

# Songs of their lives: A narrative study of three older Korean immigrants in Los Angeles

Research Studies in Music Education  
2018, Vol. 40(2) 157–175  
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DOI: 10.1177/1321103X18774346  
journals.sagepub.com/home/rsm



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## Abstract

Conceptualized as a narrative inquiry, this study explored how music permeates the lives of older Korean immigrants in the United States. By closely examining three individuals' lived experiences through the narratives they told, the study aimed to illuminate the complexity, depth, and uniqueness of meanings embedded in the musical lives of older immigrants. Narrative data revealed that while all interviewees had lived in the same time periods and went through many similar life events, each individual used different "colors and shapes" to "paint" their musical lives. Yet, some common themes also appeared from the narrative data: songs in the lives of the older immigrants portrayed their personhood, including who they are, where they come from, and what they like/dislike. Also, as a means of emotional communication, songs were intrinsically related to temporal moments at particular circumstances in the past, often paired with affective reactions. Finally, songs helped make sense of the socio-historical contexts in which the older immigrants have lived.

## Keywords

immigrants, older adults, singing, songs, South Korea

*My hometown is a mountain village blanketed with flowers*

*Peach blossoms, apricot blossoms, and baby azaleas*

*The village was a colorful flower palace*

*How I miss those days when I lived there.*

(from the "Spring in My Hometown," a Korean children's song)

Immigration is a challenging process for people who have left their motherland to live in a foreign country, trying to adjust to a new environment (Coll & Magnuson, 2014). When

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immigrants step outside the boundaries of their own culture and begin a new life journey, there is a significant loss in terms of the familiarity and comfort found in daily life, and often times, many challenges ahead. They have to speak a new language that is not their native tongue. They need to eat “exotic food”, which may be unfamiliar to their palate. Some may even need to dress differently. Because migration is not simply a crossing of a geographical boundary, but a switch in social and psychological environments, immigrants’ values, practices, and cognition enter a process of reconstruction, and this life adventure leads them to develop a new sense of self, which is often called acculturation (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010).

While music is often considered to be a promising medium with which to facilitate the process of immigrants’ acculturation (Frankenberg et al., 2014), music education studies have shown how music, “as an integral part of human experience” (Marsh, 2013, p. 508), specifically plays a role in fostering immigrant children and adolescents’ successful cultural integration into their new environment (e.g., Gilboa, Yehuda, & Amir, 2009; Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010; Marsh, 2013; O’Hagin & Harnish, 2006; Sæther, 2008).

First, music could be a powerful vehicle for young immigrants’ emotional release. Since music provides the means for individuals to express, maintain, enhance, and alter their moods and mental states (Juslin & Sloboda, 2001), immigrant children and adolescents occasionally sing or listen to songs from their homeland to relieve, soothe, excite, entertain, and inspire themselves (Karlsen, 2012, 2013; Marsh, 2012; Sæther, 2008). These practices help to reduce the stress and anxiety that arises from the challenging process of acculturation and also regulate their emotional states. Further, as “a vehicle for imaginary travels of the mind” (Karlsen, 2012, p. 140), specific songs from their homeland enable young immigrants to reconnect with their past, as well as re-experience positive emotions that they had in their homeland (Karlsen, 2012, 2013).

Because music is one of the ubiquitous everyday practices that people use to construe identity (Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2002), music could also be a powerful means for young immigrants’ identity work—to construct, reconstruct, negotiate, and express who they are, to which group they belong, and what their identities are. Karlsen and Westerlund (2010) noted that, in order to be successfully integrated into a host country, immigrants should “acculturate and learn how to become ‘functionally multicultural’ so as to connect their previous, present, and future experiences and selves... [which can be realized through] a flexible mastering of a fluid, multilayered self” (p. 229). Previous studies of immigrant students in Scandinavia (Karlsen, 2012, 2013; Sæther, 2008) have articulated some of these examples. While homeland music was deeply embraced by young immigrants and functioned to maintain a continuity of their previous self (Karlsen, 2012, 2013), these individuals also used globally popular music of youth culture, such as pop, rock, rap, and hip-hop, as a tool for inclusion in peer groups within the host society (Sæther, 2008). In addition, for immigrant students whose current lives were socio-economically unstable and challenging, music sometimes functioned as a mediator of their forming identity, thus generating a sense of optimism for a better future (Karlsen, 2012). This idea of immigrants’ identity work through music reflects DeNora’s (1999) view of music’s active role to “construct, reinforce, and repair the ‘thread’ of self-identity” (p. 45).

Particularly in school contexts, musical activities offer secure spaces in which immigrant students can feel socially and psychologically safe and enhance their sense of social inclusion (Frankenberg et al., 2014; Marsh, 2012; Sæther, 2008). Recently arrived immigrant students often experience challenges when engaging in school activities and connecting with peers due to their lack of proficiency in new language. A study of refugee and newly arrived immigrant

children in Australia (Marsh, 2012, 2013) showed that the nature of school musical activities (e.g., frequent uses of repetitions and familiar tunes, incorporation of multimodal means of expression, and a relaxed atmosphere) helped those with limited language proficiency to actively participate in class with a reduced fear of making mistakes and thus gain a sense of security in the school environment. Also, school musical activities provided a joint enterprise that effectively encouraged young immigrants' adaptation to mainstream culture within and beyond the classroom (Frankenberg et al., 2014). For example, the use of various forms of popular dancing, such as hip-hop and break dancing, enabled young immigrants to easily connect with their peers in a "community of practice" (Wenger, 2000), which often extended beyond the school (Marsh, 2012, 2013). As they played and moved rhythmically together, young immigrants not only gained great enjoyment, a sense of security, camaraderie, and social inclusion, but they also acquired "a sense of mastery in a context where lack of knowledge of a new environment may have left them feeling disempowered" (Marsh, 2012, p. 107).

