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Everywhere and Nowhere: An Ethnomusicologist Living and Working in Korea

HILARY VANESSA FINCHUM-SUNG

Auto-ethnographies tracing the fieldwork encounters of anthropologists have become integral to understand the processes of the ethnographic endeavor. In ethnomusicology, ethnographic methodology remains the *sine qua non* distinguishing our work from that of the musicologist. The field is ubiquitous in our work as the space within which we accumulate the experiences informing our analyses. Equally ubiquitous is the assumption that the field exists outside of our ‘real lives’ (Rasmussen 2004). Yet, with transcultural professional lives becoming increasingly common, and more scholars establishing professional roots in locations formerly allocated as ‘the field,’ there exists an obvious need for a reconsideration of and new fluidity in ethnographic research. If “fieldwork is, in reality, just living” (Reed 2003), then this way of life deserves a consideration in all its complexities, diving into the interstices of personal, professional, and artistic identities.

In this article, I explore the overlapping and ephemeral spaces of the ethnographic self in the Korean context. Drawing on my own experiences as a non-Korean researcher of Korean music and professor in a department of Korean music, the paper inescapably takes the form of auto-ethnography. The article uncovers the ways by which the performance-based practice of bi-musicality complicates the identity of the researcher, as the ability

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to perform on an instrument tied to notions notations of race-based nationalism transforms the scholar into a curiosity. Through an analysis of my own bimusical practice, I scrutinize the benefits and pitfalls of the constant presence of the foreign researcher in the Korean academic and social milieu.

Keywords: ethnomusicology, bimusicality, autoethnography, *kugak*, fieldwork

“Did you bring your *haegŭm*?” The Director of the Sop’o Village Traditional Arts Transmission Center (Sop’o chŏnt’ong yesul maul chŏnsugwan) craned his neck in an attempt to catch my attention. I had been recording one of the village’s *ch’ebŏm* (experience) events for weekend guests and had attempted to hide behind my camera, earphones plugged in and dreading the inevitable call to action. Smiling, I called, “No, I didn’t.” Feigning disappointment, I returned to busying myself with the camera and hoped this would deter his request. Not one to give up, he countered my avoidance with, “Well, then sing something for us.” As I began to utter something along the lines of, “Your guests did not come here to hear me,” a chorus of the women who had performed earlier chimed in. “Come on! *Taesang ŭl t’atchanba* (you won the grand prize, you know). Show us your ‘Yukchabaegi’!”¹ Fearing further avoidance would lead to embarrassment for my friends, I reluctantly gave in. The Director proceeded to introduce me as a Sop’o *ch’ulsin* (Sop’o Village native), proclaiming my proficiency as a sign of my understanding “Korean music better than Koreans.”

The above anecdote illustrates a classic dilemma for any field researcher. How far in can one go and, if one is ‘in,’ does this compromise the intent and identity of the scholar? While most anthropologists and ethnomusicologists trained over the past 30 years have learned about the fallacy of assuming one-hundred percent objectivity, ethnographic work involves a real struggle between multiple identities, often representing very different perspectives. Dorinne Kondo’s 1990 ethnography of a confectionary in Japan transformed from a study of a particular place and social space to a discovery of the complexities of the self in the field. In one particularly poignant anecdote, Kondo reveals how she had immersed herself into socially-determined behaviors and physical markers of a young Japanese woman in order to earn the trust of her contacts. But, upon seeing her reflection in a glass case at a supermarket, she is shocked to realize that she seemed to have lost the identity with which she had entered the field. Kondo asserted the loss of one’s presumed identity to be a “fragmentation of the self” (17), an embodiment of the collaboration between field worker and interlocutors.

Drawing on my experiences as a researcher, educator and performer of Korean music at a Korean university, this article explores such ideas regarding the self, fragmented through intersecting social and professional contexts and relationships. Here, I consider the spaces of ethnographic work as irrelevant to actual ‘place’ and more contingent on the fluidity of

¹ “Yukchabaegi” is a popular southwestern folksong.

identity tied to particular moments of work and interaction. A persistent notion of fieldwork places it outside of our 'real lives' (Rasmussen 2004, 216) wherein we teach and mentor students, work to make a living, and raise our families. The "setting trope" constructs the field as a space removed from the workings of daily life and, as such, one that should be interpreted by the fieldworker and communicated to readers. In this paper, I understand the field to be constructed of "shifting fields of power and meaning" (Kondo 1990, 7–8) realized through layers of experience. I contend the field itself to be a hybrid space of daily life and not separated from it; an "enactment of hybridity" (Narayan 1993, 672) both affected by and affecting relationships therein. When we consider the identity of the researcher physically and continually present in the space wherein they enact ethnography, we must take into account the multi-layered personal and professional realities of the individual.

In the pages below, I illustrate the layered veracities of ethnomusicological practice in Korea exacerbated by the 'in-betweenness' of the non-Korean ethnomusicologist in indefinite residence. Discipline-based standards regarding the identity and role of the ethnomusicologist (outlined below) often fail to materialize as expected for those perpetually in the field. Employing the ethnographic technique of bimusicality, I uncover divergences in social and professional contexts and the ways by which these affect the researcher's contributions to the profession. My experience as someone living, working, and researching in Korea reveals that, while a methodology such as bimusicality remains effective in developing deep understandings of musical form and practice, it can amplify social and professional fragmentations. To illustrate this, I delve into conflicts between discipline-based methodology and local expectations and assumptions regarding the foreign researcher in the Korean context.

