

## **A Mysterious Island in the Digital Age:**

### **Technology and Musical Life in Ulleungdo, South Korea**

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*This paper contributes to the growing body of ethnomusicological research about music-making on small islands, focusing on the remote South Korean island of Ulleungdo (literally, 'Mysterious Island'). Historically, a number of factors have conspired to present serious obstacles to the Ulleungdo islanders' musical aspirations. However, since the early 1990s, enterprising amateurs have managed to generate and maintain a variety of musical activities in spite of these obstacles: church ensembles, karaoke, saxophone clubs, and more.*

*Paralleling other island music studies, this paper seeks to show how the condition of being an Ulleungdo islander – entailing a complex of varied experiences, values, and relationships – has informed music-making over the years. However, here, the discussion remains firmly focused upon the islanders' use of technology since, evidently, an acute reliance on technology has come to permeate Ulleungdo's musical life, with certain electronic devices commonly regarded as essential facilitators of musical expression. Drawing from the islanders' own testimonies, studies of Ulleungdo's cultural history, and works addressing technology's applications within and effects upon local communities, the authors explore how and why this condition of musical techno-reliance developed, how it is manifest in the present-day, and its broader implications for the island's music culture and identity.*

*Keywords: South Korea; Ulleungdo; karaoke; community music; music education; communications technology; saxophone*

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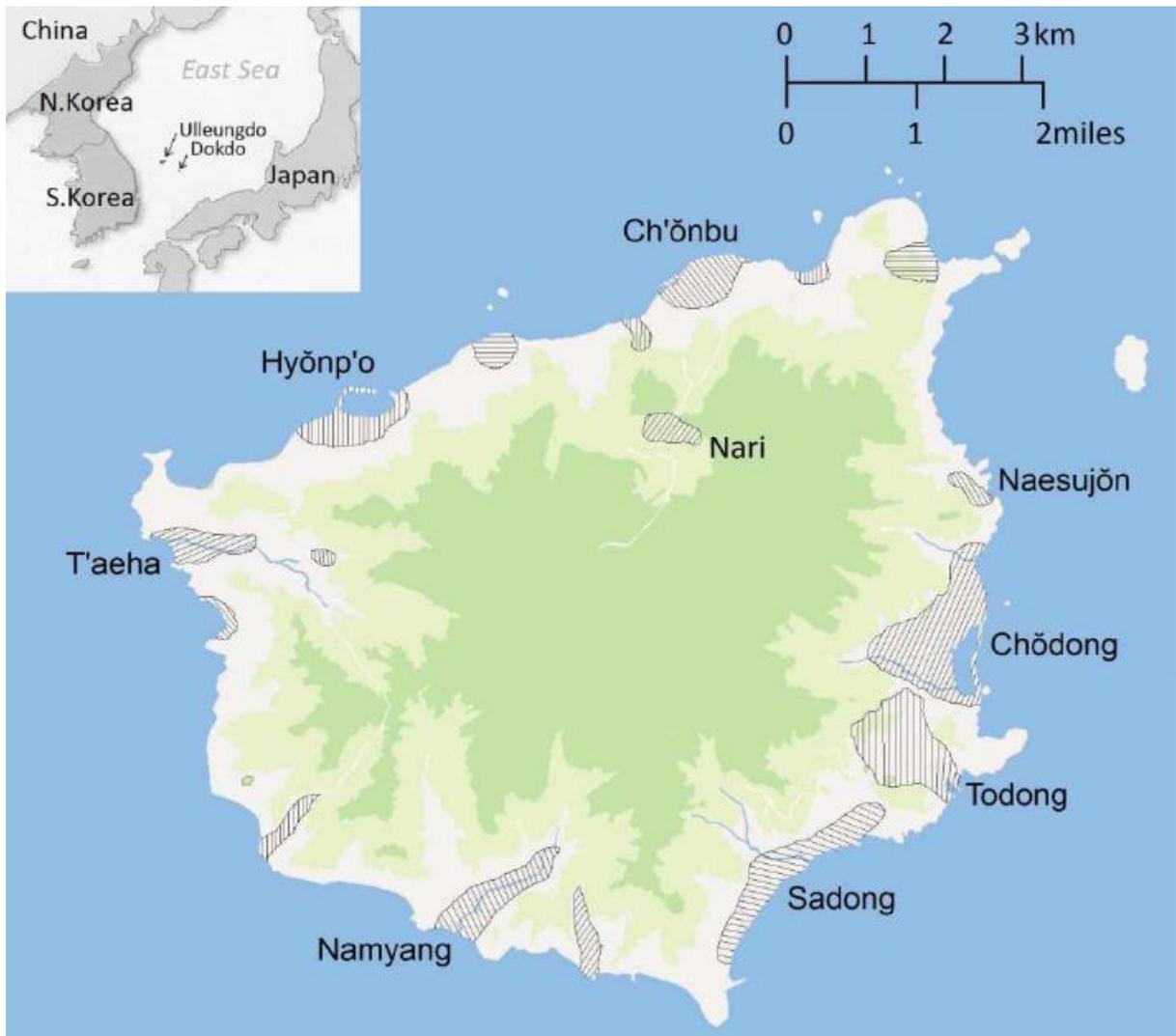
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## **Introduction**

This article explores the music-making activities of Ulleungdo<sup>1</sup>, a small Korean island about 11 km across at its broadest point, situated 120 km east of the Korean mainland, and with a population of roughly 10,000. It is the most remote piece of Korean land apart from Dokdo (a small cluster of rocks that are currently territory contested by Japan).