Finally, homeland music could be an important source of togetherness, social cohesion, and collective identity of young immigrants (Karlsen, 2012). Previous studies have shown that many immigrant children and adolescents often shared their homeland music in private musical spaces with selected friends, in most cases, those who had similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds to their own. Such a closed circle of friends created a strong sense of kin-like cohesion, which made the young immigrants feel that they were not alone in the foreign country (Karlsen, 2012, 2013; Marsh, 2012, 2013). In addition, in the home environment as well as in the ethnic enclave communities, homeland music was something that immigrants from different generations could enjoy in common. This provided young immigrants with opportunities to learn more about their native culture (Gilboa et al., 2009), to connect with other generations within their ethnic communities, and to cultivate a sense of pride in their own cultural heritages (Karlsen, 2012). Because specific songs were associated with specific cultural celebrations and festivities, they represented immigrants' collective identity of the larger cultural/ethnic group, cultivating the continuity of their cultural and national identity (Gilboa et al., 2009).

Although previous literature on music of immigrant children and adolescents provides important insights into specific roles of music in the acculturation processes of young immigrants, it is still unclear how music would continue to shape and affect immigrants' musical experiences in the course of a lifetime. While music education literature primarily focuses on young immigrants' musical lives in and outside of school contexts, very limited studies exist regarding the long-term influences of music in the lives of the adult immigrant population. For example, a study of music and identity on Brazilian-Japanese residing in Japan (Ilari, 2006) showed that adult immigrants, compared to younger ones, tended to show a stronger preference for their homeland music to Japanese music. For them, Brazilian music often functioned as a form of emotional comfort and played roles to preserve their Brazilian identity. Also, in an autobiographical study of the musical childhoods of three generations, Berrios-Miranda (2013), an immigrant from Puerto Rico to the mainland U.S., vividly described how she preserved her native musical culture and successfully conveyed it to her children, who were born and grew up on the mainland. As some types of music and dances are closely tied to social experience of Puerto Ricans, she maintained such musical skills and tastes that she developed at an early age as a source of cultural security and a marker of her identity, after moving to mainland U.S. Also, the musical culture of Puerto Rico helped her children to develop a strong connection to the family and to the old community in Puerto Rico that she cherished and tried to retain (Berrios-Miranda, 2013).

While these studies provide a glimpse of how music, particularly homeland music, permeates the lives of adult immigrants, more research is needed to understand the role of music in

shaping everyday lives of adult immigrants who have left their motherland and successfully settled in a foreign country for a long period of time, and the meanings associated with their musical experiences. Do they still sing and listen to songs from their homeland? What kinds of music are included in their everyday music listening lists? How, when, and where did they learn these songs? Above all, what does this music mean to them? In this regard, this study aimed to add to the body of literature on music in immigrants' lives by exploring the musical lives of three older, South Korean immigrants residing in Los Angeles, California. Specifically, using narrative inquiry as a mode of knowing and constructing meaning of one's life (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009), this study attempted to illuminate the complexity, depth, and uniqueness of meanings implicit in the musical lives of older immigrants through the storied representation of individual musical experiences.

### **South Korean immigrants in Los Angeles: A brief history and introduction**

As one of the largest metropolitan cities in the United States, Los Angeles is "home to people from more than 140 countries speaking 224 different identified languages" (Myers, Goldberg, Mawhorter, & Min, 2010, p. 12), and immigrants now make up nearly one-third of its population. While Koreans comprise approximately 3% of the population, being the fifth-largest immigrant group (Pastor, Ortiz, Carter, Scoggins, & Perez, 2012), Los Angeles is known to have the largest number of ethnic Koreans outside of the Korean Peninsula. Korean immigrants first became increasingly present in Los Angeles in the 1950s–60s, resulting from the Korean War and the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965<sup>1</sup> in the U.S. (Noland, 2003). As many early Korean immigrants were concentrated in the Central Los Angeles area, a huge Korean ethnic enclave, called "Koreatown," was formed around the Mid-Wilshire area and has generated extensive economic, social, cultural, political, and religious opportunities for Korean immigrants (Y. S. Kim & Naughton, 1993). This ethnic enclave has enabled immigrants to maintain their lifestyles and cultural heritage while selectively accepting American cultural practices, values, and identification (Yoon & Park, 2012). The Korean immigrants' society has now expanded to many of Los Angeles's suburbs, growing rapidly not only in number, but also in economic, political, and social power in mainstream society.

Although the well-established Korean enclave has greatly facilitated early immigrants' settlement in the new land, those who are now in late adulthood, often face various challenges such as economic insecurity and poor health in their daily lives (Kim & Lauderdale, 2002). Studies concerning the lives of older Korean-Americans have reported that they tend to experience comparatively higher levels of psychological distress than non-Hispanic white elders (Min, Moon, & Lubben, 2005) and that their psychological distress is often closely associated with health issues (B. J. Kim & Harris, 2012). According to a qualitative study of elderly Korean-Americans' perception of stressors (Y. M. Lee, 2007), the high level of distress among older Korean immigrants could be significantly attributed to language and cultural barriers, which is likely to reinforce their loneliness and social isolation. This makes sense in the case of older Korean-Americans in Los Angeles because they have tended to cluster in the ethnic enclave, having fewer social opportunities to acquire English language and American culture, which, in turn, hinders their adaptation to the mainstream society. Also, they show a strong tendency to adhere to traditional Confucian ways of thinking that place high emphases on collectivism, interpersonal hierarchy (e.g., between older and younger people), and

filial piety, which also prevents them from adapting to mainstream American values (Min et al., 2005).