Although the framing construct for this study is bimusicality, the issues facing the non-Korean researcher of Korean culture are not exclusive to ethnomusicology. The complexities of ethnomusicological work in a space foreign to the discipline offer food for thought on the work of ethnographers in an increasingly connected and trans-spatial world. More broadly, the article aims to contribute to academic discourse on the foreign professional scholar in the Korean context.² In aiming to question underlying assumptions regarding the nature of field research, this article endeavors to illuminate the challenges of transnational, transcultural scholarship.

Ethnomusicology and the Bimusical Endeavor

Academic research on the arts remains peripheral to Korean Studies with its heavy focus on the disciplines of history, literature and political science. Although in recent years Asian Studies has admitted film studies into its select circle of acceptable disciplinary practices,

² While additional identities such as female, mother and wife have impacted greatly my experiences in Korea, I have chosen instead, to examine more closely the issues directly related to my professional identity of ethnomusicologist. Gender and derivative social relations are a crucial aspect of life experiences anywhere, but discussion of these issues may take the article in a direction different from the one intended.

there has been a tendency to malign the study of music as irrelevant to the purview of the ‘interdisciplinary field’ of Korean Studies. Because ethnomusicological research is likely little known by the majority of Korean Studies scholars, it is important here to explain about ethnomusicology research methodology and current concerns related to the practice.

Ethnomusicology was born of a union between anthropology and musicology. Despite decades of development and diversification of theoretical ideas, ethnographic methodology remains the *sine qua non* and the principally consistent facet distinguishing our work from that of the musicologist. Ethnomusicological ethnographic paradigms encourage the researcher to find ways to access the inside experience of the music performances and performers we study. Just as Kondo (1990) found ways to become more socially-accessible in the field by performing a specific kind of identity, ethnomusicologists employ music learning and performance as a crucial tool for accessing these inside spaces and for earning the respect of research interlocutors and subjects. Research methods incorporating performance have been detailed in ethnomusicology ethnographies for nearly half a century. Paul Berliner’s classic ethnography of the mbira (1978), for example, details the steps he took to ease connections with contacts in the field; from devoting years to serious study of the mbira to demonstrating mastery and performing together with Zimbabwean musicians. Ethnographies such as Berliner’s take us through the ways by which ethnomusicological practice assuages social connections.

Bimusicality, like bilingualism, has been lauded as one way to breach the outsider chasm and become, through our own developing skills, interlocutors of musical traditions. The methodology emerged when Mantle Hood (1971) introduced this as a method for narrowing the gap between anthropological theory and musical practice. The structural–functionalist approach of Alan Merriam (1960) had found detractors who wondered how an understanding of musical practice fit into large-scale constructs such as Merriam’s “concept, behavior, sound” model (see Blacking 1973). Mantle Hood coined the term “bimusicality” to refer to the basic musicianship fundamental to the study of music, capacity to hear and interpret musical nuances and gain an insider view. “Learning to perform” (Bailey 2001, 86) emerged in ethnomusicology as a way to overcome the “linguocentric predicament” (Seeger 1977) of overreliance on speech explanations for music phenomena. Despite obvious imperfections of the terminology (such as assumptions regarding music practice as a fully adequate way to understanding musical culture), the goal of performance practice in field research remains reaching a deeper understanding of a music and how performance itself functions for the individual within society.

Living in the environment in which I do the majority of my research, performance practice often yields to engagement with the community in such a way that professional identities become blurred. In ethnomusicology, prolonged participation and collaboration with practitioners and performers labels the work one does as ‘applied ethnomusicology’ (Dirksen 2012). Implications of such work include inadvertent reinforcement of social hierarchies (such as in locations with colonial histories) and liminal status of the researcher with one foot in academia and the other outside of the academy (Block 2007, 88). Ethnomusicologists

have tended to polarize applied and ‘pure’ ethnomusicology, with the former considered less theoretically-focused and more practical in nature (Harrison 2012, 507–508). More contemporary ethnomusicologists have begun to write about the blurred lines between academic work and community service (Miller, et al, 2016), yet still there are few precedents for understanding personal connections and applications in the field beyond the label of ‘applied.’ Rebecca Dirksen notes, “The perceived juncture between the university and ‘real life’ and the anti-intellectual bias in American society today may further enforce impressions that a split between ‘pure’ and applied work actually exists” (2012; see also Reed 2003).

In ethnomusicology, bimusicality contributes to the identity construction of the ethnographer and functions as an outward display of mastery. The practice can ease social interactions as it takes us inside the experience of musical creativity and performance practice. Yet it can, as detailed above, lead to complications with one’s professional identity, especially when there are no boundaries separating the ethnographic experience and the professional and personal identities of the researcher. For the foreign researcher in Korea, as well, such research practice can impede professional development, usurp academic potential and put the non-Korean researcher in perpetual conflict with Korea-specific paradigms regarding ownership of Korean heritage.

