

Guest Editor's Note: The Insiders and Outsiders of Korean Culture

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In the age of global flows and transborder scholarship, where does Korean culture begin and end? Who is included and excluded? And who gets to decide? This special issue aims to critically engage the notion of Korean culture and reflect on what has been at stake in producing knowledge about it, from within Korea and from outside, for Koreans and for non-Koreans.

Anyone even mildly interested in Korea would have been exposed to the popular discourse about the uniqueness of Korean culture. From “the unique lines of hanbok” to “the unique characteristic of lyrical sensibility” and “unique flea markets” of Seoul, the unrivaled singularity of Korean artifacts, traits, and experiences is frequently stated in informational materials and tourist publications, and those descriptions are repeated eagerly by students and enthusiastic observers alike.¹ Yet not only the assertion of uniqueness goes hand-in-hand with a premise that other cultures are somehow less unique (and consequently perhaps inferior, or at least less attention-worthy). Also often smuggled in are assumptions

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¹ The quotes are from the website of the Korea Tourism Organization, english.visitkorea.or.kr, accessed on December 1, 2018. This insistence on the uniqueness of Korean cultural experiences was taken to the extreme in a recent promotional campaign. The members of K-pop group EXO ask foreign visitors to South Korea questions such as “Have you ever slept?” and “Have you ever been to a restaurant?”, to suggest that those mundane activities are radically different in South Korea and, to read the commercial ungenerously, perhaps even unknown outside of it. See the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO9aLVN5gHw>.

that only birthright—ethno-national Koreanness—permits a genuine understanding of Korean culture. However, there has been an ever-increasing number of interpreters of Korea who lack in ethno-national Koreanness but base their authority in their academic training, first-hand experience of Korean life, or passion for South Korean popular culture. They are generally welcomed by South Korean observers, especially if these “foreigners” can be understood as de-facto promoters of the said cultural uniqueness. Such expectations—or misunderstandings—invite productive questioning about what is at stake—personally, professionally, and politically—in writing about Korea for differently positioned actors. This special issue considers foreign and not-so-foreign others as producers of knowledge about Korean culture as scholars, teachers, and colleagues (articles by Finchum-Sung, Saeji, and Sorensen)—and also as its desired consumers (Wang Medina’s article).

The notion of essentialized ethno-national cultures has long been criticized in anthropology. Such portrayals ignore the historical nature of cultural phenomena, disregard social change, dismiss human agency, overlook diversity within localities, struggle with cultural practices in borderlands and postcolonial settings, and neglect political uses of tradition and culture.² Critiquing the popular essentialist ideas of Korean culture, Yi Jeong Duk answers his article’s titular questions, “What is Korean culture anyway?” with “Korean culture should not be treated as a separate entity but as something existing in people. ... Korean culture is the culture adopted by Koreans.”³

Yi’s formulation returns human dynamics to the definition of culture but leaves open the question of who counts as Korean. Koreanness can be defined differently depending on whether its basis is biology or cultural assimilation. In addition to the complex belonging of diasporic Koreans, the ethnoscape of Koreanness is complicated by migrants and immigrants residing on the Korean peninsula, and by peninsular Koreans staying overseas for prolonged periods of time.⁴ Such partial, temporary, and conditional identifications with Korea blur the distinction between insiders and outsiders to Korean culture and muddle tenable authority in producing knowledge about Korea.

Even if there were a way to neatly demarcate inside and outside perspectives, neither guarantees an advantaged access to truth nor cancels the power relations of representing and being represented. On the one hand, the privileged immediacy of the indigenous researcher’s voice has been put into doubt by the observations that nativeness comes in shades and even domestic co-ethnic scholars cannot assume an intimate grasp of all local communities, because of the differences in class, gender, and other circumstances.⁵ A recent example

² See, for example, James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” in *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1992), 6–23.

³ Yi Jeong Duk, “What Is Korean Culture Anyway?” *Korea Journal* 43, no. 1 (2003): 58–82, 79.

⁴ For insightful accounts of those in- and out-flows from South Korea, see Cho Mun Young, ed., *Hel-chosŏn in & Out [Hell-Chosun in & Out]* (Sŏul-si: Nulmin, 2017); John Lie, *Multietnic Korea? Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood Diversity in Contemporary South Korea* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2015); and vol. 3 of *Korean Anthropology Review* (2019, in print). For North Koreans, see, for example, Jiyoung Song, “Twenty Years’ Evolution of North Korean Migration, 1994–2014: A Human Security Perspective: North Korean Migration, 1994–2014,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 399–415.