Still, there are many positive aspects to elderly immigrants residing in the ethnic enclaves. The sense of alienation, closely related to depression, appears to be significantly lower in older Korean-Americans in Los Angeles, compared to those living in non-ethnic enclaves in Oklahoma (Moon & Pearl, 1991) and in Chicago (Y. M. Lee, 2007). In addition, a large number of older Korean-Americans in Los Angeles seem to maintain high social norms and trust in other people and in community (B. J. Kim & Harris, 2012). They also have high levels of partnership, and actively share information, with other members of their community, though gender differences exist (B. J. Kim & Harris, 2012). Here, Korean mass media seems to play a significant role in promoting the quality of older immigrants' lives. Various Korean television and radio stations, newspapers, and magazines are easily accessible in Los Angeles, allowing older immigrants to keep up with Korean and American daily news, acquire information about daily life (e.g., health, law, and tax), learn English, and listen to Korean songs (Moon & Park, 2007). In addition, while approximately 75% of Korean immigrants appear to attend immigrant churches (Min, 2000), these churches significantly contribute to heightening elderly people's life quality, not only by enhancing religious faith, but also by providing socialization opportunities (Min, 2000). The well-established Korean enclave in Los Angeles has resulted in creating a unique, interesting form of biculturalism, which is not typically found in the lives of Korean immigrants in other regions.

## **Methods: Narrative inquiry**

Conceptualized as a narrative inquiry, this study attempted to explore how music permeates the lives of older Korean immigrants, by closely looking at individuals' lived experiences through the narratives they tell (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry has been employed extensively in the field of music education as a means to explore various ways in which "music threads through and thrives in lived experience" (Stauffer & Barrett, 2009, p. 223). Since narrative inquirers try to look beyond the familiar and examine tensions that underlie the surface of people's lived experience, narrative inquiry as a research methodology has been particularly valuable to be "more inclusive of the lives of all people, regardless of who they are and how they are positioned on the landscape" (Clandinin, 2009, p. 208). In this respect, aiming to capture the complexity, depth, and uniqueness of meanings embedded in older immigrants' musical lives that have seldom been documented in the literature, I chose three older Korean immigrants in the United States as participants of this narrative inquiry.

Although Asians have been one of the most rapidly expanding groups in many Western countries over the past decades (Chen, Gee, Spencer, Danziger, & Takeuchi, 2009), Asian immigrants, particularly the older population, have rarely been a target of music education research. While there are great variations in reasons for immigration among Asian immigrants—some migrate for education and employment, others, for family reunification; and still others, to avoid wars and religious and political persecution (Takeuchi & Williams, 2003)—a large body of Asian immigrants since the 1970s, particularly those from Northeast Asian countries, including South Korea, have emigrated voluntarily to seek better education and employment opportunities (Min, 2011). The three older Korean immigrants who took part in the current study are also considered to be among this group. Also, I purposefully selected these study participants from a particular cohort—"who were born during the same time period and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the

same age” (Hutchison, 2010, p. 11)—because I expected that life stories of people who share various identities in common would offer clear examples of how people’s lives are consonant with the lives of others while each individual’s life appears in distinctively unique shapes and forms.

Specifically, the three older Korean-American participants of this study share the following backgrounds: 1) all were born in South Korea when it was under Japanese rule; 2) all experienced the Korean War during their childhoods, which directly impacted their everyday lives; 3) all endured many dynamic, radical political and social changes, as a process of South Korea’s industrialization and democratization movement, during their early adulthood; and 4) all migrated to the U.S. in their 30s with their spouse and children, settling in the Greater Los Angeles area in the 1970s–80s. These participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, which drew upon people who were either referred by other people or by themselves (Creswell, 2008). All were residing independently, with their spouses, while having their offspring living in different parts of the U.S. Furthermore, all participants had lived in the country for over 35 years, with some moving back and forth several times between the United States and South Korea. Although they had to shift their occupations after migrating, they had stable jobs before retirement and ensured financial security. A brief description of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Interviews were conducted at a place of the participants’ choice (e.g., their house, church), where they felt secure and comfortable, and were in Korean, their language of choice. Prior to the actual interview, I spent sufficient time with each of them in order for us to get to know each other, thereby creating a safe environment in which they could feel comfortable with sharing truthful, genuine life stories. Interview data were generated through extensive semi-structured interviews, centering on their informal and formal musical experiences throughout their lives, with particular focus on songs that they had enjoyed listening to and singing. When they shared life stories related to particular songs, I sometimes asked them to sing them for me, which they willingly did. Each interview lasted an average of 124 minutes, yielding a total of 6 hours and 14 minutes of audio recordings.

Because narrative inquiry is more than collecting and retelling a series of stories, and requires a careful analysis of the narrative data (Clandinin, 2006), I have paid particular attention to analyze the data in order to represent participants’ narratives in a coherent and meaningful way. The narrative data were first transcribed and then translated into English with careful consideration of the linguistic expressions and nuances. Validity of the translation was established by two Korean-American researchers who verified documents in English and Korean. After thoroughly exploring the narratives to obtain a general sense of the whole, I followed Creswell’s (2008) stages of content analysis, identifying the narrative data with key themes that emerged repeatedly. Given that I am a native South Korean and an immigrant in the United States, who is closely related to the Korean-American society, I not only had insider knowledge of the social/historical contexts of Korea as well as Korean immigrants’ society in the U.S., but also could access research documents and literature written in Korean. While my position as an insider greatly helped understand and construct meanings that underlie the surface of the participants’ musical lives, I consciously tried to distance myself from the insider’s view and took on the role of a “researcher” to reconstruct, interpret, and reflect on the narrative data. Particularly, the process of reconstructing the narratives involved careful consideration of the three dimensions of the narrative inquiry space (Clandinin, 2006): personal/social interactions; continuity (consideration of the past, present, and future); and situation (information about the context, time, and place).

**Table 1.** Brief description of study participants.

Name	Age	Year of birth	Place of birth	Year of immigration	Level of education	Occupations	
						Before immigration	After immigration
Mrs. Kim	76	1938	Chungbuk (Rural)	1980	High school graduate	Elementary school teacher	Self-employed: clothing store
Mr. Beak	74	1940	Seoul (Urban)	1971	College graduate (Engineering)	Engineer	Self-employed: grocery store; Church minister
Mr. Lee	72	1942	Gangwon (Rural)	1972	Doctoral degree (Education & Theology)	High school teacher	Pastor

Note. Participants' names have been anonymized.