A Ghost in ‘The Field’ of Korean Musicology

In 2009, I became the first non-Korean to teach in a department of Korean music at a Korean university. The hiring of a foreign national to a tenure-track position in the oldest running department of Korean music, a department which set the standard for other departments of Korean music, was unprecedented. Steeped deeply in nationalist scholarship, 20th century Korean musicology gave birth to Korean music departments in institutions of higher learning in the post Korean War era. Beginning in the 1960s, due to a desperate push for post-war recovery and modernization, the practice of Korean music became increasingly removed from everyday musical practices while many in Korea embraced European and American-based performances genres as an index of a progressive society. As Korean traditional performance genres moved to the periphery of mainstream Korean society, these genres gradually became specialized forms of performance practice. Once government legislation elevated the status of traditional expressive cultural forms by honoring them as intangible cultural heritage, their new status as national symbols –blood-tied, deeply entrenched in Korean historic roots, and fiercely protected—solidified an exclusive connection to Korean identity.³

³ I will note here that this ‘exclusivity’ is two-fold. On one hand, aspects of Korean culture viewed as a birthright to Koreans (such as spicy food, Korean language, Korean music, etc.) remain associated with Korean racial and national identity. On the other, Korean traditional culture’s increased specialization has made it an exclusive form of artistic expression; one only those trained in the professional realm can perform adequately. At the same time, I should emphasize that most performance genres in Korea were historically in the exclusive or semi-exclusive realm. The symbolic capital of court music rarely seeped beyond the walls of court and many genres of folk music performance (outside of local folk songs and games) remained almost entirely separate from court practice in

Despite the rather tightly bound world of Korean traditional music (henceforth, *keugak*) professionals, many were unaware of my hiring until I began appearing on television talk programs and morning shows. During one live broadcast, a colleague received a phone call from a distraught friend who, barely able to speak, shouted into the phone, “Turn on KBS!” When my colleague obliged, the friend asked, “Is it *true*?” Like this, I spent much of my first two years here as an assumed imposter. I am an ethnomusicologist who has studied Korean music for 21 years, but this often goes unnoticed as people attempt to contend with my racial identity as well as work through basic misunderstandings of my professional identity. In one particular scenario, a professor in the College of Engineering had invited me to deliver a lecture on Korean music globalization and, as he browsed over my CV, he exclaimed, “Wait! There’s no Korean music degree here! How are you a professor of Korean music?” And there, in front of 300 students, I had to validate my credentials as a Korean music specialist.

Korean musicology remains a relatively unhospitable environment for ethnomusicologists who wish to live and work in Korea. Pressure to validate my role as a specialist in Korean music often rests in misinterpretations and misunderstandings of my field of study. While some Korean scholars have espoused the merits of ethnomusicology in the Korean context (Song 2001:74), it remains both professionally and culturally liminal and, thus, misunderstood, in Korea (Park 2001:75-78; Hong 2001: 79-81). In a 1998 survey of ethnomusicology in Korea, Park Mikyung [Pak Migyŏng] noted that, among a handful of Korean scholars who studied ethnomusicology abroad, very few actually practice upon return to the professional world in Korea.⁴

Little has changed since Park conducted her survey. In 2018, young Korean ethnomusicology scholars such as Hye-lim Kim [Kim Hyerim] of University of Bath in England, Chaeyoung Lee [Yi Ch’aeŏng] of Boston University, and Cholong Sung [Sŏng Chorong] of SOAS University of London are beginning to make their mark on the world. And, while Korean ethnomusicologists working professionally outside of Korea—such as Sunhee Ko [Ko Sŏnhŭi] of the University of Auckland and Haekyoung Um [Ŭm Haegyŏng] of the University of Liverpool—activity contribute to ethnomusicology through teaching and publication activities, the majority of senior Korean scholars who have studied ethnomusicology abroad and returned to Korea (for example, Song Bang Song [Song Pangsong], Chae Hyunkyung [Chae Hyŏn’gyŏng], Park Mikyung [Pak Migyŏng], Kim Heesun [Kim Hŭisŏn], Kim Myoshin [Kim Myosin], Lee Yongshik [Yi Yongsik], among others) settled into the world of Korean musicology. Such ethnomusicologists reintegrated into the world of Korean musicology and have yet to develop sustainable programs in ethnomusicology in the Korean context. Those who return to professional life in Korea must adapt to local

the hands of professional folk musicians. For more on the place and roles of court and folk music historically, see Han, et al (2001) and Na (2001).

⁴ This article employs the McCune-Reischauer transliteration system for the Romanization of Korean terms and names of institutions and individuals not commonly written in Roman characters. However, individual spelling preference for names is respected, particularly when the individual works outside of Korea and publishes in English. In cases such as these, the McCune-Reischauer spelling of the name will be included in brackets after the individual’s name.

musicology networks in order to survive.⁵

Korean musicology remains an insular world focused on the study of Korean music by scholars trained in secondary and college-level programs for Korean music. The activities closest to ethnomusicology by some returning ethnomusicologists have been the development of world music institutes and research organizations which, for the most part, follow the conventions of Korean musicology and maintain the same academic networks.⁶ Many specialists in Korea's Western musicology circles, as well, discourage their students from studying ethnomusicology due to a common misunderstanding that it means 'world-musicology,' involving scholars who play and sample non-Western music and engage in shallow, comparative research between musical cultures. Scholars of both Korean and Western musicology in Korea have viewed ethnomusicologists as either competition (potentially stepping on the toes of researchers in Korean musicology) or researchers with too much focus on cultural context and too little focus on the music itself (Oh 2001: 257-259).⁷

