Some East Asian Popular Song Lyrics

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Most East Asian countries have by now been awash in Western-influenced popular music for well over three quarters of a century. In Japan, this kind of music began in 1914 with “Katyusha’s Song” (“Kachūsha no Uta” カチューシャの唄) by Nakayama Shimpei 中山晋平. In Korea, it began in 1920 with “Balsam Flower” (“Bongsŏnhwa” 봉선화) by Hong Nān’pa 홍난파. In China, it began in 1930 with “Drizzle” (“Máomáo Yǔ” 毛毛雨) by Lí Jīnhuī 黎錦暉. In Vietnam, it began in 1937 with “March of the Spring Performers” (“Xuân Nghệ Sĩ Hành Khúc”) by Lê Yến. For purposes of comparison, we should note here that popular music began in the United States in 1908 with “Shine on Harvest Moon,” by Nora Bayes and Jack Norworth, a vaudeville husband and wife team. Popular music in the Philippines was going strong by the 1920s with “kundiman” love ballads, but seems to have drawn some of its first sustenance from Spanish folk and liturgical music in the late nineteenth century.

A very broad spectrum of style may be observed in these songs; some sound entirely Asian and some entirely Western, while most exemplify some kind of fusion of Asian and Western musical procedures. These songs may be said in general to show concern with nationhood, modernity, and personal identity; but at the same time they deal with a huge variety of specific themes — if one perseveres, one can find an East Asian popular song about virtually anything. There is, for example, a Filipino song about fertilized duck eggs (“balut” in Tagalog), a popular delicacy that the song conceives as a symbol of Filipino identity. There is a Cantonese song about the tropical fruit called durian or jackfruit (“liúlián” in Mandarin, or “laolin” in Cantonese). There is a Vietnamese song by Phảm Duy that touches on the possibility of achieving national prosperity through offshore oil drilling. And so on.

Much care is often devoted to the lyrics that go with these songs, and phrases from them become allusions in common speech. Some songs have lyrics that are shapely enough to work quite well without music, as free-standing poems. Oftentimes, too, these lyrics bear witness, in succinct form, to noteworthy social or historical phenomena. As sources of doctrine, the
lyrics of popular songs in East Asia often appear to exist in competition with, or in opposition to, the doctrines enshrined in the civic religions and nationalist codes of the countries concerned. Thus, in the 1980s it was said that “Big Dèng [Dèng Xiǎopíng] ruled by day, while little Dèng [Dèng Lìjūn] ruled by night.

This body of material, in short, awaits the attention of a collator who might use it to create a modern-day Shìjìng or Book of Songs. The motive would be that of the Zhōu dynasty king who, according to the traditional account, ordered his officers to go into the countryside and transcribe the lyrics of the songs they heard, hoping thereby to discover the true thoughts and feelings of the people. The idea is that only words set to music reveal the true stirrings of the soul. To illustrate some of the processes at work in modern “music of the people,” I propose here to introduce, with commentary, several sets of East Asian song lyrics.

Korea’s first Western-influenced song was ostensibly about a flower, but the flower appears in the lyrics only in order to evoke the situation uppermost in the minds of Koreans of that era: Korea’s loss of sovereignty to Japan, which had occurred eleven years earlier:

“Balsam Flower” (1921)/“Bongsŏn Hwa” 봉선화 (鳳仙花)
Music by Hong Nan-p’a 홍난파 (洪蘭坡)
Lyrics by Kim Hyŏng-jun 김형준
Translated by Jane Chang & Eric Henry

울 밑에 선 봉선화야 네 모양이 처량하다
길고 긴 날 여름철에 아름답게 꽃필 적에
어여쁘신 아가씨들 너를 반겨 놀았도다.

Oh balsam standing there beneath the fence, how desolate you look!
In endless summer days when oh so beautifully you bloomed,
Adorable young maids would welcome and make game with you.

어언간에 여름 가고 가을 바람 솔솔 불어
아름다운 꽃송이를 모질게도 침노하니
락화로다 늘어앉다 네 모양이 처량하다.

But suddenly the summer faded and the autumn blasts arrived,
Unmercifully dispersing all your tender blooms—
Your petals fell away; you withered into this sad ruin.

북풍설한 찬 바람에 네 형체가 없어져도
평화로운 꿈을 꾼 너의 혼은 예 있으니
화창스런 봄바람에 환생기를 바라노라.
Though you may lose your shape beneath the cold north winter winds,
Your soul that dreams of peace is still intact—
May you be born again when warm spring breezes blow.