## Life stories of the three elderly Korean immigrants

### Mrs. Kim

Mrs. Kim was born to a relatively affluent family in 1938, the sixth among eight children, in a rural area deep in the mountains in central South Korea. This was a time when Koreans did not consider girls as “important” as boys, so it was typical that many parents did not send their daughters to school and girls directly entered the workforce to help their families make ends meet. Although this situation was particularly common in rural areas, such as where she grew up, Mrs. Kim was fortunate to finish high school with her parent’s active support. Yet, as she recalled her childhood, music did not seem deeply embedded in her everyday life:

Songs? I don’t remember... because I grew up in a small village deep in a mountain [area]. It was so remote ... So, we didn’t really have music ... Also, when I was a sixth grader, the Korean War broke out. I attended a middle school during the War, so how could we possibly imagine learning music in that hectic situation?

Mrs. Kim became a Christian during her middle school years. Though she was the only Christian in her family, she was devout and thoroughly accepted her church’s teaching, which played a significant role in shaping her musical identity. She joined a church choir, in which a group of approximately 10 mixed-age people sang hymns and sacred songs in the service every Sunday. She loved to sing hymns, but she only sang them at church because her mother, who was not a Christian, did not like her to sing Christian songs at home:

We had a phonograph at home, but I never used it. I remember that my younger sister used it a lot and listened to songs like “*Dongbaek Agassi* (Dongbaek Senorita)” by Yi, Mi-ja [a popular singer of the time]. But I never tried to learn them... because I was a Christian. At that time, the Methodist churches were very conservative; they strictly prohibited Christians from drinking, smoking, and even singing pop songs. I never imagined myself singing the pop songs.

After marriage, Mrs. Kim’s family migrated to Los Angeles in 1980. Right after she relocated to the U.S., she and her husband joined a choir in a Korean immigrant church in which some

of their relatives were already involved. In the choir, they sang not only Christian songs, but also Korean art songs<sup>2</sup> that evoked a strong sense of nostalgia. Her life was not easy during the initial adjustment period, when she had to work as a clerk in a clothing store, primarily due to the language barrier. The church choir was the only place where she could release all the stress from her tough life and gain strength to move forward:

I vividly remember the day when an old lady stepped in the store and yelled, "Why do you live in my country? You don't even speak English. Return to your country!" It was just heartbreaking. On that Sunday, we sang "*Gohyang ui Bom* (Spring in my Hometown)" in the choir and I cried a lot. Tears poured down my cheeks and I couldn't stop.

Since her family has successfully settled in Los Angeles after 35 years of immigrant life, Mrs. Kim now spends her days engaging in hobbies such as swimming, knitting, and transcribing the Bible. It has been more than 60 years since she first started to sing in a church choir and she is still singing every Sunday in the same choir that she joined when she first immigrated. She not only learned the chromaharp and harmonica in her 50s and 60s, but as a mother, she actively supported her children's music education. She is proud to state that all of her three children were involved in music lessons during their school years. Despite being musically active all her life, ironically, she does not consider herself an active music maker:

I'm the kind of person who likes to be busy and organized. I hate being idle with my time, doing nothing productive. If I had free time, I would listen to music or sing songs, but I obviously don't. In fact, I'm always busy with knitting, transcribing the Bible, and housework ... which are all done with the hands. You know, if we sing, our attention is distracted and thus I can't concentrate on my hands' activities ... So, I just don't have time to sing or listen to songs, really.

### *Mr. Baek*

Born in 1940, Mr. Baek spent his childhood in Seoul until the Korean War broke out in 1950. He grew up in an extended family, so his childhood experiences were largely influenced by his family members, particularly two aunts who were attending a Christian school:

Highly influenced by my young aunts who loved to sing and play music, it was natural for me to learn a lot of songs, especially songs from the Western tradition. I was very familiar with songs like "Santa Lucia" and "Ave Maria." We even had songbooks, one containing 100 Korean art songs and the other an Italian song collection, which were very rare at that time.

When Mr. Baek was in fourth grade, the Korean War broke out and his family had to evacuate to a small village in Gyeongju, located in the Southern part of Korea. Still, music played a significant role in his personal and family life. Mr. Baek spent many hours singing songs as well as listening to his aunts singing and playing the guitar. Even if everyone was frightened and worried during the War, the music that Mr. Baek and his aunts made provided him with a significant release from the stressful life:

Although it is impossible to think about that period as warm and good, I have a lot of beautiful memories related to the refugee life. And music is centered in those memories. In the first day of school in Gyeongju, the teacher asked me to sing a song for the class. So, I sang "*Sipyun 23* (Psalm 23)," the first song I learned at my Sunday school. When I finished the song, everyone in the classroom cheered, shouting, "Encore! Encore!" So, I said, "Ok. Then I will sing an art song" and sang "*Sungbulsa ui Bam*



(A Night at a Buddhist Temple).” They loved my singing and, because of the songs, I got special treatment from my peers, which made my life much easier in the new school [laughs].

During adolescence, Mr. Baek’s special interest in music extended to Western classical music, particularly opera, American pop songs, and French chansons. He broadened his repertoire first by listening to a radio station every night and then by going to music halls.<sup>3</sup> Because Mr. Baek’s adolescence took place during a time when people were prohibited to walk outside after 8 p.m. by law radio was the most representative entertainment for young people. Also, he enjoyed collecting LPs of his favorite music. In fact, the first thing he did when he migrated to Los Angeles was to go to music stores and collect LPs that he was not able to find in Korea:

I loved Italian operas like *The Barber of Seville* and *Tosca*. I still can hum tunes from the songs like “E lucevan le stele” and “Vesti la giobba”... also, songs from *Aida* and *La Traviata* ... I can’t describe how much I loved the songs. I was also deeply into chansons. It’s hard to describe how captivating they are. I couldn’t stop listening to and singing them.... oh, also, pop songs like “Autumn Leaves,” “Que, Sera, Sera,” “Changing Partner.” Oh, and “Moon River...”