In part, ethnomusicology's inability to adjust to the Korean context breaks down to issues as simple as translating the word into Korean. Common translations include *chongjok ūmakhak* (racial or ethnic musicology) and *minjok ūmakhak* (ethnic or national music studies), with the latter also applied to Korean musicological studies employing field work as a primary methodology. Neither of these encapsulate the essence of ethnomusicology, a term drawing on the Greek for humanity ('ethnos') and study of music ('musikos') and identifying a field of study dedicated to understanding the role of the relationship between music, any music, and human beings. My own use of the phrases *il'lyu ūmakhak* (musicology of humans) or *ūmak il'lyuhak* (anthropology of music) has not solved this issue as many resort to assuming it is 'anthropology' and dropping the 'music' part of the appellation all together.

Difficulties positioning ethnomusicology in the Korean context has much to do with its ambiguous character in general. Struggles translating terminology aside, ethnomusicology has grappled since its inception in the 1950s to define and re-define itself. One of the hallmarks of ethnomusicology remains constant debates regarding the parameters of the field and defining the limits of what, exactly, ethnomusicologists do. Much of the seminal scholarship in the field has been dedicated to clarifying such boundaries as well as proposing paradigms and theoretical models fundamental to the perspective of ethnomusicology (Merriam 1964; Blacking 1977; Nketia 1981; Gourlay 1982; Koskoff 1982; Nettl 1983; Rice 1987). Aside from

⁵ While admittedly anecdotal, it is worth mentioning here that I have held many conversations with young Korean ethnomusicologists who struggle with the necessity of 'changing back' to Korean musicological research in order to be taken seriously in the Korean context.

⁶ Examples include the Segye ūmakhakhoe (<http://worldmusic.or.kr/>) founded by Park Mikyung [Pak Migyŏng] of Keimyung [Kyemyŏng] University and the World Music Center (<https://www.worldmusiccenter.or.kr/>) with which Kim Heesun [Kim Hŭisŏn] of Kookmin [Kungmin] University is connected.

⁷ Although sources cited date from the turn of the millennium, it is the experience of the writer, a scholar and professor in one of Korea's top universities, that very little has changed in this regard since the publication of the cited papers. At the time, it appears, scholars were grappling with incorporating ethnomusicology into the Korean context. The general consensus appears to have been that ethnomusicology represents a foreign field of study with little potential contributions to the Korean academic world.

Nigerian scholar Nketia's contributions, much of this scholarship drew on the assumption of a unified (i.e. Western European-American) practice and contribution of ethnomusicology.

For the ethnomusicology scholar working outside of the American or Western European university context, the realities of research viability and application remain much different from those of their counterparts. Lawrence Witzleben's "Whose Ethnomusicology" (1997) argued for a reassessment of the nature of ethnomusicology and its suitability or transmutability outside of US academia. Based on his decades-long experience teaching ethnomusicology in a Hong Kong university, Witzleben addressed West-centric tendencies in the discipline; disputing underlying assumptions that ethnomusicologists should study the music of the 'other' and approach analysis under Euro-American based theoretical ideals. Understood from the perspective of one working outside of the 'majority' context of the 'West,' Witzleben's article represents a negotiation of 'international' standards of ethnomusicology with then-domestic research standards in Hong Kong; in essence, carving a space for the non-Chinese scholar of Chinese music in the Chinese context. As Keith Howard (2002) learned in his work on institutionalized Korean music studies, assumptions regarding the role of ethnomusicology led to its polarization from the Korean context.⁸

Socially and professionally liminal, my role in a Korean institution—an agent of 'internationalization' for the university and 'globalization' for *kugak*—often collides with the reality of my continual presence. Foreign researchers typically come and go, and their identity is tied to their usefulness as international contacts, relationships which can prove tactically advantageous. At the same time, foreign researchers and faculty can experience difficulties integrating into the domestic academic system. Terri Kim's 2005 study on the viability of internationalization in Korean universities cites differences in Korean academic culture regarding the kinds of work necessary to position oneself solidly within the Korean academy. In addition, Stephanie Kim (2016) notes the systemic disempowerment experienced by foreign faculty in Korean universities, who often find themselves on the periphery of academic networks firmly embedded in Korean academic genealogies.

For scholars in traditionally Korean-dominated fields (such as Korean language education programs, Korean history, Korean music, etc.) achieving status as a perceived academic equal can be an uphill battle due to connections between Korean national identity and the study of such subjects.⁹ For example, according to Song Bang-Song [Song Pangsong], "research on the people's culture is to define and confirm their identity. On the basis of this it is pursued in the courses [sic] of developing the national capacity" (2014: 152).¹⁰ In the case of Korean musicology, facing intense nationalistic ideals and fitting into academic stylistic standards

⁸ Hwang Chunyŏn, in his keynote address for Volume 20 of *Tongyang ūmak*, the journal for SNU's East Asian Music Research Institute, "the objectives of our institute and thus our journal are different from those of ethnomusicologists of the West....[Our] principal aim is to help establish theoretical frameworks and aesthetical concepts for the unique properties of Asian Music." (1998:v)

⁹ While never addressed head-on publicly, the struggles of former SNU faculty member Robert Fouser to integrate fully into his department led to his departure from the university in 2014 (Lim 2016).