Almost fifty years later, in 1970, Kim Min-ki wrote another song with an implicit political message, a song that was to inaugurate the democracy movement in South Korea, which lasted from 1970 to 1989 and was accompanied throughout by "movement songs" banned by the government. This song begins calmly in a musical idiom reminiscent of Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind”; in the second verse, however, its harmonies become adventurous and declamatory in a way that endows the song with considerable musical substance:

"Morning Dew”/“Ach’im Isŭl” 아침이슬
Words & music by Kim Min-ki 김민기 (金敏基)
Translated by Jane Chang & Eric Henry

Like pearls of dew distilled in night’s abyss,
The anguish in my heart forms drop by drop;
And then, the morning come, I start to mount
A sun-kissed hill, a smile on my lips.

The fiery sun arcs red above the graves,
The burning mid-day heat will be my trial.
I go now into that rough place of strife,
No anguish now — the time to act has come!

In China, popular music first began to develop in Shanghai, starting in 1930. One of the first such songs to appear there was Chén Gēxīn’s “Roses Everywhere Abloom,” a song that still enjoys considerable popularity, though it has been banned at various times as an example of “yellow,” that is to say “immoral,” music. What is noteworthy about the lyrics is that they do not simply celebrate the beauties of nature; they actually advance a doc-
trine of personal liberation that is both un-nationalistic and un-Confucian. Chén Gēxīn, like many mainland popular songwriters, suffered persecution after 1949. He died in the 1950s in a labor reform camp.

“Roses Everywhere Abloom”/“Qiangwei Chuchu Kai”薔薇處處開
Words & music by Chén Gēxīn陈歌新
Translated by Eric Henry

薔薇薔薇處處開
青春青春處處栽
擋不住的春風吹進胸襟
薔薇薔薇處處開

Roses, roses — everywhere abloom,
Fresh spring, fresh spring, implanted everywhere;
The spring wind, irresistible, blows into our lapels,
Roses, roses — everywhere abloom.

天公要薔薇處處開
也叫人們盡量地愛
春風拂去我們心的創痛
薔薇薔薇處處開

The Lord on high wants roses blooming everywhere;
And calls on all alike to love with all our hearts the rose.
The spring wind wafts away the wounds that pain our hearts.
Roses, roses — everywhere abloom.

春天是一個美的新娘
滿地薔薇是她的嫁妝
只要是誰有少年的心
就配做她的新郎

Spring is like a beauteous bride,
The roses everywhere the dowry that she brings,
And one need only have a youthful heart
To be the spring’s appointed groom.

Roses, roses — everywhere abloom,
Fresh spring, fresh spring, implanted everywhere;
The spring wind, irresistible, blows into one's lapels,
Roses, roses — everywhere abloom.

The song’s doctrine is implicit as well in a Chinese song of the 1950s that came from a movie, the title of which, *The Song of Everlasting Regret* (*Cháng Hèn Gē* 長恨歌) was identical with that of the famous Táng dynasty narrative poem concerning the love of Táng Xuánzōng and Yáng Guīfēi. The lyrics, set to a happy, swinging, swashbuckling tune, fail to affirm any nationalistic or Confucian principle whatsoever. Rather, everything perceived as possessing value derives from a mere personal relationship. The lyrics also contain a plea that such relationships be allowed to develop without hindrance.

“Meeting By Chance”/“Píng Shuǐ Xiāng Féng” 萍水相逢
*Music by Zhuāng Hónɡ 莊宏*
*Lyrics by Lù Lì 陸麗*
*Translated by Eric Henry*

我們相逢在風流裏，
好像浮萍相聚無幾。
朝夕共歡笑同遊戲，
旦經不住那風浪沖擊。

We met in bright romance and charm,
Like flotsam in an open sea—
We laughed and played both night and day,
But finally were by windswept waves struck down.

如今被拋棄各東西，
總有一天風波不起。
記住這僅是暫別離，
相逢還在風流裏。

Though we may now be cast apart,
In days to come the sea will not be rough.
Remember, this is but an hour apart—
We still will meet in bright romance and charm.
The thousand hues of nature strive,
While willows droop and cling;
Though grass and trees feel not,
They still reveal fresh spring’s desire.

小小知更雀兒，
到時要唱啼。
聽取愛的呼聲，
別讓他窒息。

The tiny time-discerning birds
In season let their songs go forth.
Listen to their calls of love—
And let them not be smothered.

Though we may now be cast apart,
In days to come the sea will not be rough.
Remember, this is but an hour apart—
We still will meet in bright romance and charm.