After migrating to the United States, his appreciation for songs from his youth deepened significantly although the tough life as an immigrant prevented him from expanding his musical repertoire further. While he still enjoyed classical music, pop songs, and chansons from his earlier life, his special affection for Korean art songs and folksongs<sup>4</sup> has also been very deep. He currently enjoys singing Korean songs for others when gathering with his family and friends, and his best singing repertoire includes popular traditional children’s songs and art songs such as “*Gohyang ui Bom* (Spring in my Hometown),” “*Gagopa* (Wishing to Return),” and “*Ummaya Nunaya* (Hey Mom, Hey Sister).”

### Mr. Lee

A retired pastor of a Baptist church, Mr. Lee was born in 1942 in a rural area located in the northeast of South Korea. Thinking back to his childhood, for Mr. Lee school provides a place in which he keeps most of his childhood memories. School was a place full of excitement and happiness for him despite its negative images, such as strict rules, physical punishment, and bullying. Learning new things, reading books, good relationships with teachers, and singing songs in the music class... all of these experiences simply made him love school:

I entered the school three or four months later than other peers ... “*Seanara ui Orini* (Children in the New Nation)” was the first song I heard at school. My peers already knew it very well, but I didn’t know it, which made me have cold feet. I remember ... I mouthed as if I knew the song because I didn’t want others to know that I didn’t know it ... as a young boy, I might have been ashamed about that [laughs]. After the class, I tried hard to learn the song and it is still in my memory.

During the Korean War, many people fled to the South, giving up their homes and property. Yet Mr. Lee’s family remained in his hometown. During the time when North Korea occupied his village, all classes at Mr. Lee’s school were taught exclusively by North Koreans. Interestingly, North Korean teachers did not teach any academic subjects but only songs that praised Kim, Il-sung, the leader of North Korea at the time, instilling communist ideas in students. All students were forced to memorize and sing them all the time:

The War was a very unique, shocking experience for us... because it was all about survival ... The song that I remember the most is “*Kim Il-sung Janggun ui Norea* (The Song of Kim, Il-sung)”. For some reason,

it sounded very impressive to me although we learned many other songs as well. In fact, as part of the Anticommunist Law, it was strictly prohibited to sing this song after the War. Indeed, even we could have been arrested if we sang the song. However, I just couldn't rid my memory of it ... There were often times when I found myself humming the song unconsciously. That's very scary, isn't it?

With the continued presence of the U.S. military after the War ended in 1953, American pop music had become very popular among young generations. However, since Mr. Lee grew up in a rural village, he did not have much exposure to it. When Mr. Lee moved to Seoul for college, he was surprised to learn that many of his peers already knew American pop songs and films well, and were able to speak English. He soon met his girlfriend (now his wife), who grew up in Seoul and was familiar with English and American popular culture, and began to learn them from her. "You are my Sunshine" was the first song she taught him and remains "their" song to this day. Despite his deep interests in learning the Western culture, his busy life prevented him from broadening his musical repertoire after his family migrated to the U.S. for his study in 1972:

[After the immigration] I was too busy, living day by day, so I didn't have time to take interests in music. Yet, at the seminary, I learned hymns in English that I used to sing in Korean before. Songs like, "What a Friend we have in Jesus" and "Were You There?" As I was able to sing them in the original text and understand the meaning behind the text, I became much more deeply touched by the songs.

After his retirement as a pastor in a Korean Baptist church in a suburb of Los Angeles, Mr. Lee spends his days giving lectures in seminaries and writing books, while enjoying singing hymns as well as old Korean pop songs in his daily life. During the interview, he stated, "I can't say that I'm a good singer, but I can confidently say that music takes a big part of my life. Singing is deeply embedded in my everyday life."

## **Convergences: Songs in the lives of three older South Korean immigrants**

When these older immigrants recalled memories of their young days during the interviews, they deeply indulged in reminiscence, which brought up various emotions: lots of laughter and smiles, deep nostalgia, anxiety, regret, and tears. Throughout the interviews, the recollection of musical experiences transported them to various points of their earlier lives, as shown in previous research studies (Karlsen, 2012, 2013). This offered them an opportunity to look back at their lived experiences, and evaluate and reinterpret them. Their life stories suggested that although these immigrants had lived in the same time periods and went through many similar life events, each individual used different colors and shapes to paint their own life, which made each musical life unique and special. Particularly, the narratives shed light on various meanings embedded in the songs of the older immigrants, including how songs, as a collection of people's reminiscences upon their life course, are related to individuals' life histories and the socio-historical contexts they have lived through—thus, by looking closely at the songs in people's lives, we come to understand many aspects of their lives.

### *Songs as identity portrayal: Songs tell who they are*

When a person chooses particular songs to listen to or sing, the songs convey messages about the personhood—the person's individuality, musical taste, emotional state, and so on—and thus music plays an important role in defining the self (Hays & Minichiello, 2005). By engaging

in a variety of music making activities, people construct, negotiate, and maintain their identities that are dynamically constructed in the situated moment (DeNora, 1999) and convey individuality as a way of defining self. Bowman (2004) states that

Musical identities are not only about the ways music makers come to identify as musicians. Nor are they just about the ways that music influences and modifies pre-existent, non-musical identities. Musical identities are always also about who, through musical doings of all sorts (listening included), we are and about whom we are in the process of becoming. (p. 5)

Despite the fact that Mr. Baek was never involved in formal music learning besides that in school music classes, he highly related to singing as a meaningful, important tool in shaping his identity. A vast range of songs that he shared in the interview—including Korean art songs, folk-songs, pop songs, world folksongs, Classical opera music, American pop songs, and French chansons—clearly showed how deeply intertwined music has been in his life. Although some of the songs were those with which people of his generation were intimately familiar, others were tunes that could not be learned without a person's deep interest and concerted effort. In fact, Mr. Baek was the only interviewee who reported having spent extra financial resources to listen to and learn songs (e.g., buying recordings, going to the music hall). The musical identity that he constructed throughout his life is clearly expressed in his words:

If God gives each person a gift, I think I was given a gift to love music ... Although I don't have the type of musical talent to technically play music on instruments, I have a special passion for music. I really ... love singing music and listening to music ... and talking about and thinking about it. I kind of have a responsibility to fully use this gift until the end of my life.