¹⁰ Keith Howard (2002) notes, "As my research progressed, I began to recognize that Korean musicology was a vital and important part of the local promotion of national identity" (75).

represent one part of the challenge exacerbated by intense, closed-network connections which often begin for Korean music colleagues in middle school.¹¹ With no standards for integrating non-Koreans into the tightly networked and nationalistic field of Korean musicology, evaluation tends to rest on standards applied to *kugak* professionals, resulting in a state of perennial inadequacy for the foreign scholar of Korean music residing in Korea.

In Korean musicology, the foundations for legitimacy of one's position rest in a genealogy of *cheja-sūsūngi* (disciple-mentor) relationships. In the theory branch of Korean Musicology, this line begins with Yi Hyeku, considered the father of contemporary Korean musicology. Yi's research methodology—focusing on translation and study of historical manuscripts, genre definitions and boundaries as well as comparative research on different musical sources and music's changes over time (Howard 2002, 81–83)—set the standards for the research approach of Korean musicologists. According to Howard, such a methodology fosters a notion of objectivity as it “retains respect for senior and often long departed scholars” as well as encourages a preference for “abstraction to, say, discussions of performance style” (2002, 85). As the founder of Seoul National University's Department of Korean music, Yi ‘fathered’ a generation of *cheja* who now dominate the field of Korean musicology. Students who study under these now-senior scholars garner validity through this master-disciple relationship as well as an accord with the research methodologies of their predecessors. If not integrated into this genealogical line, one remains a perpetual outsider, devoid of a defined local lineage and identity.

Strategizing Identity via Bimusicality

A combination of foreign training, alternative academic perspectives and racial identity has ‘othered’ me in this professional context as well as necessitated that I demonstrate my expertise in ways typically not required of theorists.¹² Beyond well-received publications, musical mastery is not required of Korean *kugak* theory scholars as the worlds of performance and theory are considered separate and distinct; theorists do not play and musicians do not do theory.¹³ Yet a lack of local academic genealogical ties has forged a double standard, one gradually shaping my identity in the local context. Maneuvers to build an identity as a *kugak* professional have taken many forms, from publishing in major international journals¹⁴

¹¹ Korean music students have a limited number of training programs available, which means that, of those who continue to work in the field professionally, the majority most likely attended the same secondary and undergraduate programs.

¹² At one academic meeting, a respected colleague said, “You really need to master an instrument to prove your understanding of Korean music.” I had already begun training on the *haegŭm* (two-string bowed lute), more as a hobby and as a way to play music than a desire to be a performer. This colleague's insistence that I prove myself through performance coincided with requests by others in media and in social settings to ‘sing a song’ or ‘show us what you know’ in order to justify my place in the world of *kugak*.

¹³ In Korea, performance is not a methodology for theorists and not considered the realm of the scholar (which carries a much higher status).

¹⁴ Such publications go unnoticed domestically because they are published in English and outside of the four

to publishing and presenting in Korean. The latter, in particular, have proven largely dissatisfactory (from my perspective) since, despite attempting to linguistically incorporate my work into this academic context, the fundamental ideas and methodologies that dominate my interest in Korean music remain foreign to Korean musicology.

Perhaps of all the efforts going towards building a professional career in Korea, music performance practice has proven the most pivotal. Field practice for my initial research focus of *ch'angjak kugak*, new compositions for Korean instrumentation, did not necessitate performance practice. Although I engaged in basic lessons on instruments, this learning process did not play a central role in field research. However, after settling in Korea, it became increasingly important to dedicate time to performance practice in order to learn Korean performance traditions more deeply. In this way, the *haegŭm* has become pivotal in the molding of my identity. Engaging in music learning and performance admittedly has served two important functions: deepening immersion in the local music community and forging stronger connections to ethnomusicological heritage. As noted above, while Korean musicologists tend to stick to theory, ethnomusicologists do not. Music learning and performance are central to ethnomusicological practice and are principal factors distinguishing the work of ethnomusicologists in Korea.

For many ethnomusicologists, performance is at the heart of research methodology (Rasmussen 2004).¹⁵ Musical practice has become vital to data collection and analysis in field research. In essence, we all listen differently, and our interpretations of the sounds we experience have everything to do with our musical training, histories, and personal experiences. The technique of bimusicality takes us to the inside of musicality, training us to hear in new ways. In my case, learning the *sŏngŭm* (mode-based peculiarities) for *sanjo* (folk instrumental solo) opened a new world of sound perception. In one section of a particular *haegŭm sanjo*, for example, the sounds I had initially heard as a descent of two pitches perceptually transformed, with training, into a tone extended through multiple shadings in the form of alternate fingerings and ornamentation. Through musical practice and instructor feedback, perceptions are awakened to a new sound world. These perceptions are aided by the physicality of playing an instrument and finding ways to replicate the sounds one is hearing.

major associations for Korean music research domestically.

