

The Story of Kim Chi Ha

Harold Hakwon Sunoo

In a dark prison cell where he is probably awaiting a death sentence Kim Chi Ha, a noted Korean Catholic poet, has written a twelve thousand-word memorandum he calls "Declaration of Conscience." The "Declaration" was smuggled out of the prison and the country, and recorded in the U.S. Congressional Record on October 22, 1975, through the efforts of Congressmen Donald M. Fraser of Minnesota and Frederick W. Richmond of New York. Since the smuggling incident of the "Declaration" took place, Kim Chi Ha has been confined in a cell surrounded by several empty cells in order to avoid any outside contact. It has also been reported that ten prison guards have been dismissed, that Kim is watched twenty-four hours a day through TV camera, and that no one is allowed to see him except assigned guards. Why has the government of South Korea been so upset by Kim, by the publication of a "Declaration" that contains statements such as the following:

I hope to be a man able to love compassionately, concretely and with all of myself, my flesh and blood neighbors who are suffering from oppression and exploitation and who are painfully and contemptuously denied their basic human rights. This is the beginning point for all of my groping thought, and at the same time its final destination. I want the whole process of my intellectual struggle to be interpreted from the perspective of love for people.

The universal love of mankind expressed by the poet is not, apparently, acceptable to the regime in South Korea. From the viewpoint of the Park regime, such an attitude is "Communistic." A Communist can be hanged in South Korea, according to the anti-Communist law, and the regime has accused him of being a Communist. To this accusation Kim replied: "I am not a Communist. I am a Catholic. The reason I became a Catholic is that Catholicism presented to me a universal message: not only that spiritual and material burdens could all be overcome, but that oppression itself

could be exterminated by the simultaneous salvation of both the oppressors and the oppressed." Such a philosophic theological context was totally incomprehensible to the dictatorial regime of South Korea. The government further accused him of writing the now famous poems *Five Bandits* and *Groundless Rumors* out of Communist motivation, and on the basis of this action he was imprisoned.

Kim's imprisonment has added to his reputation as a patriotic resistance poet, and he has become a hero of Third World progressive intellectuals. In 1975 he was awarded the Afro-Asian Literary Lotus award. His struggle against the dictatorial regime in South Korea has clearly spread beyond the bounds of that oppressed country. A group of intellectuals, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Herbert Marcuse, Noam Chomsky, Edwin Reischauer, Jerome Cohen, Edo Shusaku, Oda Makodo, Tsurumi Shunsuke, as well as Willy Brandt of West Germany, petitioned President Park in Kim's behalf while he was imprisoned, but Park didn't even know who Kim Chi Ha was. Kim commented calmly: "My problem is nothing. I'm not Solzhenitsyn, you know; I'm Kim Chi Ha. I'm a very comic guy. I'm not a tragic guy. I'm a comic guy like these bad teeth of mine. I'm always feeling happy in any case and any situation. But one chance to write freely—that's only one thing I hope for in this situation. That's the single thing I hope" (as quoted by Donald Kirk in an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, January 7, 1973).

He is a poet, but his enemy made of him a political figure. He was not discouraged by the Korean CIA's infamous physical tortures, though he was subjected to extreme physical pain. Instead, Kim asked his people to be brave. "All Korean people must create a brave new revolutionary line. Without that brave line, the real unification of the nation can't come about." In his poem the five bandits represent big businessmen, national assemblymen (the legislators), high-positioned bureaucrats in the government, generals, and the ministers in the cabinet. Meeting together, they agree to hold a robbery contest to determine who among them is the most clever in the techniques of corruption. Kim's imagery grows increasingly repulsive with indignation as his poem moves toward the end. He describes the general as "the big tall gorilla." He has white-tinted eyes, a tiger's mouth, a wide nose, and a shaggy beard.

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His chest is adorned with colorful and heavy medals
made of gold, silver, white copper, bronze, and
brass.

Black pistols cling to his body.

He sold all the rice to be fed to soldiers
and filled the empty sacks with sand.

He stole all the cows and pigs to be served to soldiers
and gave a hair to each man.

No barracks for the poor soldiers in a bitterly cold
winter, instead, hard labor all day to keep them
sweating.