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**Figure 1** Maps showing Ulleungdo and Dokdo's location (top left) and Ulleungdo itself (main map). Most of Ulleungdo's communities (shaded) are situated on the coast, while the central high-altitude region remains largely uninhabited. Only those communities mentioned in the text are labelled. Maps devised by authors (based on Google Maps), 2011.

For the vast majority of mainland Koreans, Ulleungdo has very limited musical associations. In May 2011, the Korean media news reported of Yi Changhee's release of a new song called 'Ulleungdonün Naüi Ch'ön'guk' (Ulleungdo is my Paradise). Yi was a superstar singer-songwriter of the 1970s and has been a resident on the island since 2003. Many older Koreans are familiar with the Lee Sisters' 'Ulleungdo Twist', a hit from 1966 telling of the island's many pleasures and also the seasickness one goes through to get there.

A smaller number know of other songs such as ‘Ulleungdo Sarang’ (Ulleungdo Love) sung by Kim Serena, and ‘Ulleungdo Baessagong’ (Ulleungdo Sailors) sung by Son Illyŏn (see Pak Chint’ae et al., 2007: 865–912).<sup>2</sup> A tiny minority of folk music enthusiasts know of a song called ‘Ulleungdo Arirang’, created and recorded by an elderly islander Kim Chaejo and the focus of a 1990 MBC documentary film. Finally, some TV viewers might recall watching a Daegu KBS documentary film about the Ulleungdo high school rock band in 2010 (Anon. 2009). In music scholarship too, Ulleungdo has remained largely outside the field of vision. There are just a few publications relating to folksong texts by Korean literature scholars<sup>3</sup> and several recordings of islanders singing folksongs, included in the *MBC Great Series of Korean Folksongs (MBC Han’guk Minyo Taejŏn)* (Kang Sŏnggu 1995).

It is immediately evident that few (if any) of Ulleungdo’s musicians have had a substantial influence on the wider Korean musical landscape, and the same is true of the island’s artists, poets, and authors. For a variety of reasons, the island has not developed a distinctive musical identity that can be marketed externally and has remained peripheral, both culturally and geographically. Many islanders even claim that the musical life there is ‘weak’ or ‘really impoverished’, and we have often been asked: ‘Why don’t you study Chindo Island’s music instead?’ In striking contrast with Ulleungdo, Chindo is situated very close to the mainland – less than 500 metres from the South-West coast and now linked by a suspension bridge, and has long been regarded as a wellspring of culture influencing mainland music in a myriad of ways (see Howard 2004). However, as one would expect, there are musicians in the far-flung island of Ulleungdo.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it was an encounter with one

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<sup>2</sup> Ulleungdo is mentioned in passing in a number of other songs, including the widely known hit ‘Tokdonŭn Uri Ddang’ (Dokdo is Our Land), released in 1982 and sung by Chŏng Kwangt’ae, in which the very first word is ‘Ulleungdo...’

<sup>3</sup> See Pak Chint’ae et al. (2007), Ryu Chongmok (1976), and Yŏ Yŏngt’aek (1978).

<sup>4</sup> We are using the term ‘musicians’ broadly to denote individuals for whom involvement in music-making (be it singing or playing an instrument) constitutes a defining characteristic of personal

such musician that initially inspired us to undertake research into the island's musical life. In September 2008, at the entrance to a preserved ancient forest in the remote area of Nari, we came across a caretaker practising tenor saxophone along to a backing track, alone in a small booth. How did this man come to be playing that particular instrument in such a far-flung place? Assuming there were other 'hidden musicians'<sup>5</sup> in the island, how did they all cope with living so far away from Korea's cultural hot spots? Subsequent fieldwork research has revealed that, for most islanders, technology (in a variety of guises) has been critically important as a facilitator and enhancer of music-making.<sup>6</sup>

### **Some Historical Background**

'Ulleungdo' literally means 'Mysterious Island'. The island was so-named because, for most of its history, its contents have remained largely unknown and open to imaginative speculation. As a volcanic island far removed from the mainland with many areas of rough terrain, it is home to a wealth of unusual flora and fauna. Typically, according to Chu Kanghyŏn (2008: 34), early visitors' reports exoticise these, mentioning rats the size of cats, cats the size of dogs, an abundance of strange water beasts (actually seals), and so on.

The earliest official references to the island established its status as a place of mystery, consisting of brief references to a kingdom called Usan and a mythologised account of a great king's defeat by mainland forces in 512 (Chu Kanghyŏn 2008: 338–341; Kim Hodong 2007: 60). However, the Korean government judged Ulleungdo too remote and insignificant to

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identity (both for themselves and others), regardless of whether they make money out of it or not (following, e.g., Finnegan 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Finnegan's study (1989) similarly seeks to reveal the practices of musicians within the context of an 'unremarkable' community, encompassing the activities of amateurs.

<sup>6</sup> The fieldwork research for this article was conducted from 28 August to 4 September 2010 and from 16 April to 16 May 2011.

govern, eventually enforcing an ‘empty island’ policy from 1438. It was only relatively recently, in 1883, that the government finally changed its approach, acknowledging that this policy was ineffective; illegal visitors, including pirates, run-aways and fishermen from Korea and Japan, were still exploiting the island’s natural resources (Chu Kanghyŏn 2008: 75, 290–291). In addition, inspectors had provided evidence that the island was well-suited for habitation, including a map showing an inaccurately large farmable area (Song Pyŏnggi 2010: 150–151, 177). So, in 1884, the first band of 54 pioneers were shipped out, a journey of over 24 hours, lured by a promise of three years’ tax-redemption. They lived very hard lives, and their isolation and poverty is reported as having been acute. But, after further waves of immigration, the population rapidly grew to over 1000 in 1897 and over 5000 in 1910 (Chu Kanghyŏn 2008: 182–185).