⁵ Those arguments were first laid out in Kirin Narayan, “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?,” *American*

from South Korea is fetched by Hyeon Jung Lee who reflects on her involvement with the grieving families of the 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster, first as a fellow-Korean and eventually as a scholar. A self-identified “native anthropologist,” Lee was perceived as an outsider by her informants, because of her social background as a prestigious university professor and her lack of personal experience with the trauma of losing a child.⁶

Moreover, local knowledge productions are shot through with their own politics. South Korean investigations could be dictated by self-conscious concerns for selecting tangible and intangible artifacts to buttress nation-building narratives and commodify cultural experiences for domestic and international consumption.⁷ Often coinciding with the objectives of research-sponsoring actors, such instrumentalist visions direct scholarship from Korean Studies to essentially South Korea promotion.

On the other hand, in the English-language discourse about Korean culture, academic voices—themselves by no means free from the politics of knowledge production, but generally weary of Orientalism and other pitfalls of representing Asia—are increasingly crowded out. With the spread of the Internet, the role of interpreters of Korean culture has been taken over by bloggers and vloggers, interested in Korea either due to their long-term residence on the peninsula or Hallyu fandom. Some of those online publications have contributed to critically educating English-speaking public about Korea (such as James Turnbull’s “The Grand Narrative” blog), whereas others have offered essentializing and exoticizing representations (such as the much critiqued YouTube channel *Eat Your Kimchi*). Moreover, with the surging Korean Wave, many online representations of Korean culture are based on mediations by popular-cultural productions, whose representational choices chase viewership rankings and commercial sponsors, often by portraying South Korea as the fantastic land of consumerist “Asian cool.” Whereas dedicated fans distinguish actual Korea from “K-Dramaland,”⁸ casual commentators gravitate toward simplistic interpretations, such as “because Confucianism” explanations of virtually every phenomenon of Korean life. With so many diverse academic, government, and guerrilla culture brokers, the questions of the politics of producing and disseminating knowledge about Korean culture have become ever more pressing.

These issues were raised during a conference at the Department of Anthropology at Seoul National University in September 2017. The theme—“Global Korean Studies and Writing Korean Culture”—was partially inspired by my own unease at finding myself teaching undergraduate, and particularly graduate, courses on Korean culture at South Korea’s oldest and biggest anthropology department. A non-Korean “foreigner” and an outsider to South Korean academic lineages, on what authority did I offer my insights? While not attempting

Anthropologist 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–86. For a recent discussion, see Julia Khan, “‘Ghost in the Shell’: Reflections on Field Work in Kazakhstan,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 19, no. 3 (2018): 197–213.

⁶ Hyeon Jung Lee, “Three Fields and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge: Lessons from the Sewol Ferry Disaster in South Korea,” (Presentation at Global Korean Studies and Writing Korean Culture conference, Seoul National University, September 22, 2017).

⁷ In addition to Sorensen’s article in this issue, see Laurel Kendall, ed., *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity: Commodification, Tourism, and Performance* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011).

⁸ Marion Schulze, “Korea Vs. K-Dramaland: The Culturalization of K-Dramas by International Fans,” *Acta Koreana*, 16, no. 2 (2013): 367–97.

to deliver encyclopedic overviews of Korean customs, rituals, and their contemporary adaptations, I chose to pose questions about the politics of writing (about) Korean culture, from different subject-positions inside and outside South Korea.⁹ Motivated by those concerns, the conference resulted in a fruitful dialogue between anthropological perspectives and critically oriented Korean Studies while bridging perspectives from South Korea and abroad. I hope that the papers selected for this special issue go a long way in addressing those problems of voice, authority, authenticity, and power relations in knowledge production about Korea.

In “Worshipping the Goddesses of P’albong Mountain: Regional Variation, Authenticity, and Tradition,” Clark W. Sorensen analyzes drastically different evaluations of a shamanic shrine celebration produced by himself, an American anthropologist, and his South Korean colleagues. A resident ethnographer of P’albong village in 1977 and 1983, Sorensen witnessed and recorded the ceremonies to honor the gods of P’albong Mountain. A decade later, in 1990, the same ceremonies were studied by a team of South Korean government researchers led by Kim Myŏngja, whose account, in Sorensen’s assessment, coincided with his on the observational level, but reached different conclusions about the village ceremonies’ authenticity and scholarly value. Both ethnographies noted the absence of a men-centered Confucian ceremony, which the theories of the dual structure of authentic Korean village festivals posit as a normative counterbalance to the women-centered shamanic ritual. Where Sorensen interpreted the observed rites as a window into vernacular religion, Kim and collaborators saw a truncated ritual that lost some of the characteristic features of Korean village worship practices. Sorensen reflects on these differences as an effect of the ethnographers’ different purposes. Whereas his goal was to grasp religious practices as part of a village study, Kim’s team assessed the P’albong Mountain ceremony for its eligibility as an “intangible national treasure.”