Also, songs appeared to play important roles in preserving the older immigrants' ethnic and cultural identities, as previous studies on music of young immigrants have articulated (Karlsen, 2012, 2013; Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010). Mr. Lee, a former pastor in a local Korean-American church, often had opportunities to go on picnics with elderly members of his church. Whenever the older people boarded the bus, they turned on a karaoke system and sang a variety of Korean songs, sometimes taking turns to sing solos or singing all together. Mr. Lee commented, "Some songs, like *Gagopa* (Wishing to Return)," made us confirm that we all are Korean even though we had left our homeland and acquired American citizenship." This comment clearly represents the role of homeland music that helps older immigrants to maintain and reinforce their ethnic identity as Koreans.

In addition, religious identity was also manifested in the individual narratives of musical experiences. Interestingly, all interviewees were already Christians before migrating to the United States, which could be unusual cases, considering the small population size of practicing Christians in the mid-1900s in South Korea. Although it is unclear when and how they became Christians since related information was not specifically shared in the interviews, early exposure to Christian culture seemingly contributed to shaping their musical experiences and cultural tastes over the course of their lives. For example, growing up as a devout Christian, Mrs. Kim fully accepted the church's teaching that considered activities such as drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and singing pop songs to be earthly and therefore to be avoided. In fact, song repertoires she shared during the interview mainly involved Korean Christian songs, children's songs and folksongs that she defined as "not earthly"; she rarely recalled any pop songs. She also expressed a strong negative feeling regarding contemporary pop songs, as she was extremely resistant to their sexual aspects:

I don't really know about pop songs ... because I don't listen to them ... Even if I hear them on the radio or TV, I actually don't like them. Do you know why do sexual crimes occur a lot these days? That's because the sexual songs deceive young people. Things like ladies wearing gaudy dresses ... dancing in a very sexual manner. I strongly disagree with showing those kinds of things on the TV... I never allow my grandchildren to watch that kind of thing.

### *Songs as emotional communication: Songs evoke detailed emotions*

Interwoven with various aspects of one's life history, songs are often paired with specific episodes, experiences, and scenes in people's lives (Janata, Tomic, & Rakowski, 2007). In the interviews, particular songs often enabled the elderly interviewees to recall autobiographical memories from a moment in the remote past, along with the emotions associated with them, corresponding to the previous studies of musical lives of young immigrants (Karlsen, 2012, 2013; Marsh, 2012; Sæther, 2008). For example, on a Sunday just a few days after Mrs. Kim was insulted at her work due to her lack of English fluency, she poured out all of her sorrow and homesickness while singing "Spring in my Hometown" in the church choir. Also, Mr. Baek recalled a detailed memory during the refugee years that his singing on the first day of a new school in front of his classmates impressed them and caused him to become popular among his peers. These narratives are consistent with the work of DeNora (1999), who stated that music can be a symbol of a larger interactional and emotional complex associated with one's past experiences, as music's affective power often represents other components of past experiences such as events, people, and places. Therefore, when people hear particular songs, they experience waves of affective reactions associated with the experiences, or events, in their lives (Hays & Minichiello, 2005).

For Mrs. Kim, old Korean pop songs were closely associated with missing her younger sister, who passed away many years ago. Although she did not enjoy popular music and stated that the songs themselves did not directly arouse her affective reactions, some pop tunes brought memories of her sister, who loved to sing them, therefore, stirred her emotions. Indeed, a memory of an old pop song, "*Dongbaek Agassi* (Dongbaek Seniorita)," was the moment in which Mrs. Kim showed the most intense emotion during the interview. She recalled,

It was summer or springtime. The weather was so nice. My sister was singing "*Dongbaek Agassi* (Dongbaek Seniorita)," acting as if she were the actual singer. It actually bothered me because her voice was so loud and my mom also got annoyed, too... [faintly smiles] But she didn't care. She was... [laughs] very different from me or our other siblings. She wasn't like any other girls in my neighborhood. She was ... a happy girl ... Because we lived far away from each other since I got married and left home, I don't have a lot of adult memories of her, but whenever I hear "*Dongbaek Agassi*," the memories of her shining face and her singing voice just fill my heart.

In regard to affective memories elicited by songs, Mr. Lee referred to his dating experience in his 20s with his girlfriend who eventually became his wife. Korean and American pop songs that described romantic love particularly evoked strong emotional expression:

It was a beautiful time ... Just the thought of her made my heart flutter [laughs]. At that time, people weren't allowed to walk outside, by law, between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m. So, what could we, young people, do at night then? Listening to radio stations and writing love letters were the most romantic things we could do.

Nostalgia was particularly often shared by the interviewees. For example, Korean art songs that involved lyrics of the narrator's nostalgia for particular places (e.g., hometown), time

periods (e.g., childhood), or people (e.g., old friends) deeply touched the older interviewees. Mr. Baek, for example, was quietly absorbed in deep thought after he sang a Korean art song during the interview:

[After singing the full song of “*Gagopa* (Wishing to Return)”] [long pause] It’s a very beautiful song. It makes me feel like... there is something choking my heart. I don’t mean it hurts me, but when I sing [Korean art songs], I strongly feel like I want to return to those times, my young years...

Mr. Lee also stated,

[Korean folksongs and art songs] sometimes bring strong nostalgia for Korea. They make me wish to go back to ... [pause] The nostalgia is for something that I can’t have any longer ... It’s like ... [pause] a yearning for my youth when I had the passion and energy ... and a time when I felt very warm and passionate even though my situation would have not been as great as it is now.