Thereafter, the island’s history has been underpinned by a series of life-changing developments in transportation and communication: in 1906, an undersea telecommunications cable was laid, linking the island to the mainland; in 1912, a weekly boat trip taking just eight hours was introduced (although this was not sustained beyond the Japanese colonial period, 1910–1945); in 1939, wireless telecommunication was established, enabling limited radio reception; and in 1948, 500-ton boats (double the previous size) began service (Chu Kanghyŏn 2008: 55–58). However, older islanders recall that Ulleungdo still remained remarkably cut off from the mainland until the 1980s, which marked the end of the ‘old days’ (*yaetnal*) in most people’s views. Yun Sŏkch’an (b. 1932) remembers the ‘old days’ without fondness:

We had no money. We were poor and the boats just weren't available to us... Many people never got to visit the mainland and then died here. We couldn't even get back for urgent matters like our families' funerals<sup>7</sup> (Interview, 15 May 2011).

Meanwhile, arrivals from the mainland were intermittent and highly valued, be they visitors bringing stories and gifts, or imported goods. Most islanders lived subsistence existences, venturing out in large groups to fish the dangerous seas, and farming the inconveniently hilly ground in order to sustain themselves and their communities. In the early 1970s, the most isolated communities like T'aeha maintained life-styles that had all but died out on the mainland; houses were thatched, walls made of mud, flooring just a bamboo mat and there was no domestic electricity supply. Yi Sugil, a fourth-generation islander in his early 50s, recalls, 'In the evenings, I had to work really quickly at my homework... before the oil lamp burned out!' He also recalls the excitement when big boats docked offshore; in return for fresh water, the sailors would give the children sweets from the mainland—rare, highly prized, delicacies (Interview, 12 May 2011).

The limited flow of people and goods between Ulleungdo and the mainland coincided with a limited flow of culture. Much of the islanders' musical experience came from within the community itself: congregational hymn singing in local churches (for the growing population of Christian converts), participation in shaman rituals (for the dwindling adherents of folk religion), *p'ungmul* folk percussion bands (in a small minority of agricultural villages), and singing at social get-togethers. In the pre-radio era, songs were primarily experienced and transmitted orally, brought from the mainland within the minds of newcomers, sojourners, or relatives and then shared within the community. Some songs were transmitted over several generations and, although a distinctive Ulleungdo musical style never developed, there are

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<sup>7</sup> Traditionally in Korea, the deceased is buried two or four days after death.

evidently cases of texts being altered to a small degree (see Pak Chint'ae et al. 2007; Yŏ Yŏngt'aek 1978), before subsequently disappearing from practical existence.<sup>8</sup> As Hong Inch'ŏl (b. 1946) explained, the experience of mainland cultural products was periodic and transient, providing only a small window into what was happening far away:

People came over two or three times a year carrying a film projector and two or three films. They'd travel around from village to village... Everybody assembled to watch, crammed into the little spaces... It was so exciting for us! And then they would go back to the mainland... It went on like that until the early 70s (Interview, 4 May 2011).

In 1964, the island's own KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) tower became operational, receiving a single radio channel from Taegu (Korea's third largest city on the mainland) and re-transmitting it across the island. This transformed the islanders' musical experiences irrevocably, displacing the primacy of oral transmission and enabling immediate access to current mainland fashions. The songs projected over the air were eagerly apprehended by the islanders who, no doubt, associated them (and the technology that brought them) with modern comforts. One old woman gave a typical response to the question 'What music did you sing in the old days?' 'The same as the mainland: popular songs (*yuhaengga*) and folk songs (*minyo*)—anything that we liked off the radio' (Interview, 29 August 2010). Like the goods that were shipped over from the mainland, the broadcast material was limited in variety and yet the islanders soon had ample opportunities to hear it. From the early 1970s, as part of President Park Chung-hee's nationwide New Village Movement (*saemaŭl undong*) aimed at modernising Korea, speakers were hung up around the villages and the broadcasts were

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<sup>8</sup> None of the island's old people could identify a fellow islander who could remember any but the most well-known pan-Korean fare, such as various versions of 'Arirang'.

transmitted far and wide: folk songs, popular songs, New Village Movement songs, and news, with the aim of motivating productivity and promoting unity of culture and vision across the territories. The advent of KBS television in Ulleungdo in 1975 supported the process further (although few could afford their own set in the early days).<sup>9</sup>

During the 1980s, the flow of people and culture between the island and mainland was greatly augmented. Many poorer islanders moved to the mainland to work in newly opened car- and ship-making factories and, at the same time, there was a large influx of entrepreneurs, eager to develop and profit from the island's tourist industry by establishing restaurants, shops, tour agencies, motels, and so on. In 1986, daily services of 2300-ton ferries began (Chu Kanghyōn 2008: 55–58), further spurring the newly flourishing tourist industry while also enabling booms in the fishing and farming industries, particularly in the large-scale export of cuttlefish and, sometime later, rare medicinal mountain vegetables. Between that time and the present day, the continued success of these industries, further advancements in travel and telecommunications, and substantial government subsidies have transformed Ulleungdo into a wealthy territory, engendering a complete transformation in the islanders' way of life. The original steely self-sufficiency has given way to a culture of mainland-dependence wherein people rely more than ever on the mainland to meet their needs and desires.

