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Advanced Writing

May 1, 2016

Kiha and the Unpolitical Faces

Has Chang Kiha been political? Two years ago when I read Cha Woojin's review of *Sarame Maum* [Human Mind], the third album of Kiha and the Faces, I could not help but murmur the question. In the article, Cha claimed that the title track had in itself "sisajeogin nwiangsu [implications of current events]," evoking universal emotions of specific memories related with Sewol Ferry Disaster and its aftermath (Cha). I do enjoy reviews that combine a sociocultural perspective, and Cha is a writer that I usually trust, but this one was a bit perplexing; not only could I not find any palpable allusion in the lyrics, but Chang Kiha, the leader of Kiha and the Faces, had never raised a political voice in his career as far as I knew. I followed him since I got into middle school, the year when Kiha made his debut, when everyone else of my age was interested in idol groups. I admit disregarding idol singers was a bit of snobbism, but Kiha's music as well as a sudden rise to fame did strike me as more compelling. Graduated from Social Science College of Seoul National University, often called "the cradle of Korean progress," he became an indie syndrome with his first single, "Ssaguryeo Keopi [Cheap Coffee]," whose lyrics were a realistic portrait of an unemployed young man, so he seemed destined to be an intelligent-political-indie folk artist. Back then, I liked folk guitar sound, started to hang around the school library and were finding interest in politics and society, and therefore Kiha was going to be a perfect fit. However, he broke down my anticipation afterward, denying every political allusion in his songs and going somewhat mainstream in the following years. Once a indie singer-songwriter, now he has become a TV star who dates IU, one of the most famous idol singers of the country. Then, his third album

was released, Cha's article published, and it made me reexamine the whole career of his. For most of his career, Chang Kiha had rarely been political, and if his latest album included political implications, then it should be a sign that he underwent a massive change of path.

A change itself is no surprise, however, for Kiha has never stopped betraying expectations ever since he made a breakthrough. He debuted in 2008 to quickly become a main artist of Bunga Bunga Records, an indie music company founded by a group of Seoul National University graduates. The label had a few similar artists, such as Youth Unemployment for which Chang Kiha himself played drums, and a few other indie productions like Bunga Bunga also emerged at the time. In turn, they formed a small modern folk scene around Seoul, largely consisting of varsity graduates and fellow young artists. One of their features was that they were usually political; quite a few of them came from college activist groups that persisted from 1980s, which as usual operated small clubs and bands that practiced protest songs, and they were active members of radical minority parties. Also, 2008 was a year of national protests, anti-government rallies regarding import of U.S. beef taking place for months, and many of young folk artists participated there as performers. Strangely enough, however, Kiha and the Faces never took part in such events even though they seemed to be a perfect match. During the turbulent months, a group that the rallies kept calling on was 20s and 30s, and his hit single "Ssaguryeo Keopi" sounded like the essence of daily lives of young men who live alone in poverty and alienation. In the chorus, the narrator sings, "ssaguryeo keopireul masinda, mijigeunhe jeokjani sogi sseuryeo-onda. Chukchukhan binil jangpane balbadagi jjeokhago dalabuteotdaga tteoreojinda. Ijeneun amureotjido aneo, bakwibeole hanmarijjeum sseuk jinagado [I am drinking a cheap coffee, so tepid that my stomach burns. My sole sticks to the damp vinyl linoleum. I am now indifferent even when a cockroach passes me by]." Not only the lyrics but also the overall outfit of Kiha seemed to emblemize the alienated and frustrated youth. He did not shave nor comb his hair and was

putting on crumpled shirts. Then, when the music began, he and the session started to wave his arms up and down with the eyes closed. The whole image, a bunch of messy guys performing eccentric music and choreography, turned into an internet meme. That way, he earned popularity on the web, the very place where the alienated young people that he epitomized gathered together. Still, most people thought that he would end up vanishing as a one-hit wonder, and even I thought so. Folk rock could never be mainstream music, and Kiha's music was more offbeat than any offbeat indie rock. Yet, he proved us wrong again. The following album titled after the band name was a surprising success, and more important, the content changed as you could not find the loser attitude that defined their breakthrough single. Even the first track, "Mwol Greoke Nollae [What's So Shocking about It]," was entirely about bragging:

Nado naega jinjjaro haenael jooreun molatseotseo [I did not know that I would really make it].