### *Songs as cultural communication: Songs tell their taste*

Taste, as a symbol of an individual’s cultural experiences and preferences, functions to shape one’s identity as well as represent the self (Bourdieu, 1984). One’s taste enables the individual to be aligned with selected others while differentiating him/herself from non-selected others. Therefore, by understanding what songs people choose to sing and listen to, we can understand what they like and dislike, and how they want to be perceived by others (Hays & Minichiello, 2005). Cultural tastes are likely to change over a lifetime—research indicates that there is a narrowing pattern of musical tastes, as people get older (Harrison & Ryan, 2010). In the case of these three older immigrants, while their musical tastes appeared to be fairly varied during their youth, their musical tastes became more consolidated over time, with some shared commonalities later in their lives.

Mr. Baek and Mr. Lee, who had actively engaged in music making since childhood, actively broadened their musical repertoires during adolescence and young adulthood. They were deeply interested in learning new songs and enjoyed listening to radio stations, and thus singing was deeply embedded in their early lives. Particularly, Mr. Baek, who grew up in a musically-rich home environment, already established a fairly wide-ranging musical taste in his childhood. He further extensively broadened this to a wide variety of musical genres until young adulthood, which most people in his generation would not have done. Unlike Mr. Baek, Mr. Lee grew up in a rural area and was relatively late to have opportunities to learn music from Western culture. However, he gradually expanded his musical taste at his own pace and looked for opportunities even when he did not have enough access to more diverse music. For both men, the life course trajectory of musical taste seemed to expand and reach a peak, in terms of the richness of repertoire, in young adulthood. Their musical taste of the time included Korean pop songs, art songs, religious songs, American pop songs, Western classical music, and other types of songs from Western culture.

On the other hand, Mrs. Kim, who grew up in a rural area where access to the media was more limited, did not seek opportunities to broaden her musical tastes. It was noteworthy that, influenced by her religious faith, she consciously limited her musical choices to particularly selected types of music, which significantly shaped her musical taste as well. She tried to avoid listening to or singing “worldly” songs, and only accepted songs that she considered not to be secular (e.g., Christian songs, folksongs, and art songs). Although it was generally a trend for young generations in the 1950s and 60s to listen to and love Western popular music, Mrs. Kim was not exposed to Western musical culture until she migrated to the United States in 1980.

As noted, despite distinctively different musical tastes in their early years, these older immigrants' musical tastes appeared to converge to some extent in their later lives. Although Mr. Baek and Mr. Lee still enjoy a wide range of song repertoires from their early years, their musical tastes significantly narrowed in later life. Perhaps, the musical tastes of the three older immigrants were heavily impacted by the big life event—immigration—that happened in their 30s, or early 40s in Mrs. Kim's case. Because they were too busy to survive in the new environment, they simply had no time or energy to spare for music during their middle adulthood. The wife of Mr. Lee, who was present at the interview with Mr. Lee, clearly described the general circumstance:

When we first came to the U.S, we had three little kids and my husband was pursuing his doctoral degree. We had no time to do anything other than work and take care of kids. It was unspeakable ... I forgot everything that I enjoyed in my earlier life. Regarding my life in the 1980s and 90s, it is just blacked out.

In addition, the unique characteristics of the Korean ethnic enclave in Los Angeles appear to have influenced their musical tastes. Since their everyday lives adhere to the ethnic enclave, they were offered fewer sociocultural opportunities to acquire the culture of the host society, which, in turn, somewhat hindered their adaptation into mainstream American society. They watched Korean TV programs, listened to Korean radio stations, and interacted mainly with Korean immigrants in daily life. Such life environment likely resulted in the reinforcement of a taste of the "old days" of Korean culture rather than in assistance towards integration into the new culture.

### *Songs as social communication: Songs describe historical/social contexts*

Songs embedded in the musical lives of the older immigrants not only capture who they were and what they had done at the moment in the past, but also tell the specific context and circumstances in which the songs were heard and sung. For example, their childhood years (the 1940s and 50s) were particularly hectic periods because it was right after Korea was emancipated from Japanese rule, and thus the political and social climate was very unstable and most people experienced severe poverty. Because parents had to pay for their children to attend school, even elementary school, it was not typical that every child could go to school even though they longed for that. A song commonly shared by the interviewees from their childhood vividly describes the circumstances of the time:

*Dad, please let me go to school.*

*Look at the kids over there*

*who are wearing black skirts and white shirts with a kerchief.*

*I envy them going to school.*

Mr. Lee recalled,

[This song] was very popular ... I remember, peers in my neighborhood, including my sisters, who couldn't go to school, sang this song and cried so hard when they saw us going to school every morning.

All the three interviewees, who lived in geographically distant regions at that time, knew this song from their childhood memories, which suggests the popularity of this orally transmitted

song at that period; however, interestingly, the song seems to fail to be transmitted to younger generations. This song is unknown for most of the younger generations, and no formal reference to this song seems to exist. It can be assumed that the song gradually disappeared at some point in later years because it became irrelevant to children after elementary school education became compulsory in South Korea in the early 1950s.

During the interviews, military songs were also frequently shared when the interviewees tried to recall memories of their early years, since the Korean War deeply impacted their childhood. Mr. Lee was able to list more than 10 songs associated with the War. He stated,

Military songs are very meaningful to my generation which experienced the Korean War. [The War] was a very unique, shocking experience for us because it was all about survival... "*Jinja Sanai* (Real Men)" was the most popular military song that everyone, even young children, sang. It was almost considered as a "national" song at that time.

In addition, songs shared by the older immigrants, particularly Mr. Baek and Mr. Lee, from their adolescence as well as early adulthood, clearly depicted the general climate of Korean popular culture in the 1950s and 60s, which pursued radical Americanization. Immediately after the Korean War's ceasefire in 1953, two divisions of the U.S. Armed Forces were stationed in South Korea for complicated political reasons. Unsurprisingly, they became the main gateways for the influx of American culture (Chung, 2013)—American films, music, dances, magazines, and various Christian media poured into Korean society and fascinated the young generation. The popularity of Western popular culture also caused young people to be interested in learning English. Mr. Lee recalled:

English was the criteria to show one's intelligence and sophistication among the educated young adults. We should have been able to sing at least some English pop songs. And, if anyone could speak English fairly well, the person became an object of huge attention.