The flow of people and culture now occurs in both directions, with islanders, tourists, and TV, radio, and broadband signals travelling back and forth with greater ease. All but the most impoverished and unfit inhabitants make regular trips to the mainland to binge on concerts and films, get broken things fixed, buy new things, and eat in fancy restaurants. During the severe winters, most islanders head to the mainland, the wealthiest relocating to

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<sup>9</sup> See: [http://ulleung.grandculture.net/Contents/Index?contents\\_id=GC01501019](http://ulleung.grandculture.net/Contents/Index?contents_id=GC01501019) (last accessed 29 April 2012)

their second homes in mainland cities and others (especially the elderly) staying with mainland relatives. There has also been an increase in longer-term departures and arrivals. After leaving school, almost all youngsters head to the mainland for university or professions, although many return later in life to establish businesses or go into administration. At the same time, there is a steady influx of mainlanders who come to work on fixed-term temporary contracts; in fact, to counter stagnation and corruption and promote equal opportunities, it is government policy that all school teachers (including music teachers), middle-ranking civil servants, and most military officials can only stay for a maximum of three years. Other mainlanders come to build new lives in Ulleungdo, generally weary of stressful city living.

And yet, the island's geographical location and the forces of nature continue to present obstacles in people's lives. On the map and in the mind, mainlanders and islanders generally agree that Ulleungdo is still 'far away'. Everybody who knows the place at all well recounts tales of plans being obstructed by last-minute boat cancellations—still quite a frequent and wholly unpredictable occurrence—and many claim to be near-obsessional about checking the timetables, even if they are not involved in the island's main industries and have no plans to travel themselves. As Pastor Ch'oe Sŭnggho explains:

Every morning when I get up I check the weather forecast and boats... It's a habit... Are they coming? Are they going? And when they don't, I feel trapped and depressed. It isn't just me that has this habit... I know that others feel like I do (Interview, 8 May 2011).

Although much diminished, the island's enduring conditions of remoteness, insularity, peripherality and, of course, smallness, continue to have profound implications for the islanders' musical experiences, most obviously engendering limited resources and diversity, and a narrow skills base. Unsurprisingly, these same musical symptoms are also highlighted

in other ethnomusicological case studies similarly addressing rather small and remote islands, such as the studies included in Kevin Dawe's *Island Musics* (2004) and other studies referenced in the concluding discussion of this article. In the case of Ulleungdo, however, these symptoms (which are invariably regarded as 'problems' by the islanders) have been greatly compounded by the increased comings-and-goings of the island's inhabitants: it has become difficult for groups to sustain musical activities, develop skills, and forge stable musical identities when their members are often absent and change so frequently. In striking contrast with other islands where cultural tourism has encouraged the fostering of local groups (see, for example, Harnish 2005, Howard 2004, Picard 1998), in Ulleungdo, the industry has consistently been ecological in focus, cementing the island's identity as a distinctly natural haven. The only mainlanders who come to Ulleungdo specifically for musical reasons are the professionals who are invited to perform in the island's only concert hall (The One Heart Centre, opened in 2008) or at festivals such as the annual Cuttle-fish Festival (Ojingŏ Ch'ukje).

Despite these various obstacles, amateur music-making exists on Ulleungdo in various guises: church choirs and congregational singing, sometimes with accompanying keyboard players or bands (typically comprised of drumkit, guitar, bass, keyboard); a variety of percussion ensembles specialising in *p'ungmul* (traditional village-style), *samullori* (a concert version of *p'ungmul*), or *nant'a* (fusing contemporary Western and Korean styles and instruments); saxophone playing; a school rock group; and karaoke. In all these realms of music-making, people have depended on electronic equipment to a striking extent, generally to provide far more than mere amplification. Here is an example of technoculture in which 'technology is not merely a mediating agent but rather a fully implicated element of cultural production and a significant cultural resource in its own right' (Waksman 2004: 158). Rather than explore activities in a group-by-group or genre-by-genre sequence or rashly attempt an

all-encompassing survey of the island's musical goings-on, this article will focus on the predominant types of music-facilitating/enhancing machine on the island, examining what they are (the ontological dimension), how they are applied in specific areas of musical life (the pragmatic), and how they shape people's experiences of music (the phenomenological) (see Lysloff and Gay 2003: 7).

### **Karaoke: 'Where else can we go?'**

Until the mid-1990s, a small number of the island's entertainment venues featured live musical performance, the most popular being: the Sõnil Nightclub (Sõnil Hoegwan) in Todong, the island's administrative and tourist centre; the Korea Centre (Han'gukkwan) in Chõdong, the island's residential and fishing centre; and the Marina Hotel in Sadong, a picturesque village situated right next to Todong. These venues hired musicians from the mainland to play Korean and Western pop favorites. The last saxophonist of the Sõnil Nightclub, Wõn Tõkchong (b. 1941), recalls:

I first moved to Ullegundo in 1982... I had played saxophone in middle school and then in the American army, clubs, and cabaret... But then my first business failed—in computer study aids—and I came here to start a new life, playing the saxophone again, in the Sõnil Nightclub with my little band; just sax, bass, guitar and drums. At that time, I remember, it was always packed... with quite a lot of tourists. People drank and danced, sometimes paid a little money, made a request, and sang at the mic... Ha ha! (Interview, 23 April 2011)

However, by 1992, the club's fortunes had dramatically changed and it was closed down and, within a few years, the other live band venues also faced a critical loss of clientele. It was the appearance of the karaoke machine to the island in 1991 that spelled the demise of live music venues.