¹⁵ It is important to note that this type of research is conceived of as a field methodology, and not a means to becoming a performer. In a letter to then-young researcher John Bailey, ethnomusicology legend John Blacking advises Bailey to refine his reasons for engaging in learning from music masters. Blacking wrote that learning the music from musicians “would tell you much more about the cultural realities and deep structures of the music than the sophisticated teaching of the academies ... I am assuming that you plan to become an ethnomusicologist first, and a *tar* player second, third, or fourth. If I am wrong, what I have said will be irrelevant” (quoted in Bailey 1994, 5–6).

Image 1. The author performs with students at Töksu Palace, 1 June 2016.

Photograph courtesy of Töksugung and the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

Physically taking in and reproducing the sounds we study remains an essential ingredient in communicating the understanding of musical practices. When ethnomusicologists engage in performance, we not only learn techniques but the aesthetic ideals embedded in the thought processes of music making—the *mindfulness* of performance. Such mindfulness enables the deep understanding crucial to grasping the inside of culturally, socially embedded musical practices. Tomie Hahn’s work on Japanese dance remains a key proponent for engaging in performance practice. Knowing, according to Hahn, is the grasping of a reality “in the physical engagement and sensational knowledge of experience” (2007, 45). Hahn contends, “Theory lies in the practice of embodiment” (*ibid*).

Over time, learning to perform convinces others of intentions, confirming status as a musician and scholar as it presents opportunities for exchange (Rasmussen 2004, 216). As a rite of passage into a music community, musical practice demonstrates seriousness in learning and researching, something which people do tend to notice over time (Titon 1985). Despite my role as a faculty member in a major department for *kugak* learning, my discipline’s liminal status in Korea has complicated my positioning in the community. While undoubtedly a theorist, learning to perform has granted me an understandable role and position in the *kugak* community in a way that theoretical writings in ethnomusicology could not. The *haegŭm* has been a concrete means for incorporation into the *kugak* development narrative, as evident by inclusion in publications such as Gugak FM’s 1-year anniversary publication and the chapter “Blue-Eyed Kugak Specialist” in Lee Ju Hang’s *Kugak is Young* (2015). In many cases, I am identified as a professor and, to my great discomfort, “*haegŭm* expert” (*haegŭm chŏnmun’ga*). The official status remains professor of Korean music, yet, unofficially, the *haegŭm* legitimizes my commitment to the study of Korean traditional arts.

While the *haegŭm* continues to be a work in progress, as a “direct entry to performance

event” (Bailey 2001, 96) it has opened doors to experiences and deeper awareness of relationships and rivalries amongst *kugak* artists. Learning to perform adequately over time creates improved opportunities for observation and for working with musicians in a way I would not have had an opportunity to do if I had only focused on theoretical work and writing. As a performer, I’ve been involved in a local *p’ungnyuboe* (association for performing the aristocratic chamber tradition), led workshops with musicians, and engaged in residencies abroad. The experience of preparing for a staged performance, of working with sound crew and other artists, has shaped the ways by which I ask questions. Learning how to ask the right kinds of questions remains a constant challenge for the field researcher and, in this case, experience performing has provided insight regarding the terminology and the issues significant to the performance of traditional music in contemporary Korea.

Performance practice has not been limited to the *haegŭm*, but extended to research projects over the past few years.¹⁶ My research on folk song sustainability on the southwestern island of Chindo has benefited immensely from learning the folk songs from local women. Initially, I was met with a resolute distrust from locals who had grown weary of being the research subjects of Korean musicologists. Having aided and recorded for researchers, as well as provided precious materials such as photographs and notations in the hopes of personal benefit (perhaps a human cultural treasure designation), many artists in Chindo were sick of having their hopes dashed. As one local man noted, “We just feel used” (anonymous, personal communication, Chindo, 2015 February 2). When I began learning *namdo chapka* (southwestern professional repertoire) from local human cultural treasure Kang Song Dae, further doors were opened as my developing ability to sing “Yukchabaegi” (notoriously one of the most difficult yet representative songs on Chindo) convinced people of my dedication. Learning to perform, in this context, softened the edges. It turned field research trips, which were once focused on data collection, to ones of exchange.

Performance has lubricated social engagement, allowing me to demonstrate my earnestness to learn local traditions. At the same time, performance engagement with the community has, ironically, pulled me further into a peripheral professional realm. At times my role as a researcher has been usurped by articulations regarding my status as a member of the community, having performed in local events. This is primarily to my benefit, but also represents an obvious conflict of interest. As introduced in the opening pages of this article, intensive work within a community earmarks one’s research as ‘applied’ in ethnomusicology. According to Dirksen:

[T]he reality of the applied scholar tends to be super-saturation in the local affairs of those on whose behalf the researcher advocates, and therefore the priorities of the researched communities may conflict with the demands of academic publication. (2012)

¹⁶ At the same time, *haegŭm* performance has opened doors to other research projects on Chindo. Regular invitations to perform at public memorials for the Sewŏl Ferry victims have inspired research on public performance and trauma.