Lumber for the construction of barracks was used for
building the general's quarters.

Spare parts for vehicles, uniforms, anthracite
briquettes, monthly allowances, all were stolen.

Soldiers who deserted because of hunger and
desperation were arrested, beaten and thrown into the
brig, and harassed under orders.

University students drafted for military service were
assigned to the general's quarters as living toys for
his wanton wife,

While the general enjoyed his cleverly camouflaged
life with an endless stream of concubines.

By the time the poet writes of the last bandit—the
ministers in the cabinet—he is furious.

They waddle from obesity, and sediment seeps from
every pore.

With peerless, shifty mucus-lined eyes,

They command the national defense

With their golf clubs in their left hands,

While fondling the breasts of their mistresses with
their right.

And, they softly write,

INCREASED PRODUCTION

INCREASED EXPORT

AND CONSTRUCTION

On the mistresses' breasts. The women murmur,

"Hee-hee-hee, don't tickle me!"

Then they jokingly reproach,

"Hey, you ignorant woman, do national affairs make
you laugh?"

Let's export even though we starve,

Let's increase production even though
products are not sold.

Let's construct a bridge across the Strait of Korea
with bones of those who have starved to death,

So we can worship the god of Japan!"

Like slave master of older times,

they drive the people to work harder and longer,

with the beating of bursted drums

and sounds of broken trumpets,

With one aim in mind: to increase

their own wealth.

It is clear why Kim Chi Ha's poetry is repugnant to
Korean high officials. His satires are specific, detailed,
and precise in describing the forms of illicit activities
and corruption that afflict Korean society. The high
officials feel in their bones Kim's accusations and
revelations. Kim says they buy a Mercedes in addition to
their black sedan, but demonstrate their humility by

riding in a Corona, a domestically produced car. They
make a fortune by cheating the budget and further fatten
it by illegal biddings, but chew gum to rid themselves of
the smells of corruption.

The Korean CIA claims that such charges comfort the
Communists and thus violate the nation's anti-
Communist law. They may perhaps comfort the
Communists, but they also comfort the common citizens
in South Korea. The government officials were so
enraged by the publication of "Five Bandits" that the
magazine that published the poem was ordered to cease
publication, the charge being that the magazine
encouraged "antagonism between social classes."

Kim Chi Ha writes not only to expose the corruption of
the high officials, but also to rouse sympathy for the
poor. He writes to expose gross social injustices and
inequities among the poor farmers as well as the city
slum dwellers. "The Road to Seoul," published in
November, 1969, in *The Poet* is an example of this
aspect of Kim's thought and of his empathy with the
poor.

Kim was born on February 4, 1941, in
Mokpo, Cholla-do, in Southwest Korea.
Mokpo is a port city where Kim Dae-Jung, the
opposition party leader, started his political career. It is a
city of resistance. The city where President Park could
not get his man elected against Kim Dae-Jung for more
than ten years. Not long after he entered Seoul National
University's College of Liberal Arts and Science in
March, 1959, the poet became involved with the April
Student Movement against the dictatorial regime of
Syngman Rhee. This was a first experience in a long
resistance movement to which he has devoted himself. It
took Kim seven years instead of the normal four years to
graduate from the university because of financial and
health problems. In the 1964 student movement against
the normalization of relations between Japan and South
Korea he played an important role and was arrested with
many of his fellow students. They were severely
tortured. He writes of these experiences in his later
poems, for example, in "Groundless Rumors."

The year 1970 was an important one for Kim. The
famous "Five Bandits" and "April" were published in
The Thought (Sasangee) magazine, the leading voice of
the democratic segment of the intellectual world in South
Korea, and were the occasion for his imprisonment. This
magazine, which took a critical position against the Park
regime, received the international Magsaysay Award for
its democratic struggle. Kim's poems have appeared
regularly since 1970. His first anthology, *Yellow Earth*,
was published only three months after his release from
prison. Starting in April, 1971, Kim began to work for
the Roman Catholic Church in Womju. He worked under
the supervision of Bishop Daniel Chi engaged in
research work for the church. Bishop Chi, too, was
sentenced to fifteen years in prison for his support of Kim
Chi Ha and his student associates in their struggle against
the Park regime. About this time Kim published another
poem called "What Makes Us So Poor" in *World of Art*.
The well-known long poem "Groundless Rumors"
appeared in *Creation*, a Catholic church publication, in