**Figure 2** The entrance to Ulleungdo's first ever 'song room' venue, the Beach Song Practice Place, with the original owner at her drinks stall. Photograph by the authors, 2011.

Ulleungdo's first-ever karaoke establishment, the Beach Song Practice Place (Pich'i Norae Yönsüpchang), is located right next to the harbour in Todong. It continues to attract customers today and is still run by the original owner, who also sells drinks from a small

stand outside the front. From the very beginning, the Beach Song Practice Place was configured as so-called ‘song rooms’ (*noraebang*)—commonly known as ‘karaoke boxes’ in Japan (see Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998: 1–29, Xun and Tarocco 2007: 35–37), in which individual parties book out private rooms, paying by the hour. Each room has its own programmable karaoke machine with microphones, amplifier and speakers, and a screen to display the song texts, and each is furnished with seating and a table for refreshments and song menus (catalogued by artist and title). Currently, the Beach Song Practice Place only has three rooms but, in 1991, it had ten and was allegedly permanently filled with customers. At that time, ‘song rooms’ were still very new on the mainland too, the first opening in Pusan in April 1991 (Chŏng Kanghyŏn 2011).<sup>13</sup> The owner recalls that, in the first year, she made 100 million *wŏn* (approx. £50,000) (Interview, 9 May 2011). Novelty aside, it is easy to see why the ‘song room’ format was such a hit back then and why it continues to be popular today: one can choose from a huge list of tracks to express (and play with) individual and group identities, reconnecting with personal and shared memories in a variety of creative ways while the backing track provides melodic guidance, screen shows the song text, and reverb smooths out undesirable vocal qualities. Because the event happens in a privately-hired room, there are no outsiders to interfere with the in-group dynamics and make shy people feel uncomfortable.<sup>14</sup>

Following the success of the Beach Song Practice Place, there was a boom in the establishment of ‘song rooms’ in Ulleungdo, as distinct from single-stage karaoke bars that have never existed on the island. In many cases, existing venues were adapted. So, for example, the aforementioned Korea Centre (Han’gukkwon) in Chŏdong was turned into the ‘Hong Kong’, later becoming the hugely popular ‘Noblesse’ of the current day. But many

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Song Toyŏng (1997) for analysis of the early spread of karaoke culture in Korea.

<sup>14</sup> For further analysis of karaoke’s appeal, see Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998: 1–29, Xun and Tarocco 2007, and Drew 2001.

other venues were created from scratch. Currently, there are 15 ‘song rooms’ in the island: seven in Todong, four in Chōdong, two in Namyang, and two in Ch’ōnbu. Some of these, located in the major harbours, are primarily visited by tourists while waiting for their homeward-bound boats. Others are located further away down back-alleys and are more for locals, for example, Fantasy (Hwansang) and One Love (Hansarang) in Todong and the Noblesse in Chōdong. There are some avid local enthusiasts: one old man we met, who owns a shop selling Ulleungdo edible produce to tourists, showed us his extensive collection of recordings of old Korean pop classics, all sung by himself. The song room that he frequents is one of those that will record your renditions on request.

Meanwhile, the original Beach Song Practice Place remains distinctive, not only because of its old-fashioned décor and colourful owner but also because it mainly caters for the island’s school children. However, the owner explained that the business’s future is by no means secure:

I’ve been renting this place... but now the owner wants to have something else here. So now the students constantly ask me: ‘If you close down, grandmother, where can we go?’ Because, you see, there are only two no-alcohol no-smoking places here and the other one doesn’t have new songs.<sup>16</sup> I go to Yongsan [Korea’s ‘digital valley’ in Seoul] every two months to collect new songs onto my digital chips<sup>17</sup>... It is a problem: there is no place for the students to release their stress. I thought that maybe the Ulleung Cultural Centre could convert an empty room into a karaoke place for the students. That would be great... I

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<sup>16</sup> There are three main categories of song room venue in Korea: alcohol-free venues (*norae yōnsūbjang*), alcohol-serving venues (*tallan chujōm*), and venues that also serve food and provide women companions (*yuhŭng chujōm*). While the first type is licensed under the Department of Culture and Sports, the others are licensed under the Department of Food and Hygiene.

<sup>17</sup> Since Asa’s launch of the ‘Dream 21’ karaoke machine in 1999, there has been a proliferation of internet-connected machines that can download new songs soon after their release (An Chōnghun 2009: 18). The owner of the Beach Song Practice Place still uses older models.

even talked to the Catholic priest about this problem, asking if he would like to have my machines if I close but he said ‘No’. (Interview, 9 May 2011).

In addition to the island’s ‘song rooms’, there are also non-commercial venues in which karaoke machines are used for music-making. The main police station has its very own song room, for exclusive use by the island’s police officers. Officer Pak Hyogŭn explained to us that, in his lunch breaks, he eats as quickly as he can to leave plenty of time for practicing saxophone to the accompaniment of the machine (3 September 2010). Every community has at least one daycentre for old people (*kyŏngnodang*), where friends chat, play games, eat together, and sing, and most include one of these machines, generally bought by pooling resources. One old man that we met in a tiny daycentre in Chŏdong said that he and his friends had amassed £800 to get their package but larger centres can pay over double that (Interview, 3 September 2010). One of the largest daycentres, located in Hyŏnp’o in the north of the island, acquired its particularly high-tech machine in 2009. Every two months, the elderly visitors hold a song-singing event at which there can be as many as 100 people, passing around the microphone and performing for one another—generally Korean hits from long ago. At another day centre in Todong, a large group of old women stressed the machine’s importance in their lives:

In the old days, there was no music... At weddings, we’d hit rhythms out on a washing tub and sing... It was like that. But these days we travel together to Taegu [on the mainland] for group song classes and then when we return we sing the songs we’ve learned together with this machine here. It’s very good!... That granny over there sings just like a professional now. Would you like to hear? (Interview, 2 September 2010).