Sorensen unpacks how these evaluations imply divergent theoretical assumptions about authenticity and tradition. If for Sorensen the measure of a ritual’s authenticity is in religious believers’ lived “inner experience and perception” and in the shaman’s practical significance to the religious needs of the village, for Kim and collaborators, authenticity resides in the faithfulness to the performance scripts handed down from the past, reconstructed from historical sources and abiding by the national ideal-types. Thus the shaman’s artistic improvisations testify to the ritual authenticity in Sorensen’s eyes—and to lack thereof in Kim’s. Moreover, for Sorensen the shaman’s performance, despite its many departures from the recorded forms, can be seen as traditional, because, following Handler and Linnekin, he theorizes tradition as an interpretive process whereby traditional activities are recognized as such because of the meaningful identifications with the past they provide. Rejecting the national ideal-types as a useful analytic, Sorensen offers an alternative interpretation of P’albong vernacular religion and argues that the observed ceremonies were not a later corruption of a dual-structure festival but a manifestation of old and original local ceremonies, which likely never had the Confucian component.

⁹ The expression “writing culture” is an allusion to the seminal volume by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (*Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986)), which provoked far-reaching debates about the politics of ethnographic representation.

Resonating with above-quoted Yi's argument about Korean culture being what Korean people do, Sorensen's privileging of how traditions are lived (as opposed to how they are constituted and preserved) is relevant for analyzing contemporary cultural practices. In this vein, K-pop, for example, can be seen as authentic Korean culture, or at least authentic culture of the young generation. It is improvised by Koreans, from idols themselves to their managers and fans—somewhat like the shaman Cho Chöngsun, the protagonist of the conflicting accounts in Sorensen's article, improvised her shamanic performance. While clearly departing from the historical forms of Korean popular music, H.O.T., Girl's Generation, BTS, and Twice among others have nevertheless been authentically Korean, in so far as their performances are relevant for articulating lived experiences of enough Korean youths to inspire massive fandoms.

Jenny Wang Medina's article, "At the Gates of Babel: the Globalization of Korean Literature as World Literature," reveals another metric of cultural worthiness—popularity with critics and consumers outside of Korea. Wang Medina examines the South Korean quest for attaining the "world literature" status for South Korean literary fiction through its translation into languages with powerful readership, such as English. She details how South Korean literature has been instrumentalized as a metonym for Korean culture and transformed into a commodity for export. The context for these developments is, on the one hand, the domestic "crisis of literature" caused by its depoliticization after the democratization of the late 1980s and, on the other hand, the national globalization policies of the 1990s, particularly the drive to enhance exportability of commodified cultural content, for profit and for nationalist pride.

To clarify the desired role of translated literary texts in promoting Korean culture and to elucidate "how Korea perceives its own position in the world," Wang Medina details the twelve years (2000-2012) of discussions at translation-focused events hosted by the biggest agents for globalizing Korean literature, the Korean Literature Translation Institute and Daesan Foundation. She concludes that their pursuit of a "world culture status" for Korean literature reaffirms the hierarchical distinction between "world" universal cultures and "local or specific" other ones. Wang Medina also questions the peculiar coincidence of the worldwide decrease in book sales with the activated attempts by national governments to translate and internationally promote national literary fictions. Her answer highlights the continued significance of literature as national cultural capital which is reinforced by increased multiculturalist sensibilities and critical attention to legacies of imperialism.

With an eye to the special issue's theme, Wang Medina's article foregrounds the shifting boundaries of what is included into Korean literature as Korean culture, what this canonized literature is called to represent, and what its asserted singularity erases. South Korean literature, she suggests, comes to stand for all literatures of all groups that can be described as Korean in some sense, from North Korean literature to diasporic Korean literature. "[T]he identifying marker 'Korean' ultimately denies the historical specificity and cultural particularities of each group," Wang Medina observes.