from *Groundless Rumors*

“Guilty,” the judge declared,
Pounding his gavel three more times.
“And it is hereby solemnly declared in accordance with the law
That from the body of the accused shall be cut off immediately, after the closing of the court,
One head, so that he may not be able to think up or spread groundless rumors anymore,
Two legs, so that he may not insolently stand on the ground on his two feet any more,
One penis and two testicles, so that he may not produce another, seditious like himself.
After this is done, since there exists a great danger of his attempting to
Resist, his two hands shall be tied together behind his back, his trunk shall be
Tied with a wet leather vest, and his throat shall be stuffed with a hard and long-lasting voice-preventing tool, and then he shall be placed in confinement
For five hundred years from this date.



from *Five Bandits*

You are the five bandits, aren't you?
No, sir, I am not.
Then, who are you?
I am a snatcher.
Aah, good. Snatcher, pickpocket, robber, burglar, and swindler.
They are the five bandits.
No, sir, I am not that kind of snatcher.
What are you then?
I am a pimp.
Aah, good. A pimp is better. Pimp, prostitute, madam, hoodlum, and informer. You are the five bandits, aren't you?
No, no, I am not a pimp.
Then, what are you?
I am a peddler.
Aah, peddler! Much better. Gum peddler, cigarette peddler, sock peddler, candy peddler, and chocolate peddler.
They are the real bandits living on imported goods.
No, no, sir, I am not that kind of peddler.
Then, what are you?
I am a beggar, sir.
Aah, if you are a beggar, it is even better.
Beggar, leper, ragpicker, pauper, thief,

All together are the five bandits.
Shut up, you dog: to the big house with you!

*No, no, I don't want to go. I am not the five bandits,
I am a peasant from Cholla-do.
I came to Seoul to earn my livelihood
Because I couldn't feed myself by farming.
The only crime I committed was stealing a small piece of bread
because I was hungry last night.*

But nobody listened to him.
The rope around him is tightened, left and right,
up and down, and he twists hopelessly,
listening to the squeaking noises.
The tortures used are compressing, beating, water torture, fire torture, tanning, branding, hanging upside down, swinging in the air. Soapy water, to which red pepper and vinegar are added, is poured on him.
But his answer remains the same: *no, sir.*
No, no, sir. That is all he says.



The Road to Seoul

I must go.
Don't cry, I'm going,
Crossing the white passes,
through the black passes,
through the thirsty passes,
Along the wearisome road to Seoul,
I must go,
To sell my body.
Without a promise when I'll return,
When I'll be back with brightly blooming smiles,
And without the modest promise of untying the ribbon
I must go.
Though living in a hard and miserable world,
How can I forget the castor-bean flowers in the hills and the smell of wheat growing in the fields surrounding the village where I was born.
I'll never forget
Cherishing them deeply in my heart.
In my tearful dream, I might come back to you,
I see myself coming back with starlight in the night.
I must go.
Don't cry, I'm going
Along the wearisome road to Seoul,
Crossing the thirsty passes which make even the sky weary,
I am going to sell my body.

March, 1972, while he was employed as a research worker under Bishop Chi. This antiestablishment poem made a sensation. No less than the "Five Bandits" did it upset the high officials, and the government went looking for some reason to "put him away for good." What was it that made the government officials so angry? Let me quote a portion of it:

If he earned ten Won, a hundred Won
were taken away.
Every day of the year without exception
he was harassed
and harassed and harassed by this guy
and that guy,
guy with government power, guy with
sweet talk,
guy with strong fists, guy with powerful
backing,
guy with the letter "B" for bureaucrat written on
his forehead, guy with the letter "T" for tax
collector written on the bridge of his nose, guy
with "swindler" written in his smiling eyes
and fast-talking mouth, guy with "fraud"
written on his gold teeth.