A final context in which one might encounter a karaoke machine is Kim Yōnggon’s taxi. Kim has rigged up a system comprised of the machine itself, microphone, small screen (attached to the roof), and a full menu of tunes. He told us that the machine was mainly used by tourists and seemed somewhat bemused that we considered the set-up so extraordinary—another indication of how pervasive karaoke-related technological innovation is in South Korea.



**Figure 3** The interior of Kim Yōnggon’s taxi, showing his karaoke machine, with screen and song menu.

Photograph by the authors, 2011

But is the island’s karaoke culture different from that of the mainland? While there is no evidence that people behave differently in the song rooms, karaoke must surely have greater presence in the islanders’ consciousnesses. In conversation, many adults echoed the

sentiments of the recreationally-limited children, pointing out that karaoke rooms are essentially the *only* form of entertainment venue on the island; the few nightclubs are prohibitively expensive and cater for tourist parties, the One Heart Centre only offers a small number of shows per year, and there are no screen golf venues, *jjimjilbang* (sauna and relaxation complexes), cinemas, shopping malls, or any of the other recreational venues popular on the mainland. It is a deep-rooted practice in Korea that, over the course of a social evening, the party should proceed from one venue to perhaps several others but as the owner of the motel where we stayed put it: ‘After you’ve eaten with your friends, you’ve got to go somewhere, haven’t you? Where else can we go?’ (Interview, 9 May 2011). Given that very few of the restaurants and tea rooms (*tabang*) feature music at all (even in the background), for many islanders, song rooms must constitute indispensable resources for communal musical experience.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Accompanying Machine: ‘My Teacher’**

Another type of backing machine is used specifically by solo instrumentalists and small ensembles; this is simply referred to as an ‘accompanying machine’ (*panjugi*). As with the standard karaoke set-up, the accompanying machine provides a multi-part backing to the solitary performer, while amp settings provide reverb and other effects, ensuring that tones are smooth and tapered with a sound quality approaching that encountered in professional recordings. The overall effect is flattering to the performer. However, in comparison with the karaoke machine, the accompanying machine, which superficially resembles a lap-top computer, is quite a sophisticated digital processor, allowing a great deal of scope to import

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<sup>19</sup> In smaller countryside communities on the Korean mainland, it is common for restaurants to have their own karaoke machines. On Ulleungdo, however, with so many specialist song room venues, we only encountered one large restaurant that had its own machine.

or edit files and manipulate sounds; the user can easily transpose material, change tempi, loop sections and more. Crucially, the machine also displays staff notation with a moving pointer indicating exactly the playback point in the score. In Ulleungdo, this type of machine is generally used in conjunction with the saxophone, which is the most widely-played solo melodic instrument on the island (apart from the piano, which is played almost exclusively by primary school children).<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 4** Caretaker Kyōn Chaeshik practising saxophone with an accompanying machine. Photograph by the authors, 2011

The saxophone craze started on the mainland in the mid-late 1990s following a number of appearances in the mass media that forged strong connections between the

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<sup>20</sup> The authors have been unable to find any research whatsoever addressing this type of accompanying machine.

instrument and particular qualities and emotions. One particularly notable example occurred in the hit soap opera ‘Sarangül küdae p’umane’ (‘Love in your heart’) in 1994. In this story, a millionaire’s handsome son (played by Ch’a Inp’yo) falls in love with a beautiful girl who works in his department store and, in a famous scene, expresses his emotions to her by playing the saxophone. By 2000, many thousands of saxophone circles (*tonghohoe*) had been established across the mainland—groups of saxophone enthusiasts meeting on- and off-line to practise, perform, and socialise.<sup>21</sup> However, it wasn’t until 2007 that such a group was established on Ulleungdo, demonstrating a cultural lag that is often discernible, largely deriving from the island’s smallness and remoteness.

The initiators of the island’s saxophone-playing craze both came from the mainland. Söng Han’gyo (b. 1961) moved to a particularly idyllic mountainous location in 2004 to become a farmer after retiring from a stressful job working as an administrator in Taegu Train station. While visiting the mainland in the winter time, he discovered the saxophone (together with the accompanying machine):

The saxophonist Kim Saeuk often plays by the beach in P’ohang. One evening in 2005, my wife and I were having a beer there when I suddenly realised how well his saxophone sound matched with the sound of the waves. I was deeply moved... and the next morning I discovered where his institution was and enrolled there immediately. From 10 until 10 every day, I practised there for three months, finishing two practice books, which others usually take six months to do. I only stopped to order noodles for lunch and rice soup for dinner... Then I bought a new tenor and an accompanying machine and brought them back here with me to Ulleungdo. Inspired by Kim, I started playing in the Little Park (So

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<sup>21</sup> See the website ‘*Saxophone nara*’ (saxophone country), on which a large proportion of Korea’s saxophone circles post details about their history, activities, and membership: <http://www.saxophonenara.net> (last accessed 29 April 2012). The authors have been unable to find any research whatsoever regarding Korea’s saxophone circles, in either Korean or English.

Kongwŏn) next to the harbour [in Todong], driving down with all that equipment by myself, whatever the weather and if people were there or not (Interview, 10 May 2011).