The article illustrates how government and quasi-government organizations are powerful agents in shaping what counts as attention-worthy Korean culture. Yet Wang Medina also

reveals how those efforts are dependent on a multitude of other actors, namely South Korean authors, their translators, and domestic and international academics, who bring conflicting priorities to the project of mediating national culture for international consumption. As Wang Medina shows, some of those actors are weary of the changes that this catering to international tastes brings to national literary aesthetic and literature's social mission, though the overall drive outward is hardly challenged. The irony thus remains that the nationalist pursuits of international recognition install the foreign reader as the judge of the worthiness of Korean culture and thus undermine the nationalist project by privileging outsiders' opinions of and uses for Korean culture.

The foreigner we encounter in Hilary Vanessa Finchum-Sung's piece, "Everywhere and Nowhere: An Ethnomusicologist Living and Working in Korea," is no longer the arbiter of Korean culture as in Wang Medina's article, but a fringe insider, whose uncertain belonging invites endless professional and social tests. The auto-ethnographic account presents struggles of a non-Korean scholar of Korean music (*kugak*) employed in Korean academia, where the presence of non-Korean colleagues in indefinite residence is relatively novel and poses multilayered challenges for all the parties involved. Finchum-Sung lays out how the sites of research, professional career, and everyday living blur and present conflicting expectations. Particularly her disciplinary affiliation as an ethnomusicologist, a field largely unknown and misunderstood in South Korea as Finchum-Sung explains, exacerbates the challenges of life and work. Whereas for ethnomusicologists learning instruments is a part of a "bimusical practice" to get an insider perspective and deliver nuanced ethnographic accounts of musical communities under study, the Korean music field observes a division of labor between performers and theorists. Finchum-Sung's learning of Korean music thus at once qualifies her as an ethnomusicologist in the eyes of the transnational ethnomusicological community, but also, in the eyes of South Korean music scholars, positions her as a performer and undermines her voice as a scholar and theorist. Her authority as an equal member of a Korean academic community is further challenged because her English-language publications in top international journals—expected of her as a non-Korean hire and an "agent of internationalization" by the university—remain invisible to her South Korean colleagues in the traditional music field. The outcome of navigating these conflicting demands is a "fragmented self" negotiated amidst overlapping yet incommensurable professional and social contexts. Finchum-Sung thoughtfully theorizes this complex positionality engaging with the anthropological literature on nativeness, multiplex subjectivity, and relationality in the "hybrid space" where her research field, professional career, and daily life are all enmeshed.

The article offers a nuanced perspective on the "peripheral embeddedness" of international faculty in South Korean academia. Not quite insiders, these long-term residents are not true outsiders either. They develop their own investments and identifications in South Korea while navigating shifting power relations between Korea and the West, from where they usually hail. Their historically privileged positions as deference-worthy foreigners are buttressed by their credentials from Euro-American universities—but also undermined by their exclusion from local networks, professional isolation, and often cultural differences

and linguistic limitations. Finchum-Sung's auto-ethnography details how the distribution of power among international and native South Korean scholars is volatile and involves intricate negotiations of belonging, expertise, and prestige.

In light of the special issue theme, the article raises questions about who can authoritatively speak about Korea, in this case, Korean music, on what conditions, and at what personal and professional cost. We learn that, amidst popular discourses that link understanding of things Korean with Korean ethnicity, Finchum-Sung is constantly required to demonstrate her expertise through performance. The artistic value, however, is often in danger of being overshadowed by the sheer curiosity of a "blue-eyed foreigner" performing traditional Korean arts. The article suggests that if addressing a South Korean interpretative community, a non-Korean observer, academic or popular, risks being locked in the racialized "foreigner" identity and heard for the novelty of an outsider perspective, not for a genuine insight.¹⁰

Finally, in another reflexive piece, "No frame to fit it all: An auto-ethnography on teaching undergraduate Korean Studies, on and off the peninsula," CedarBough T. Saeji explores the pedagogical and institutional challenges of teaching about Korea. She and Finchum-Sung share concerns with professional accountability of non-Korean scholars, though where Finchum-Sung foregrounds the demands of the scholarly practice immediately accountable to South Korean academia, Saeji ruminates on her obligations to the diverse student audiences of Korean Studies. Reflecting on her teaching experience in five distinct settings in South Korea and North America, Saeji appeals to Koreanists to collectively reconsider the content and approaches of their teaching, to better meet student needs amidst their increased interest in Korea. As such, Saeji adds concerns with undergraduates' preferences and employment needs to the previous critiques of the field of Korean Studies.