At the end of this long poem the poet tells this story:

Suddenly the astonished King cried out,
his body writhing,
as out dropped the yellow snake egg;
its shell cracked and out slithered a baby snake
crying,
"Mama, Mama."
The King screamed and fired his gun again
and again.
"Close the four great gates," he shouted.
"No one may leave.
Arrest them all.
I decree a new law forbidding freedom
of speech.
Bring in the troops.
Bring in the air force.
Bring in the palace guards.
Crush and grind that statue of Jesus
into powder."
The rifles went bang, bang, bang.
The machine guns: ta-ta-ta.
The canons: boom-boom.
The tanks: boom.
The planes: zoom, zoom, zoom.
Standing in a circle, all at once
They fired ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta.
But none of the bullets reached or touched the small
statue of Jesus;
Instead
The bullets crisscrossed,
Killing, and crushing the troops
Until, at last, all had perished.

Is this a prediction? Perhaps it is. We have already witnessed some of the irrational behavior in the Park regime in the description provided by Kim in this long, still unfinished poem. Kim Chi Ha was arrested again for "Groundless Rumors." He was accused again of

violating the anti-Communist law. The prosecution accused him and his student friends of being Communist sympathizers, if not Communists themselves, because of their antiestablishment stand. The prosecution pointed out that Kim Chi Ha was the ringleader of the student group, which included Yu In-Tae, Su Jung-Suk, An Hyung-No, and other students, and insisted that the group was guilty of studying Marxism. The members of the group, according to the prosecution, believe that South Korea is still a feudalistic society, enslaved to foreign economic forces, and that due to these conditions, South Korea is poor and corrupted, and politically is not free. The student group desires to change this corrupted system. The students did not deny in court that they organized to demonstrate to restore democracy, but denied the accusation that they proposed violent revolution or were planning to establish a socialist government after overthrowing the present corrupt regime.

The prosecution specifically pointed out that the student group appointed a Christian student group to lead the mass mobilization and also raise political funds among church circles. Presumably, the Christian student group willingly accepted that responsibility. It is obvious that the government prosecution has attempted to establish close relationships between the Christian church and the student groups, which are accused of advocating a violent revolution against the government. It becomes clear then why the members of the Korean Federation of Christian Students were one of the government's major targets at this time.

Why did the government attempt to connect the Christian church and the "violent" student groups? The answer lies with another question. Who is threatening the existing politically corrupted power of Park Chung Hee? Neither the Confucian groups nor the Buddhist groups pose any visible challenge to the Park regime. The dynamic Christian activists, though small in numbers, caused more social protests than any other group since the "Yushin" regime emerged. The present government is more aware of this fact than anyone else today.

The students, the Christians, the intellectuals have continued in their demands for the restoration of democracy and freedom. Meanwhile, threatened by the spread of the antiregime movement, the government has been getting tougher. As though the January presidential decree was not strong enough, Park declared decrees one after another, and finally on May 13, 1974, the most notorious of them all, Decree Number 9.

Presidential Decree Number 9 prohibits the spread of "rumors," public assembly and demonstration, criticism of the "Yushin" constitution, the political activities of students, the reporting of all the above activities in the press as well as reporting of legislators' speeches in the National Assembly if they have anything to do with the above. Decree Number 9 included all the previous decrees in one, and today South Korea is virtually under martial law. In spite of such a severe decree, which could bring about a death sentence to the violators, there continued to be a series of sporadic

student demonstrations in Seoul. It is estimated that about seven hundred students, mostly from Seoul National University, are now detained in prison without legal procedure. Declaring that underground student groups have a link with North Korea, Park justifies his decree outlawing all student organizations.

To challenge such a savage decree, Kim Chi Ha wrote another long poem, "Cry of the People," and had it distributed in a handwritten form in and out of the country. Like his other poems, it is prohibited from being read by the people in South Korea.

Kim expressed his position in an eight-hour-long interview with a Japanese correspondent of the *Weekly Post (Shukan Post)* of Tokyo. The comprehensive interview appeared subsequently in three consecutive issues, March 14, 21, and 28. The story was a sensation in Japan. The following is a portion of the interview translated from the original Japanese source by the author.

REPORTER: I understand that the reason for your imprisonment was your connection with the Federation of the Democratic Youth and Students. Can you explain that situation?