Kim Tŏkshik came to the island in 2007 as a school technology teacher. He was already quite an accomplished saxophone player, having been learning since 2002, and was pleased to discover a fellow enthusiast in Sŏng. Using his existing connections to the Ulleungdo Education Office, Kim initiated a series of ‘life learning’ saxophone classes for adults. The classes were popular and, by the end of the year, 12 of the island’s new saxophonists (plus Kim and Sŏng) had established a circle dedicated to the practice and performance of saxophone music, constituted under the official name of ‘The Ulleungdo Saxophone Cultural Voluntary Service Group’ (Ulleungdo Saxophone Munhwa Chawŏn Pongsadan). On its formation, the circle successfully secured funding from the Ulleung Cultural Centre (Ulleung Munhwawŏn), most of which was used to acquire an accompanying machine, together with amp, mic, and other accessories. This equipment remains permanently set up in the circle’s practice space, located in a derelict building beside a graveyard on the outskirts of Todong.<sup>22</sup>

Like other musical groups founded by temporary visiting teachers, the saxophone circle experienced difficulties when Kim Tŏkshik returned to the mainland after his three-year contract ended. Almost half of the original members gave up, one by one. However, the others continued and, subsequently, new learners have joined. All of those who we spoke to emphasised the enormous support provided by the accompanying machine, explaining that they never played without it.<sup>23</sup> Most bought their own personal machine as soon as they had developed a basic level of commitment. Kyŏn Chaeshik (b. 1957) (see Figure 4)—the forest

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<sup>22</sup> Sŏng Han’gyo jokes that sometimes when he comes to practise by himself, ghosts come in from the graveyard to watch.

<sup>23</sup> The aforementioned Sŏnil Nightclub saxophonist Wŏn Tŏkchong is an exception; although he rarely performs in public, he still practises for several hours each week, never using an accompanying machine. Wŏn’s career as a saxophonist predated the existence of such technology.

caretaker who we had encountered in 2008—stressed that having a good machine was absolutely essential:

The machine and the saxophone: together, they form the foundation of music-making. So you have to have lots of money if you want to play. My wife gave me £1000 to start this hobby but when you play and play some more, your ears open up [become more sensitive]... and then you have to upgrade. Over the past years, I've tried all sorts of things to get more money. One main thing is making *sōkpu* [ornamental displays made of rocks and bonsai plants] to sell to tourists... I used to spend all my money on gambling, drinking, and singing in the nightclubs... Not now! My life has turned around 180 degrees (Interview, 2 May 2011).

Meanwhile, Hong Inch'öl, who owns a souvenir shop in Todong selling juniper-wood products and his own paintings of Ulleungdo's scenery, emphasised the machine's importance for his own learning in no uncertain terms, claiming: 'The accompanying machine is my teacher' (Interview, 4 May 2011).

While the saxophone circle's members are invited to perform a brief turn at most of the island's annual festivals—supplementing the professionals invited from the mainland and representing local music-making—their saxophone activities mainly revolve around the performances that take place in the Little Park in Todong, continuing the tradition established by Sōng Han'gyo. Every Friday and Saturday night from 6:30pm until 8:30pm (from May until October), the instrument's distinctive sound, together with accompanying backing track, can be heard throughout much of the town as the saxophonists take turns at the mic. They mainly play old favourites from the popular music genre known as '*tūrotū*' ('trot'), a term describing the music's prevailing rhythm but also connoting characteristic features of orchestration, vocalisation, performance practice, and so on. With origins in the Japanese

colonial period (1910–1945), this Koreanised offshoot of *enka* is the favourite pop style of the island’s ageing population, older tourists, and the saxophonists themselves.<sup>24</sup> Some of the saxophonists, including Söng, then build up excitement by moving on to disco versions of well-known Korean folksongs before closing with slow ballads.

In every live-with-playback performance, there is a perceivable reconfiguration of the typical soloist/accompanist roles; although it is the person with the microphone who renders the main melody, it is the machine that dictates the progress of the music from note to note. Because of current technical limitations, the soloist unavoidably has to ‘follow’ the accompanist far more than he or she would have to if all parties were human. However, it is evidently largely up to the performer to determine the degree of role blurring. To gain the listeners’ attentive focus (and, hopefully, their admiration), one can attempt ‘perfect mimesis’, an immaculate imitation of the original recording artist’s version (Drew 2001: 19–20; Keil 1984: 94); one can indulge in ‘mimetic overacting’, enhancing distinctive qualities of the original, often with humorous effect (Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998: 12); or one can deliberately diverge from the original in imaginative ways, thereby making the song one’s own. In addition, one can employ gesture and dance to supplement commentary to the musical content and, at the same time, enhance direct communication with listeners, or one can simply turn down the volume of the accompaniment. Rob Drew (2001) identifies extensive use of such strategies in single-stage karaoke bars in America.

Of course, codes of karaoke conduct vary from culture to culture. In contrast with Drew’s karaoke singers, the Ulleungdo saxophonists choose not to challenge the leadership of the ‘accompanying’ machine at all in their concerts. Although they acknowledge a compulsion to cultivate their own personal ‘sound’ or ‘voice’, their interpretations stray very

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<sup>24</sup> For more details about the history of this genre, its stylistic features, and especially its cultural associations, see Son Min-Jung 2006 and 2009.

little from the prescribed standard: they avoid using eye- and body- gestures to engage directly with the audience instead keeping their eyes firmly fixed on the screen's scrolling notation and making minimal extraneous body movement; and they turn up the machine's volume to a high level. There is little reason to suppose that the saxophonists' approach will change markedly as they become more technically advanced performers; this particular relationship between machine and man is by now deeply entrenched and it is experienced routinely by the performers as a source of personal security and, more importantly, as a winning formula. We have seen some highly successful performance events unfold in the Little Park, audience members committing all their energies to dancing and singing along, working together with the saxophonists and the machine to generate an intensely socially effervescent atmosphere. Because the saxophonist doesn't steal the limelight, people can concentrate just as much on one another—creating the ultimate party. Some show their appreciation by dancing up to the front and laying cash on the accompanying machine, which is an intriguing update of the former tradition in folk performances where they would have threaded the money around the strings of an accompanying drum or placed it on an outstretched fan.