In Chindo, for example, I've worked primarily in the village of Sop'o, a government-designated arts village due to the concerted efforts over decades of villagers to maintain their traditional performing arts. I have been asked to speak regarding the contributions of the village when funding was on the line, such as when the village was under review for government support under the 'Happy Village' (*Haengbokhan maiil*) initiative. When I have been present during performances for guests in their transmission center (*chönsugwan*) the head of village promotion activities has asked me to play *haegŭm*. At such times, he would half-jokingly introduce me as a "native" (*Sop'o ch'ulsin*) and stress my importance to promoting Chindo traditional folk performance arts. Such scenarios illustrate a professional quandary which emerges from community expectations regarding the goals of my research. Although I may understand my role as a researcher, such expectations limit the extent to which I can critically approach studies of Sop'o or Chindo performance events.

Incorporation into the performance community one studies can be further complicated when engagement accidentally morphs into representation. In 2015, while on a sabbatical research trip, I encountered documentary filmmaker Eungsu Kim [Kim Ŭngsu] who had traveled to Chindo in search for 'authenticity.' Discouraged by polished performances by communities accustomed to film crews, he aimed to capture impromptu moments of unrehearsed performance. One of my sessions with the Sop'o mother's singing room (*ömöni noribang*) found its way into his film, featuring almost ten minutes of my extreme amateur version of "Yukchabaegi." The 'authenticity' the filmmaker sought became transferred through my presence, instigating deep introspection, on my part, regarding the function of my presence in this performance moment. This forced me to rethink my relationship with the community and, ultimately, my research. Similar to Rebecca Miller's unwitting incorporation into local performance hierarchies and related narratives, the ethical precariousness of being intertwined into this narrative of 'authenticity' made me uncomfortable. Still, Miller balances this precariousness by reminding us that participation and reciprocity should outweigh our (sometimes accidental) contributions to deeply-rooted narratives which do "not end with [our] departure" (2016, 190).

Image 2. Singing for the women of the Mother's Singing Room (*Ömöni noribang*) in Sop'o Village, Chisan District, Chindo County. Still from *Journey to Okju* (2016) directed by Eungsu Kim.

Challenges of Defining “The Field” and Musical Practice in Korea

The benefits of learning to perform make this an effective research method as well as an effective tool for asserting the self in the local context. Yet, it comes with challenges that lead to heightened awareness of the social context within which one conducts research. In my case, it has helped me understand the limits of performance practice and the potential drawbacks performance can hold in relation to my identity and status in the local context. My racial and national identity, for example, has helped ease my entry into performance practice, yet at times it has interfered with establishing genuinely lasting connections with performance communities. My experience with a Seoul-based performance club heightened awareness of the limits of integrating into the community and the ways by which performance participation can build walls instead of breaking them..

From the outset, I was accepted seamlessly as a member of a local amateur *pungnyu* association. Members were intrigued by a foreigner learning and performing in their midst and some were impressed with my affiliation with Seoul National University. As a member, I paid a membership fee, attended weekly group lessons and performed as a member of the troupe. During my time in the association, we were featured in local documentaries and in the print news. On one particular occasion, my schedule prevented me from joining the others in an interview with a national newspaper. Yet, when the paper printed, the article featured me, despite my absence, as the focus of the article. Fellow members of the troupe made jokes about the affair, and others were visibly upset. This was the beginnings of a tension in the group that grew worse. Soon the leader of the group began only pointing out my errors in the *haegŭm* section, typically coinciding with a, “You’re a professor of Korean music, aren’t you? You should do better than this.” With the situation becoming increasingly uncomfortable, I used my busy teaching schedule as an excuse and reluctantly left the performance group. I had become convinced that my distracting presence within this music learning and performing context created obstacles to adequate participant observation and, on a personal level, became an intense source of stress.

Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice (1997, 17) uses the lens of phenomenological hermeneutics to examine his experience of “being in the world” as a researcher. Although his experience in ‘the field’ reflects that of many ethnomusicologists who live their ‘real’ lives elsewhere (Rasmussen 2004, 217), his examination of the hermeneutic arc as a metaphor for experience helps to theorize the function of performance experience in the work of ethnomusicologists. Traversing through this hermeneutic arc we move from “preconceptions of the way things should be through a learning process of how things actually are to a new cognition of the relation of self with others” (Miller 2016, 189). In the case above, although I had been accepted as a member within this performance troupe, the impact of an outside perspective resulted in disrupted harmony and resentment. While, admittedly, I was not the most dedicated member of the group, unable to attend and help out at all performances, my performance skills went from being praised to being a source of displeasure with this one pivotal encounter. Performance practice has opened doors just as it has heightened my

awareness of the limits of its practical applications in a context wherein the personal ‘real life’ and professional collide.

Realizing the reality of differences between the ways by which you and others perceive your identity in ‘the field’ can be a hard lesson. Learning musical performance takes hours of commitment to practice and memorize repertoire. Opportunities to perform are important research opportunities (particularly from the ethnomusicological experiential practice view point), but the researcher can also perceive these as a reward for hard work. Yet, it can be difficult to face the reality that the audience, and other musicians, may not view the performance in the same way. Sean Williams, for example, regularly performed in Indonesia yet, “perhaps like many other ethnomusicologists doing research in a culture far from their own,” gradually realized her performances served as a novelty act “to lighten things up rather than as genuine performances” (Witzleben 2010, 140). In my case, this very much rings true. The danger of this rests in the fact that, unlike Williams and other ethnomusicologists, I live here. Perception of my contributions as ‘*kugak* lite’ could detrimentally affect a hard-earned professional identity.