Specifically, Saeji advocates for Korean Studies inclusive of "more than just the prosperous populations in fancy Seoul districts," namely covering North Korea, multicultural changes in South Korea, and Korean diaspora. Second, the article proposes to cultivate a shared commitment to Korea-specific theory, critiquing clumsy applications of Western theories to Korean realities. Third, Saeji critiques Korean Studies programs for being ill-prepared to capitalize on students' passion for contemporary South Korean popular culture, due to lack of adequately prepared faculty to teach popular-culture courses and supervise related projects. Lastly, Saeji makes a case for South Korean undergraduates studying Korean Studies at South Korean universities, to prepare for jobs that demand international interactions and to simply enjoy learning about their own culture.

Perhaps distinguishing between Korea as an object of study and Korean Studies as an interdisciplinary field offers an answer to the pedagogical conundrum that Saeji highlights when she notes, "The last thing I want to do is tell Koreans how to understand their own country." While

¹⁰Finchum-Sung's critique complements Sonia Ryang's sharp intervention to highlight the professional costs of imposed essentialized identities based on ethnic origin. Whereas Finchum-Sung insists on being seen as an ethnomusicologist and a performer rather than a foreigner, Ryang, a Japan-born, U.S.-based anthropologist of Korean descent, resists being pigeonholed as a native because of her research on Koreans in Japan, and demands to be recognized first as a scholar. See Sonia Ryang, "Dilemma of a Native: On Location, Authenticity, and Reflexivity," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (2005): 143–57.

her point is specific to South Korean classrooms with non-Korean instructors, it is rooted in the postcolonial critique of how the “Orient” has been constructed by others’ representations and not allowed to represent itself.¹¹ The position of a “foreigner” teaching Koreans about Korea is indeed sensitive, as also discussed in Finchum-Sung’s piece, and is worthy of critical reflection. In my view, switching the focus from Korea as a totality to particular phenomena that manifest in Korea or for Koreans—globalization, capitalism, nationalism, colonialism, multiculturalism, just to name a few—might be a productive approach, because those issues offer insights about Korea yet transcend particular national cultures. In that regard, separating native and non-native theory threatens to undermine Korea’s full belonging with the modern world. Evidence to how distinct Korean developments are nevertheless local inflections of planetary processes, many South Korean scholars of Korea have insightfully adopted, and originally built upon, theories with Euro-American origin.¹² Limited familiarity with their work outside of South Korea, and certainly outside of Korean Studies, is another matter. As Saeji rightly mentions, there is much room for greater mutual acknowledgment between scholars writing in Korean and English (and ideally other languages).

I hope that this introduction and the four essays in the special issue will provide a critical and reflexive contribution to the ongoing conversations on Korean culture and the blurry lines between its insiders and outsiders. The concept of culture itself has been rightly critiqued for essentializing differences, smuggling in hierarchies, erasing history, and evacuating politics.¹³ “Culture is the essential tool for making other” writes Lila Abu-Lughod arguing for “writing against culture,” namely focusing on specific discourses and practices, foregrounding historical and geographical connections, and producing ethnographies of particular individuals in time and space.¹⁴ Those anti-essentializing strategies are good to remember while facing the reality where culture is intensely mobilized for diverse agendas and where cultural membership is often unselfconsciously treated as synonymous with ethnicity. The persistent popularity of culturalist discourses adds urgency to the task of researching and teaching about Korean culture in a manner that dislodges attempts at cultural reification and inspires new ways of thinking about Korea and the world—for insiders, outsiders, and those in-between.

¹¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979).

¹² To give just three examples, Chang Kyung-Sup, *South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition* (Routledge, 2010); Kim Dong-choon, *The Unending Korean War: A Social History*, trans. Sung-ok Kim, First Edition edition (Larkspur, California: Tamal Vista Pubs, 2009); Paik Nak-chung, “South Korean Democracy and Korea’s Division System,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013): 156–69. The similar dilemma of recognizing local difference without insisting on local incommensurability of both socio-cultural developments and scholarship has incited an ongoing debate in anthropology about intellectual and political merits of singular “world anthropology” vs. plural “world anthropologies.” For summary of the arguments on both sides, see “Roundtable: Between World Anthropologies and World Anthropology: Toward a Reflexive Critique of the Mediation Processes” in *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 4 (2016): 843–58. For a perspective from South Korean anthropology, see Virginia R. Dominguez and Emily Metzner, “Interview with Professor Hyang Jin Jung, Chair, Department of Anthropology, Seoul National University: World Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 4 (2016): 838–43.

¹³ In addition to the culture theorists mentioned above, see Arif Dirlik, “Culture against History? The Politics of East Asian Identity,” *Development and Society* 28, no. 2 (1999): 167–190.

¹⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing against Culture,” in *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology*, ed. Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 466–79.

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