The rapid influx of Western culture coupled with young people's desire to learn more about an exotic world that they could only know through imaginations signified the dramatic change of young people's view of the world (C. Lee, 2013).

## Concluding thoughts

The rich life narratives of the three older Korean immigrants' musical lives provide valuable insights into the diverse ways that music permeates people's everyday lives. Their narratives are particularly valuable because the musical lives of older adults from such ethnic minority groups have not been commonly discussed in music education literature. Also, since members of this specific group of people have gone through many unusual life events, such as the War and migration, the songs that they have been listening to and singing in the course of their lives bring forward many interesting, unique stories and insights into music in people's everyday life (DeNora, 1999). While these older immigrants' experiences with a wide variety of songs appear to be highly individualistic and personal, songs embedded in their lives seem to have played some common functions, as reflected in the previous literature on the musical lives of immigrant children and adolescents. For example, songs in the lives of the older immigrants unfolded the temporal moments at particular circumstances in the past, often paired with strong affective reactions, which were often discussed in the previous studies of young immigrants (e.g., Karlsen, 2012, 2013; Marsh, 2012). Particularly, songs associated with immigrants' past in their homeland were powerful resources with which to express, release, and regulate their

emotions. Also, often times, immigrants used those songs as a vehicle for “imaginary travels of the mind” (Karlsen, 2012, p. 140) to reconnect with their valuable memories of the past and re-experience the positive emotions that they had in those contexts (Karlsen, 2012, 2013). In addition, songs that the older immigrants sing and listen to provided extensive information about each individual’s personhood—who they are, where they come from, what they feel in specific moments, and what they like and dislike—, which aligns with the notion of songs as a symbol to elaborate a sense of self and to tell the “continuous” stories of who they are (DeNora, 1999). As previous studies indicated that young immigrants often used music from their homeland to maintain a continuity of their previous selves (e.g., Frankenberg et al., 2014; Karlsen, 2012, 2013) and cultivate the collective identity of their larger cultural/ethnic groups in the immigrant societies (e.g., Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010), songs of the older immigrants in this study seemed to significantly contribute to their personal, as well as collective, identity works. However, although young immigrants also used music as a tool to cultivate their “fluid, multi-layered self” by relating themselves to the popular music of general youth culture, which is the commonality of interests with their peers of the host society, this did not appear in any cases in the narratives of the elderly interviewees. In fact, while previous literature on the musical lives of adult immigrants (Berrios-Miranda, 2013; Ilari, 2006) mainly described the significance of homeland music in the immigrants’ lives, their interests in the music of the host society were rarely articulated. This finding may be attributed to the fact that adult immigrants, particularly those who reside in ethnic enclaves, tend to have less social contacts with native people of the host country and, thus, are much less pressured to engage in cultural assimilation than younger ones, who go to school and interact with the host society’s culture on a daily basis.

Additionally, the narratives of the older immigrants’ musical lives provide glimpses into the long-term consequences of early musical experiences that take place both in and outside of school contexts. In the cases of Mr. Baek and Mr. Lee, many stories associated with their school music experiences were shared during the interviews—learning songs in the music class, sharing music with peers, and showing off singing ability to the classmates. At the time of their childhood back in the 1940s and 50s, school music in Korea was somewhat limited; singing appeared to be the only musical activity that was offered. Nonetheless, positive emotional experiences that they had while engaging with music in their childhood certainly offered them “the chance for expression, insight, and development, and so has lasting effects on their engagement with the world” (Pitts, 2009, pp. 241–242). In other words, the lived stories of the older immigrants clearly present evidence that positive musical experiences in childhood have potential to develop students’ lifelong interests in music, nourish a sense of musical identity, and provide opportunities for the acquisition of the passion for music in the course of their entire lives (Pitts, 2009). Many music teachers in today’s schools are often concerned with the immediate effects of their school music provision. Yet, through the narratives of the older immigrants, we come to witness the lifelong implications of every lesson that we provide to our students, even if our hard work would not immediately bear fruit.

Lastly, as an implication for music education research, narrative inquiry as a research technique seems to offer a valuable opportunity to look closely into the musical lives of particular groups of people. By giving attention to the subjective musical experiences of the Korean older immigrants, we could gain interesting insights into unique roles and functions of songs in individuals’ everyday lives that are not commonly seen in “conventional” research reports. As we include narratives told by the voices of “unheard” groups as the core of a research study, we not only come to understand more diverse and broader inter- and intra- personal viewpoints in people’s musical lives, but also deepen our understanding of unique, interesting roles of music and cultural diversity in the lives of people. This aligns with Barrett and Stauffer’s (2009) claim



that narrative inquiry as an exploration of storying and stories as both process and product of academic inquiry provides “a means to re-conceptualize the ways in which we think about music engagement, music education, and inquiry in music education” (p. 1). Thus, we can come to understand more diverse accounts of why, how, when, and where people engage in and through music, and recognize different perspectives, voices, and experiences of the world.

## Notes

1. Known as the “Hart-Celler Act,” the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished an earlier quota system that was based on national origin, and greatly liberated U.S. immigration policy and opened the door for immigration from non-European countries, including South Korea.
2. There is no clear definition of Korean art songs, but they typically involve songs that used poems as lyrics and were initially popular during and after the Japanese colonial period (approximately the 1920s to the 1960s). Many early art songs intrinsically described people’s longing for the independence of Korea while explicitly hiding the meaning.
3. A place full of LPs where young people gathered to listen to music. They paid a certain amount of money and requested from the DJ the music that they wanted to hear. They were very popular until the 1970s, but are now rarely found.
4. Like typical folk tunes in other cultures, Korean folksongs are generally defined as music by unknown composers, transmitted and evolved over a long period of time. “Arirang” is one example that is well known worldwide.

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