Ireotgena meotjige haenael jooreun molatseotseo [I did not know that I would make it this fabulously].

Neodo naega jinjjaro haenael jooreun molatgetjiman [You would not have known that I would make it either],

Deoisang, ijeneun niga aldeon naega aniya [But I am no longer the one that you knew in the past].

Indeed, they were no longer Kiha and the Faces that I knew in the past.

Regarding the metamorphosis, not in a bad term, I would say the band has taken a more pop way with *Kiha and the Faces*. As though the whole eccentricity of the first effort was a mere strategy to gain attention from people, the color and concept of the band diverged from it. The first alteration I noticed was an addition of keyboard, and the folk guitar was replaced with electronic one as Hasegawa Yohei, who had played for a number of modern rock bands

including Kim Changwan Band, joined the group. Moreover, Kiha no longer looked pathetic, for he was shaved as well as groomed and started to dress well-ironed shirts. He somehow started to look like a rock star a bit; after the breakthrough, the band completed several tours and concerts, adding to Kiha's confidence. These changes resulted into an overall transition of music genre to more popular rock n' roll. The title numbers like "Geureotgo Geureon Sai [Some Sort of Relationships]" and "Uri Jigeum Man-na [I Must See You Now]" were successful, concerts enthusiastic, and the band went on television shows to a nice response. At this point, Kiha was smoothly parking on the mainstream. In 2012, he became the host of a primetime radio talk show, and in the following year he featured as a guest on the most popular TV show in the country, Moohandojeon [Infinite Challenge]. Furthermore, in 2014, he was entangled in an unexpected controversy after an appearance on a talk show during which a female host was slammed for saying that she wondered how Kiha would be on the bed. She was obviously blamed for sexualizing him, which in a sense meant that Kiha was worth sexualizing. I realized then that Chang Kiha, at last, became a sex symbol – considering the image he stood for six years ago, I could barely believe it. Then, later in the same year, media reported that Kiha had been dating IU for two years. It was the culmination of the transformation that Kiha and the Faces had gone through; while the genre altered from folk to punk rock, the status of the band leader shifted from a messy indie singer to an envied celebrity.

Nevertheless, some style of music that defined Kiha and the Faces was left unmoved. Like many other folk singers, he was influenced heavily by 70s and 80s artists, and the two of the most evident forefathers were Kim Changwan of Sanulim and Song Changsik. In terms of a vocal style, Kim whispers while Song howls, and Kiha is somewhere between them. The commonality, though, is that both demonstrate rhythms of colloquial language; although their songs have clear melodies, Song and Kim looked like they were performing dialogues rather

than singing. Such a style, which I would like to call "a talking way of singing," was developed by Kiha. Not just whispering and howling, at times he throws out words indifferently, other times he murmurs, and melodies become thin to the extent that it is almost indiscernible. For example, the monologue that came in the middle of "Ssaguryeo Keopi" was almost understood as alternative rapping. After all, the result is quite compelling sound of voice that comes across as straightforward, sincere and inviting, for Kiha's vocal does make us feel as if we are engaging in a conversation with a long-time friend whenever we tune in. In 2011, he performed "Seoreun Jeu-um-e [Nearing Thirty]" of Kim Kwangsuk on a television music show, and even though I was closer to thirteen than thirty at that time, his vocal, which I felt was honest because it did not show any extravagant technique, caused me to relate to the lyrics. That is, his sincere style of singing possesses power to deeply appeal to listeners' heart. Many of his songs, in turn, take a form in which the narrator speaks directly to an imaginary listener, which is exemplified by the title track of the third album, "Sarame Maum [Human Mind]," the song for which Cha wrote a review. Its lyrics goes:

Jibe gaja, oneul halireun da haetsunikka [Let's go home, now that we have done our work today].

Jibe gaja, ije seulseul pigonhanikka [Let's go home, now that we are getting a bit tired].

Jibe gaja, baega gopajyeotsunikka [Let's go home, now that we got hungry].

Jibe gaja, nanuen jeongmal jichyeotsunikka [Let's go home, now that I am truly exhausted].

Eojjidoen irinji jiburo omgineun balgeorum han georum han geogum hangerum-mada moogeopki jjagi oepjiman ildan jibe gaja [Somehow each step to home feels heavier than ever, but now let's just go home].

