The gorgeous killer

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Kim Hyun Hee

THE TEARS OF MY SOUL
The true story of a North Korean spy
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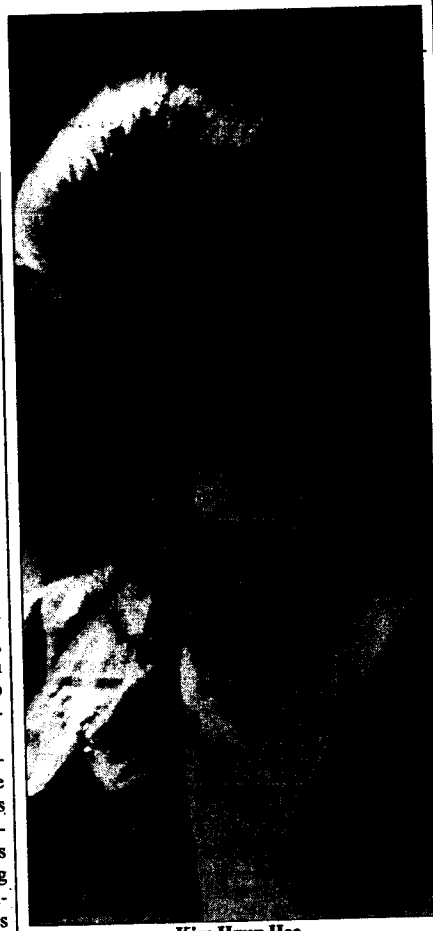
Born in 1962 in Communist North Korea into a well-placed official family, Kim Hyun Hee was, on the strength of her good looks, selected when she was still a child for a career as an actress in state-made films. Her roles included an important cameo appearance in a real-life drama: during the tense and ultimately unsuccessful peace talks between North and South Korea in 1972, she relaxed and charmed representatives from Seoul by playing a "typical" North Korean child. Later, as a student at Pyongyang Foreign Language College, she was chosen by her government for a different line of work. Officials in North Korea's intelligence apparatus had determined that she might make an excellent foreign agent. For the next eight years, she was carefully trained and prepared to execute what, in the event, turned out to be a single mission: the bombing, in November 1987, of a South Korean civil aircraft, KAL 858.

Miss Kim's bomb did indeed go off as intended, and all 115 passengers and crew on board perished *en route* from Abu Dhabi to Bangkok. But the rest of the plan, from North Korea's perspective, went horribly wrong. Miss Kim and her more senior accomplice were quickly picked up in nearby Bahrain, and their escape was thwarted. Following instructions, both agents used their cyanide-filled cigarettes to commit suicide. Her more experienced partner died instantly, but Kim Hyun Hee survived and recovered. She was extradited to Seoul, and despite all her training began a full confession after less than ten days of interrogation by South Korean Intelligence. Within a month, she was holding televised news conferences, explaining the terrible details of her assignment and declaring her complicity in the plot. In 1989, she was tried in a South Korean court, professed her guilt repeatedly, and was sentenced to death.

Kim Hyun Hee's death sentence, however, presaged the start of a life in South Korea rather than its end. Shortly after the verdict, she was granted a full pardon by South Korea's then president, Roh Tae Woo. President Roh explained to the nation that the contrite Miss Kim was herself a victim of Pyongyang's brutality, just like the doomed passengers on KAL 858, and that responsibility for the crime really rested with the North Korean leadership. (In her confession Kim had proclaimed that Kim Jong Il, son and heir-apparent to Great Leader Kim Il Sung, had personally authorized her mission.)

By the time she emerged to freedom, Kim Hyun Hee was a public sensation in South Korea. From her first news conference through to her pardon, Kim captured the attention of an excited and growing audience of fans – most of them male. Newspaper and magazine readers lapped up the latest bits of gossip about the gorgeous and demure ex-terrorist – that she was still a virgin, for example, or that she had made a wholehearted conversion to Christianity. Kim was deluged by letters from admirers, including hundreds of marriage proposals from men she had never met. Despite her celebrity, she seems determined to keep a low profile in her adoptive homeland. Her routine these days reportedly includes regular attendance at church services, occasional public lectures decrying North Korean Communism, and a steadfast refusal to consider the many proposals from hopeful suitors that still come her way.

The Kim Kyun Hee story is by turns frightening, compelling and surreal. Unfortunately, the account of it provided in *The Tears of My Soul* is too incomplete to be satisfying. While this slender book does include some memorable glimpses of Miss Kim's past – especially the training regime by which she was to become a multilingual North Korean killing machine – it neglects to mention some aspects of her life that would be critical to anyone wishing to assess the reliability and authenticity of her story. Foremost among these is anything that would cast light on the claim made by Yonhap, South Korea's leading news service, that Kim was in the employ of the South Korean intelligence service when *The Tears of My Soul* was published in 1991.



Kim Hyun Hee

The book itself is a curious piece of work. One might think that a woman of Kim Hyun Hee's singular experience in the two Koreas would wish to share her thoughts about adjusting to life in the bustling capitalist South, or about the inner turmoil she endured after making the fateful decision to turn her back on her kinsmen in the North. Yet few reflections of this sort are to be found in it. Instead, it is full of specific facts and details about the various North Korean agents with whom Miss Kim worked, but it is circumspect in the extreme about her contacts with their counterparts in the South. Although the agents in Seoul who broke Kim's resistance and obtained her confession figure prominently in the narrative, they are never fully named.

From a political standpoint, by far the most significant item in *The Tears of My Soul* is the assertion that Kim Jong Il personally ordered the destruction of KAL 858, and even sent Miss Kim's bosses handwritten instructions to have the plane bombed. There is nothing inherently implausible in the charge that the "Dear Leader" was indeed the direct culprit behind the mid-air massacre. What is more difficult to believe is that a junior agent on her first mission overseas should have known that he was. Covert agents are not normally briefed on the strategy underlying their missions, or on the authorship of the directives they are to follow.

Readers with long memories may recall the excitement that initially greeted the publication of the Penkovsky papers, the memoir that was released after that famed double agent was uncovered and executed by Soviet Intelligence. The Penkovsky papers, it later transpired, were a fraud perpetrated by the CIA. Kim Hyun Hee is no Oleg Penkovsky. She is alive and well, and there is no doubt that she contributed to the book that finally bears her name. Even so, *The Tears of My Soul* is perhaps better read as an exotic sort of spy novel than as an autobiography.