The following Vietnamese song written in the mid 1950s celebrates a love, passionate but not sexual, between two young men who met in the military. Same-sex relationships of this intensity are not uncommon in Vietnam and East Asia generally. The song also illustrates an aspect of military service that may be seen wherever it occurs: it brings together people of different background who would never otherwise have met. In this song, one man is from the paddy fields, the other from the ocean shore. Though the personal relationship is obviously prized here, this feeling seems to harmonize with an intensely felt love of country. The melody swings along in a drunken, swaying, heavily accented fashion:

“The First Moment”/“Phút Đầu Tiên”
Words & music by Hoàng Thị Thơ
Translated by Eric Henry

Anh từ dòng quê đến,
Tôi từ miền cát lên.
Đối ta chủ mà gặp nhau đây,
E. Henry

Tuy ban đâu mà tình e sâu,
Gặp nhau sau mùa chính chiến,
Gặp nhau phút đầu lưu luyện
Vui giữa trời đất nước thần yêu.

You came down from paddy fields,  
And I came up from sandy shores—
We tarried here, and thus we met,
Though fresh and timorous at first.
We met when war had come and gone,
We met and our attachment swelled,
Blithe amid the sky and earth beloved.

Anh môi em điếu thuốc,  
Tôi kể chuyện đáng cay.
Đối ta chưa mà gặp nhau đây,
Say tâm tình cảm chất đôi tay,
Ngời trông sao trời lòng lạnh.
Trời xanh trông vàng hồng ánh,
Hai đưa nhìn đôi nét cao xanh.

You offered me a cigarette,  
And I recounted piercing tales.
We tarried here, and thus we met.
Drunk with friendship, we clasped hands,
Sat gazing at the twinkling stars,  
The pure blue sky and shining moon,
Two lads gazing at two lofty brows.

Anh ơi, phút đầu tiên ấy nay đâu?
Anh ơi, khi tình sông núi ấn sâu,
Lòng trai thế hé trao nhau?
Xin cho duyên tình tìm kiếm tìm ta,
Trao qua duyên tình non nước bao la.
Lòng trai trắng hòa yêu thương.

Oh friend, where now is that first moment?
Oh friend, when souls were steeped in fervor,
And young men shared their aspirations?
Oh may this love seek out our hearts,
And steep us in the love of our vast land,
The overflowing love of manly youths.
Trên nẻ đường đất nước
Ta từng giờ ước mong.
Chán quay về, dù gặp lòng đong
Tin nhau, dù biên đời mênh mông.
Lòng tuôn dòng đầy trang giấy,
Vì nhớ phút đầu tiên ấy,
Đối xưa mình khi mới quen nhau,
Đây trái tim t...a...a!!!

Along our country's winding paths,
We lived each hour in dreams.
Our feet, though hemmed about, turn home,
We keep our trust, though life is vast;
Our fervor makes our letters full,
For we remember that first time,
The two of us, when first we met,
Here in our hearts!!!

In 1973 there were several months when it appeared possible that negotiations might lead to peace in Vietnam. Several composers wrote songs responsive to this hope. In the song below, hope for the future merges with nostalgia for an idyllic past. The melody is folk-like and makes excellent use of irregular phrasing:

“The Day the Rocks Put Blossoms Forth”/“Ngày Đá Đổm Bông”
Words & music by Nhật Ngân
Translated by Eric Henry

Buổi tối ngủ trên đồi, hỏi hồn đá nhỏ
“Con đường nào, con đường nào,
Đ dan đến một dòng sông?”
Một dòng sông mà em vẫn thương xa ngôi biệt áo
Và câu hò và con thuyền theo nước trời xuống.

At evening, sleeping on a hill, I ask the little rock,
“What is the road, what is the road
That leads to a flowing river?”
A place where still you often sit afar and wash the clothes,
And boats and river calls go up and down the current.

Buổi sáng ngồi rừng hỏi ngàn lá đỗ
“Con đường nào, con đường nào,
Đan đến một miền quê?”
Một miền quê trời hanh nâng, ruộng khô cần sỏi đá,
Đối mưa về, đối mưa về, cho lúa trở bông.
At daybreak sitting in the wilds I ask the thousand falling leaves
“What is the road, what is the road
That leads to a place in the countryside?”
A place where fields are parched and pebbly
And await the rain’s return, the rain’s return, so fields will flower.

Oh, oh, oh, in this countryside of mine,
The boats go sometimes up and sometimes down the ancient river.
Oh, oh, oh, the hammock creaks in swaying back and forth;
Oh, oh, oh, the lullaby is sweet upon my lips.

In listless midday hours I often softly ask myself
“What is the road, what is the road
That leads to days in bygone years?”
In bygone days, my mother came and stood,
white tresses stirred with laughter,
As the bamboo by the gate and palms beyond the garden nodded in
the breeze.