Sarame maumiran eoryeopgodo eoryeopguna [A human mind is difficult, truly

difficult],

Hajiman oneul bamen jameul jaja, puk jaja [But tonight let's just have some sleep, a good night's sleep].

The track is inevitably sentimental, for Kiha speaks directly to our heart, and it is no wonder that Cha interpreted the song to a reference to Sewol. The strong emotion the lyrics trigger, delivered through Kiha's vocal, might have forced him to relate to real-life events, and by that time across the country a scene that aroused the most powerful sentiment was undoubtedly Sewol.

Likewise, the manner of performing, which was as unorthodox as the vocal style, has persisted. In fact, "bizarre" was the more appropriate word to describe it when I first saw his Youtube videos. From his early performances, Kiha tossed words rather indifferently, and at small intervals between the lines he constantly moved his body. While the arm-waving choreography of "Dari Chaoreunda, Gaja [The Moon Is Waxing, Let's Go]" was the trademark, other dances he practiced were also pretty much absurd – they were not so much dances as awkward moves. This time, though, the influence came from an unexpected source outside the country. From his early days, Kiha has revealed that he studies Talking Heads as a reference, a band also famous for their absurd choreography. A bigger absurdity was, however, that the crowd really seemed to immerse themselves into Kiha's performance, some even imitating his moves. He was eccentric, but he certainly had a charisma, so much so that when he became an internet meme his nickname was "Kiha the Religious Leader." Just like David Byrne, Kiha was not afraid of showing off his bizarre moves and interacting with the crowd in his own way, and such confidence as well as the energy created a strange but strong connection with the crowd. In 2011, I also have been to his concert, and I enjoyed how he kept making conversations with the audience, whether by his tongue or body, and the atmosphere was indeed like a revival meeting of some pseudo-religion worshipping a master

on the stage. Just like that night, Kiha kept managing to have a total command of the stage on every occasion, and for him who the audiences are did not matter. In that sense, the performance for 33rd Blue Dragon Film Awards was a classic Kiha and the Faces. It was the biggest night for Korean film industry with all the movie stars gathering, and Korean actors were infamous for a low response to guest performers; critics even contend that they presume a superior position to pop singers. Kiha, as usual, did not bother, and he did not even bother to get off the stage, stand on the edge of the chairs on which actors were seated and sing in their faces. To make the matters worse, he asked them to clap their hands. In the end, though, the celebrities surrendered, and they began to clap with an awkward grin on their faces. The legendary night, which became another hit on the web, was everything Kiha could provide for in a four-minute show – funny, absurd and spectacular all at once.

Those exuberant styles were not just the facade, though, because they eventually have served to shape the content. For example, the talking way of singing sets the mood for effective storytelling, engaging the listener right in from the beginning. The narrativity is important, for despite all the extraordinary features of Kiha and the Faces, classic storytelling constitutes the core of their work. The band has covered different types of stories, but what underlay the basis was lives of his generation. They shared somewhat pessimistic and indifferent attitude toward society, and instead focused on themselves more because they had to find a way to survive on their own. Some work of Kiha and the Faces, in turn, reflected such characteristics indirectly. For instance, the debut album, *Byeolireopsi Sanda* [Living the Carefree Life], is an account of an easygoing lad who calls out for friends in "Nawa [Come Out]," praises a leisurely lifestyle in "Neurige Geotja [Let's Walk Slowly]," and proudly declares that he is "Byeolireopsi Sanda [Living the Carefree Life]." However, after the release of the album, Kiha was mostly viewed as an outsider, which inadvertently demonstrated that most young people were living in the exact other way around; the fact that the band

emphasized the easygoing lifestyle and thus gained attention was the very proof that most of his colleagues were buried under worries of lives. On the other hand, another attitude that Kiha shared with his peers were that he did not take authority seriously. "Myeoksal Hanbeonman Japisipsida [Let Me Grab You by the Collar]" in the debut album was a great example, which could easily be interpreted as mocking the establishment:

Nwisinjineun moreugetjiman [I don't know who you are, sir],
 Dangsindeul ttamae naega jalmotdwengeoyo [But because of you, sir, I went wrong].
 Byeonsangkkajineun barajido aneuni [I don't dare to demand compensation],
 Myeoksal hanbeonman japisipsida [But let me grab you by the collar just once].

