after twenty -two years of suppression, enjoy the works of this great poet-composer-singer and more fully appreciate his unique contribution to the history of modern Korean popular culture.

Given the popular association of Kim Mingi and his music with the anti-government student movement of the 1970s and 1980s, what is perhaps most striking about this collection of thirty-nine songs is their relative lack of any overt political content. In that sense his work is very different in tone and content from the work of another great icon of the 1970s, the writer Kim Chiha, whose caustic, satirical poems directly challenged and undermined the legitimacy of the Park Chung Hee government, its policies, and its supporters.

Despite his reputation, Kim Mingi has in fact never seen himself as a political activist. Since childhood, his first passion has always been painting, which he later studied at Seoul National University, and one of the main characteristics of his songs is their colorful visual imagery, an attempt by the composer to paint, as it were, in the medium of language and sound, the landscape and people that most impinge on his life and consciousness. Such images, often very concrete, are

compelling in their own right, but in Kim Mingi's songs they acquire even greater authority as they are often used to express, suggest, symbolize, or contextualize deeply personal feelings or philosophical attitudes. One can see this clearly, for example, in one of his most haunting and well-known songs, Chin' gu <A Friend>.

Written and composed when he was only seventeen, the song grew out of the drowning death of a friend on a Boy Scout outing and Kim Mingi's personal attempt to cope with that loss as he returned to Seoul by train to inform his friend's parents of the death of their son. In the song the physical context is very concrete. The singer is sitting in a train staring out the window and thinking of his friend. He sees the roadside flowers flashing by and hears the rushing wheels of the train. But, the singer asks, what is truly real here? For the singer, still unable to grasp the reality of his friend's death, the images of his friend that keep appearing before him at the window seem as or more real than the reality of the train and the outside world.

The many images before my eyes;
If someone insists that all are real,
Who among them
Would rise up alone
And say it is not so?

In the end the singer also seems to ask, though not entirely without hope, whether the so-called real world has any satisfactory answer to the undeniable reality of death:

Floating before my eyes
The image of my friend
Flickers
Over the scattering petals;
His voice coming
From out of the distance,
Will the wheels of the rushing train
Respond?

Like Ch'in'gu, most of Kim Mingi's songs are filled with a profound sadness about the world. At times he even projects a sense of innocence lost, a feeling that is heightened, when, as in Paekku <The White Dog Paekku>, the perspective in the song is that of a child. But his sadness is neither angry nor nihilistic. Rather, one hears in his songs a final message of acceptance that hovers somewhere between a Buddhist sense of resignation and a Christian sense of forgiveness. In part this philosophical attitude grew out of a long and conscious personal search for existential meaning. After leaving college and completing his army service, he returned to his native North Chôlla Province and worked for several years in the early 198Os as a tenant farmer and itinerant laborer in an attempt, in his own words, 'to throw myself into a situation that was close to the most basic aspects of human life." After the harvest following his first year as a tenant farmer, Kim Mingi has said that he "begged the forgiveness of all the things in the world and also dared in my conceit to dream that I too could forgive something."

In fact, Kim seems to have shown a disposition toward acceptance and forgiveness from very early on. In a recent interview in Sindonga he recalled his first beating by the government authorities in 1971: Even though I was physically losing consciousness, my mind became clear, and as I went into a kind of hallucinatory state, the men directly in front of me looked exactly like demons foaming at the mouth with the exertions of their work. I was at peace, but because of me, these men were doing evil, and suddenly I felt sorry for them ." It was undoubtedly this spirit of affirmative resignation that enabled him to survive and go on during many years of persecution.

Kim Mingi's most famous song, Achim isûl, is a perfect lyrical and musical distillation of this spirit. Through a long night without sleep, the singer finally comes to terms with the sadness that has engulfed and paralyzed him. He climbs the hill behind his house and resolves to move on with his life, despite whatever difficulties he may have to face:

After a long night without sleep
When sorrows cling to my heart
One by one
Like drops of morning dew
More beautiful than pearls
On every blade of grass,
I climb the hill behind my house
And study how to smile a little.

When the sun floats crimson
Over the graveyard,
The steaming heat of midday
Will be my trial.
I am going now;
To that distant wild plain;
Leaving all sorrows behind,
Now I go.

In one sense it seems nothing short of astonishing that the Korean government authorities of the 1970s could find so moving and essentially apolitical a song so objectionable. One of the reasons, to be sure, was that it appeared in the same album with another song that was considered even more subversive, Kkot piunûn ai <A Child Growing Flowers>. This song speaks of the withering and dying of the Rose of Sharon, the South Korean national flower, and was regarded by the authorities at the time as an unmistakable attack on the Park Chung Hee government's policies. Ironically, however, Kim Mingi had originally written the song with "violets" as the subject and only substituted "Rose of Sharon" at the last minute because he thought it sounded better. One might also note that the song can be read apolitically as yet another example of Kim's spirit of affirmative resignation. The last stanza, for example, exhorts listeners to replace the flowers that have died:

Grow the Rose of Sharon
Filling up the garden,

Like the loving hands
Of the needy child.

On the other hand, for anyone who lived through the 1970s in Korea, it is not that difficult to understand why the government tried to silence Kim Mingi and his music. The juggernaut of national development that was the Park Chung Hee regime not only brooked no dissent from its policies; it also sought through every means possible, especially through a controlled media and educational system, to instill in the public an unquestioned sense of good feeling and commitment toward those policies. Despite their lack of overt political content, Kim Mingi's somber, introspective songs jolted anyone who heard them into a recognition that all was not as well as the government wanted people to believe, that there might indeed be a dark side to the government's singleminded pursuit of "modernization." That his songs were not only provocative but also arrestingly beautiful, especially when sung by Kim himself, only made them all the more subversive from the government's point of view. In a country of deeply emotional people enamored of music, such songs had a power that a government of questionable legitimacy could not ignore.

The very qualities of Kim Mingi's songs that the government authorities most feared and despised were the ones Korean students of this period found most appealing. It was, after all, the students who above all dared openly to question the government's fundamental premises and authoritarian methods. Although he offered no political solutions, Kim Mingi's extraordinary capacity to understand and empathize with other people, even his torturers, made him acutely sensitive to the pain and anguish of his time. Not so much a clarion call to political action as a gentle, compassionate voice in the darkness, to students living in a Kafkaesque world that seemed to deny the reality of palpable injustice and suffering, his music nevertheless struck with the revelatory and liberating force of truth itself. The students saw in him the best of themselves, and he became the conscience and voice of an entire generation.

Now in a more liberal political environment, and with the full range of his music freely available, it is at last possible to appreciate Kim Mingi in all of his complexity, both as a great political icon of the 1970s and 1980s, and also as a brilliant artist of words and sounds with a deeply personal vision. The translation of his songs offered here for English readers is hardly more than a hasty first draft that has little relation to the wonderfully complicated sounds, meanings, puns, and rhythms of the original Korean. No attempt, moreover, has been made to match the English words to the original music. Indeed, in the original songs the words and music flow seamlessly together as if created simultaneously, and to try to graft English onto the Korean melodies seemed somehow not only an impossible task but also a violation. One can only hope that this first, woefully inadequate attempt to convey something of the lyrical genius of Kim Mingi to an English-speaking audience, together with the sheer auditory beauty of the music itself, will stimulate further interest in his work and inspire more worthy translations in the future.