In the morn I ask the tirelessly roaming clouds if they’re aware,
“What is the road, what is the road
That leads to a day of happiness?”
On that day of happiness the sparrows urged each other back to
build their nests.
The rains will come, the rains will come, so stones can put forth
blossoms.

Vietnamese songs are often characterized by an intense yearning for
transcendence, that is, liberation from the mundane. In the following song,
written in 1955, love is the medium through which this is to be achieved. This song came under heavy attack from northern Communist ideologues as exemplifying decadent bourgeois subjectivism. The melody, slow, measured, and somewhat hymn-like, is redolent of the state of ecstatic stillness evoked in the lyrics. In the A section of the song, the lyrics for which are verses 1, 2, and 4, an extra metrical beat occurs at the end of the third line.

“Song of Love”/“Thương Tình Ca”
Words & music by Phạm Duy
Translated by Eric Henry

Dìu nhau di trên phố vàng,
Dìu nhau di trong ánh sáng.
Đất hơn về giấc mơ vàng, nhẹ nhàng;
Dìu nhau di chung một niệm thương.

We lead each other through the empty streets,
We lead each other through the shining light;
Our souls are led into a golden dream, all mild—
We lead each other in a realm of love.

Nhip chân êm đềm thanh thớt,
Đừng cho trăng tan dưới khói.
Chớ để mộng thơ mưa tàn, điều dàng,
Đừng cho không gian đứng thời gian.

The rhythm of your steps is soft and light;
Don’t let the moon dissolve beneath the mist;
Don’t let the dream break up, nor raindrops cease, so soft—
Don’t let this world’s space collide with time.

Đưa nhau vào cõi vô biên;
Có chim uyên tình thiêng
Hát ru em triền miên.
Đưa nhau vào chỗ không tên, mặc đời quên,
không bền không thuyên, hết câu nguyên.

We lead each other into an eternal realm
That has a nightingale of sacred love,
Whose gentle lullaby coos on and never ends.
We lead each other to a nameless place, unknown to men,
That has no pier, no boat, and no more vows.

Dìu nhau sang bên kia thế giới;
Dìu nhau nương thân ven chín suối.
Dắt diu về chốn xa với, đôi đôi;
Dìu nhau, dìu nhau vào nghìn thu.

We lead each other to a place beyond the world,
We lead each other till we rest by death’s Nine Springs,
Drawn deep into the distant mist, life after life—
We lead each other into an unchanging realm.

This yearning for transcendence is also very often exemplified in the songs of Trịnh Công Sơn, whose lyrics are generally acknowledged to be uniquely imaginative, but at the same time abstruse and hard to understand. Trịnh Công Sơn’s mind was so constituted that he was able to contemplate his own existence and that of others only as seen from a cosmic distance, with the result that he was perpetually inconsolable. A good example is the song below:

“Sunk Beneath a Gust of Rain”/“Chìm Dưới Con Mưa”
Words & music by Trịnh Công Sơn
Translated by Eric Henry

Chìm dưới con mưa
Và chìm dưới đêm khuya,
Trời đặt bao la còn chìm đậm trong ta.
Hạt cát ngố nghê lẫn chìm dưới chân đi
Bờ bên thiên thu nằm chìm dưới hư vô.

We’re sunk beneath a gust of rain,
And hid beneath the heavy night...
The boundless sky and earth lie hid in us as well.
Dumb grains of sand lie hid beneath our footsteps.
And the border of eternity lies hid beneath the void.

Chìm dưới con mưa một ngàn năm trước,
Mây qua mây qua mọi em hồng nhất.
Chìm dưới con mưa một ngàn năm nữa,
Mây qua mây qua mọi em hồng vô.

Hid beneath a gust of rain a thousand years ago...
The clouds pass, the clouds pass; your lip’s color fades.
Hid beneath a gust of rain a thousand years from now...
The clouds pass, the clouds pass; your lip’s color recedes.

Chìm dưới con mưa,
Một người chết đếm qua.
Chìm dưới đất kia,
Hid beneath a rainstorm,
A person died last night.
Hid beneath the ground there,
A person lives for an eternity.
Hid invisibly within us,
An utterance meaning nothing.

Hid beneath the autumn mist
Is a fragrant flower.
Hid beneath the rainstorm,
A print left by a passing foot.
Hid beneath that soil there,
Are boundless grains of sand.

Hid beneath the rainstorm,
A tiny weak foot—
One year, one year, we were gay together in summer.
Hid beneath the rainstorm,
A tiny weak foot—
This year, this year, we’ve forgotten the way back.