Likewise, the way Kiha conducts himself on the stage, which I would like to define as "the performance style of I don't care," stems from the same wayward attitude. On the night of Blue Dragon Film Awards, Kiha was proclaiming, "I don't care who you are, how you are famous or how you regard me. Just follow me when I perform." In other words, it was a total disregard and taunt to authority, which mirrored the general mindset of Kiha and his peers.

Still, he denied that his songs contained any political allusion and posed an indifferent attitude even to those suggestions. Such a kind of interpretation has followed Kiha and the Faces from the debut, and perhaps "Amoogeotdo Eopjaneo [Absolutely Nothing]" was the strongest case. The song is a tale of a bunch of cowherds in the middle of a desert who are on the verge of starving to death. Then, the herds meet a prophet, who guarantees to take them to greasy lands, and follow him for three months only to find out "absolutely nothing." Since the song was released in 2008 just after the inauguration of Lee Myungbak, the president who promised economic growth, everything clicked for an explanation that the song intended for an allegorical satire. Chang Kiha did not respond, however, and kept reticent to similar

suggestions for his other songs hitherto. In fact, though, such denial is another attitude that Kiha and his contemporaries have in common. Even though they act and think politically in that they disregard authorities and assume a critical stance toward society, they have exhibited a tendency to shun overt participation into real world politics. To be fair, Kiha seems genuinely unconcerned about actual events. He has not said a word about politics in numerous interviews and has not made an action either, focusing on his own music more instead. Nevertheless, his songs, which demonstrated the outlooks of youth, are political, and regardless of Kiha's wish or intention, they have been interpreted that way. Here I see a parallel between him and his predecessor, Sanulim. The latter, likewise, did not mind political turbulences of his era and tried to create their own world of music. Still, their work was understood as reflections of rebellious youth, and some of it was even designated as forbidden songs by the powers that be. Although thirty years have passed, Kiha's case is no different; Kiha himself has abstained from intervening in political events, yet his work has been understood as portraying lives and thoughts of his contemporaries.

Therefore, after re-contemplating his career, I revised my notion of Kiha and the Faces and came to a conclusion that they have not really changed; if Kiha has been political, he has been that way for the whole career. In fact, what he has demonstrated over the years was some kind of evasive politics – unpolitical on the surface, but deep down always having a potential to be so. That is, Kiha has not engaged in any political movement nor voiced a clear viewpoint, but as a member of his generation he shared certain characteristics, thoughts and attitude of his age group that formed the basis of his work. In other words, the stories he has conveyed are specific tales of folks in our era. Thus, when he talks about *Sarame Maum*, it refers to a human mind of the people in our generation, and thus inevitably, as Cha pointed out, it has implications of current events. Four months later, in February 2015, Kiha and the Faces released a single, "Saehae Bok [Happy New Year]," which is another epitome of Kiha's

politics. In the opening part, Kiha gives New Year's greetings to his family, friends, enemies and everybody on the planet. Then, in the chorus, he changes his tone and exclaims, “Saehae bokmaneuroneun andoe. Niga Jalhaeyaji. Yeolsimi Haeyaji [New Year's luck is not enough. You have to do well. You have to put an effort].” The song, which is a variation of a traditional children's New Year song in Korea, serves as another satire that mocks the "effort discourse," a prevalent tendency of the establishment that coerces young people into an idea that the only way to success is to exert more effort. The work was deemed slightly more political, for the band explicitly brought real-life discussions into the song for the first time, but I do not think that the change is remarkable. Rather, the song is a classic Kiha and the Faces; without referring to any real event or political figure, they once again manage to engage with grievances of present individuals, which is the consistent strategy Kiha and the Faces has adopted from the debut. To be frank, I once hoped that Kiha would come out as more openly political and assume a position of the representative of the young generation. Now I do not anymore, and perhaps the dream was a naïve middle school fantasy. A heroic musician that fully speaks for my generation does not exist, and from the outset Kiha had no interest in such a position. Instead, he focused on his own narrative, which was a right path, because the onus is on us to interpret his work in a political way – or not. After all, Kiha has never tried to reflect anyone else's thought; rather, it was me who kept trying to project my ideas onto him, just like Cha did in his review. I would probably continue doing so in the future, so now I do not care whether Kiha has been political or not. I just want him to carry on what he does best – connecting with people in our era with the unique stories of his own.

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