As part of a local academic community, I must remain cognizant of the paradigms for a music theorist. As I mentioned above, music theorists theorize and music performers perform. The lines are pretty solidly drawn, with the exception of a few *kugak* musicians (such as Hwang Byungki [Hwang Pyŏnggi]) who have successfully worked in both realms. Because I am situated within the theory division of a *kugak* department, a few colleagues have openly discouraged my work in performance as a distraction from my work. One colleague, in particular, reminds me on a regular basis that I “should write, not play,” with an admonition to pull back on those things that are “not important.” Chinese music scholar and ethnomusicologist Yu Siu Wah (2004) faced similar difficulties when re-integrating into the Chinese context, yet his challenges primarily rested in retaining balance, which is something that many ethnomusicologists in the field face. Still, the ‘you should write, not play’ perspective represents a misinterpretation of the meaning of music performance to ethnomusicological practice and underpins an essential misunderstanding of the value of ethnomusicology in the Korean context.

With Yu, I share a similar concern over balance. “Encountering intense pressure to concentrate on performance, sometimes to the potential detriment of the research” (Witzleben 2010, 150) is of special concern when the field is not far, far away but surrounding you at all times. This becomes exacerbated when many assume one’s label to be ‘performer.’ Recently, for example, I was asked to deliver a special lecture on Korean music. I chose to present on *kugak*’s struggle in a K-pop world, a topic I believed many might be interested in hearing. But, when the poster advertising the event was released, my ‘lecture’ had transformed into a talk concert with the title “Listening to the Haegeum.” Incensed, I called the lecture series organizer to insist she change the title. It took two weeks to convince her I was not going to perform. The pressure to present a ‘show’ becomes very real when one’s racial identity becomes the star attraction and the ability to perform on an instrument tied to local notations of race-based nationalism transforms the scholar into a curiosity.

Conclusions

In this paper, overlapping identities of foreigner, foreign scholar, professor, performer, professional *kugakin* represent an ephemerality of existence for the ethnomusicologist in Korea, one emergent through interactions with colleagues, students, *kugak* professionals and research interlocutors. The fragmented selves of the ethnographer continually intertwine in a process of negotiation and renegotiation of identity and social capital in Korea. Through an auto-ethnographic exploration of my experiences as a long-term resident and professional in Korea, I have drawn out the complexities of discipline-specific work and pre-determined ideas regarding that work and my identity in Korea. While the pages above have focused on ethnographic methodologies in ethnomusicology as a way to discuss the complications of professional work within the field one researches, my hope is that scholars of Korean Studies will have found this useful in understanding better the issues facing non-Korean professional academics in the Korean context.

Intertwined as I have become in this context, issues of writing and research become increasingly complicated. Incorporating my experiences into writing remains an important practice of ethnomusicology, yet where do the anecdotes end and the hardline analyses begin? Presenting overtly-critical writings can compromise my relationships with colleagues, yet working to avoid tough assessments results in 'soft work,' at best critiqued for its laudatory approach. I find myself censored by the very context within which I must do my work. Margaret Sarkissian notes in her essay on long-term connections to the field that "there are plusses and minuses to extreme connectivity" (2016, 193) with one of the minuses in the form of personal history and connections shared with human subjects. Many of the musicians, scholars, and composers I have written about in publications have now become colleagues, and some are students; realities which have necessitated altering my research focus from individual actors in contemporary music practice to genre, music aesthetics and transmission.

Beyond the reality that community members could be amongst my readers, I find these daily, personal and professional relationships limit my abilities to research and write critically as my research has become part of an "ever-expanding web of social obligations" (Ibid). Turning to the stuff, rather than the people, of music has become a professional coping strategy. Desire for distance led to choosing the southwestern island of Chindo as a site for current and future long-term research because, while in Korea, it is far enough from Seoul that, as my student assistant once noted, "It might as well be a foreign country." There, professional conflicts of interest are minimized, yet (as indicated in the text above) personal, professional and ethical difficulties still arise. In Korea, writing about the musical present is typically the job of music critics, not theorists, which represents a palpable reason behind the choice of Korean musicologists to stick with historical topics, genre definitions and aesthetics. The job of the Korean music theorist has been to clarify the structures and boundaries of music and not to dig deeper into the processes of music-making in Korean society. The latter, undoubtedly, remains a goal of ethnomusicologists but (as detailed above) such a focus and accompanying methodologies defy classification in this cultural and academic context.

Living in the spatially, culturally, and professionally liminal necessitates asserting the right to be a non-Korean ethnomusicologist in a place where ethnomusicology does not exist. One could argue that musical performance practice has become a way of avoiding an analyst's eyes on the scene by participating in it. Yet I find it a critical tool for truly discerning and interpreting the aesthetics, standards, and history of this tradition in which I have become embedded, albeit in a peripheral manner. Learning to perform has served as an important pathway to grasping the nuances of musical style and genre-based aesthetics that Korean scholars of *kugak* have already firmly established at a young age. From the moment of conception in this new life, the personal ethnomusicologist yielded to the public *kugak* professor. As such, my time here is founded in relative disadvantage, yet it is an uphill battle made more tolerable through exquisite interstices of the self lost in sound.

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