KIMCHI HA: ...in answering your question...let me stress that my connection with the Democratic Youth and Students is based on my fundamental philosophy of life. That is, to me the relationship is political, aesthetic, and religious. Therefore, to become involved in this task is being master guiding my own destiny and creating a new livelihood in a new era. My life, based on such a concept, must follow every detail of it. This is not limited to my individual action, but reflects on our total movement. Between the truth and fabrication, how we determine our actions as true human beings will ultimately decide the successes or failures of our movement. I also think that the mass is watching every movement we make.

REPORTER: Then is the "Democratic Youth and Student" incident totally a false assumption?

KIM: Yes. As a poet, I must bring the truth out to light from the darkness. That is my responsibility as a poet. I am very frank with you, since I have no political plan. I swear before Christ, in whom I believe, my people, my country, and history that I am telling you the truth.

REPORTER: Why does President Park oppress the people so harshly at this time?

KIM: ...if you read the "Yushin" constitution, you will discover how bad a document it is. We believe in freedom and democracy. Knowing the nature of the Park regime and the "Yushin" constitution, how can we not fight against them? It is not a matter of ideology. It is the natural reaction of decent men. It is also a legal response. Those who do not respond to the "Yushin" spirit are doing their civic duty. We are responding against the evil because of our own conscience, and our actions are very humane, indeed....You must appreciate that our movement is a very serious one. It is coming from the bottom of our hearts. We resist the evils because we hope to live a free and better life. That is why we cannot accept the lies and frame-ups. That's against our basic philosophy....

It is a simple problem. We are fighting against the

dictator who represses human rights in our country...individually we are doing our duty, collectively we are doing our patriotic duty.

After this eight-hour interview and the publication of three articles, "Austerities 1974," Kim was once again arrested, on March 14, 1975, on the most serious charge of having violated the anti-Communist law. The government has already hanged eight men accused of membership in the Peoples Revolutionary Party (PRP), and now the victims are to be Kim Chi Ha and his student friends. The government has circulated a pamphlet, "The Case Against Kim Chi Ha," that seeks to portray the poet as a Communist.

According to the Korean *Haptong Press* on March 15, 1975, Kim had three charges against him: (1) that Kim had written articles in *Dong-A Ilbo* charging that the "PRP" case is government fabrication; (2) that Kim demanded the release of these "PRP" members at a press interview with seven Japanese reporters on March 1; (3) that in his interview with the Japanese reporter of *Sankei Daily* Kim praised the activities of the antigovernmental groups in Japan. *Sankei Daily* carried the story on March 8.

The Minister of Justice, Whang San-Duk, issued an official statement condemning Kim's statement, and added that anyone who claims the "PRP" case is a fabrication must be charged with violating the anti-Communist law. Whang at one time was known to be a "liberal" professor of law at Seoul National University, but is now a strong defendant of the dictatorial regime he used to condemn in his classroom many years ago.

On May 19, 1975, at his first court appearance since his arrest, Kim Chi Ha stated that there would be no fair trial in the present court in view of the previous experiences. The "previous experiences" to which Kim was referring were the cases of the "PRP" and the "Korean Federation of Democratic Youth and Students." The same presiding judge sentenced these students to various terms, including the death sentence. Kim complained he was unfairly treated since his rearrest, for he was not allowed to wash his face, exercise, or even see his lawyers. With these prejudices, Kim doubted he would receive fair treatment in court.

More than three hundred people packed the courtroom, including Kim's aged mother, mother-in-law, his wife with their year-old son, and many civil rights leaders. Their spirited poet was the source of their inspiration. The poet continued his demand for citizens' rights in the court as he would have done out of court.

Kim Chi Ha continues to follow his own courageous words: "For the liberation and freedom of humanity, and for the victory of democracy for which the people hunger and thirst, we want to offer all of ourselves." Thus the internationally famed poet, Kim Chi Ha, identified himself as a political activist in a struggle against the dictatorial Park regime in South Korea with a burning resistance. "In this darkness, with my eyes glaring in anger, I am constantly challenging an ill-omened gray future. The agony of this provides me with limitless fuel to keep my fighting spirit burning, so that I do not fall asleep in front of the enemy."