Some of the island's saxophonists perform in a rather different context: the Sunday morning service in Ch'ŏnbu Baptist Church, led by Pastor An Jungjin. Ch'ŏnbu is a small community located in the north of the island, far from the saxophone circle's practice room in Todong, and home to both Pastor An and the aforementioned caretaker Kyŏn Chaeshik. Pastor An first started learning the saxophone in 2006, inspired by hearing and meeting the Christian saxophonist Kim Yŏngil. The following year, he encountered Kyŏn Chaeshik listening to 'trot' music in his caretaker's office and, feeling that the style did not match the idyllic surroundings, lent him a CD of Kim Yŏngil's hymn adaptations together with a spare saxophone. Kyŏn's progress took off when he joined Kim Tŏkshik's classes later that year,

buying his first personal accompanying machine and filling his solitary caretaking hours with uninterrupted practice. Since then, his saxophone skills have become widely recognised throughout the north of the island, to the extent that he now has his own pupils, regularly receives invites to perform at parties, and rarely travels the 45-minute journey to Todong to meet with ‘The Ulleungdo Saxophone Cultural Voluntary Service Group’. In this way, a new saxophone circle has been established, differing from the other not only in regards to membership and geographic location, but also in its incorporation of Christian ideology and repertoire. Accordingly, since 2009, the circle’s focal performance event has been the Sunday morning service in An’s church, playing under the title of the ‘Saxophone Praise Team’ (Saxophone Ch’anyangdan). Although, in this case, the musicians perform hymns instead of trot, here too, their attention remains firmly focused on the machine. Pastor An told us: ‘We once had a go at playing without the accompanying machine. The sound was really feeble... We won’t do that again’ (Interview, 1 May 2011)



**Figure 5** The ‘Saxophone Praise Team’ of Ch’õnbu Baptist Church, led by Kyõn Chaeshik (second from left) and Pastor An Jungjin (far right). Photograph courtesy of An Jungjin, 2010.

## **The Hymn Player: ‘Our little helper’**

There is a very strong Christian presence throughout Ulleungdo with a total of 38 churches encompassing a huge array of different denominations. In most cases, the churches are not just forums for worship but close-knit mutually supportive social communities. And they have also long been forums for encouraging music-making.

In the larger communities of Todong and Chōdong, the churches tend to have their own keyboard instruments and people who play them—often the owners of the island’s piano schools, their older pupils, or amateur enthusiasts originally from the mainland. Some also have their own bands to accompany the hymn singing. Outside of the larger communities, however, many churches have considerably smaller congregations and, therefore, receive far less donation money. The poorest leaders even rely upon Salvation Army hand-outs to get them through the winters. Such churches also have limited access to musicianship. The tiny Catholic church located in Ch’ōnbu—very close to Pastor An’s thriving Baptist Church—simply makes do without any accompaniment, the small congregation singing hymns a cappella in unison. Others rely on hymn-playing machines, also referred to as ‘accompanying machines’ (*panjugi*), which can be bought for a relatively small sum (from £200). This is the case, for example, with Sadong Baptist Church and Kallyōng Church in Okch’ōn, both in remote locations.

The hymn-playing machine is a simple digital playback device that is only able to play the accompaniments for standard hymn repertoire, stored on memory cards (each holding about 400 hymns). As with the karaoke machine, one generally plugs the machine into an amp but, in this case, there is no microphone to sing into or screen indicating the song texts.

Nevertheless, these machines have become increasingly sophisticated over the years.<sup>26</sup> The pictures below show three successive models of ‘hymn player’ by the leading Korean manufacturer, Michael; the first (only about 10 years old) is chunky and offers little opportunity for manipulating playback; the second is more streamlined; and the most recent version is touch screen with many additional functions—a progression that is, of course, paralleled in other technology.



**Figure 6** Three generations of hymn player produced by Michael

Pastor An evidently relies on the machine quite heavily:

We don't have anyone here in Ch'õnbu who can play the keyboard. All the young people have gone to the mainland... So we use the hymn machine instead... if we're not playing our saxophones. I also run a free school for old people... and all those machines are really useful for teaching them (Interview, 3 September 2010).

Some of the wealthier churches with larger congregations also make occasional use of hymn-playing machines but only when their usual human accompanists are unavailable. In one of

<sup>26</sup> Again, the authors have been unable to find any research into this technology and its applications, either in English or Korean. However, Xun and Tarocco do discuss the similarities between hymn singing and the karaoke experience (without mentioning the machine itself) (2007: 22–25).

the island's most thriving church communities, the Cheil Presbyterian Church in Todong, Pastor Ch'oe Sūngho makes use of it in his 5am morning services, when Yi Chōngi—the church's long-term accompanist and owner of the island's oldest piano school (established in 1980)—is still sleeping. Highlighting the machine's usefulness and diminutive size, he referred to it as 'our little helper' (Interview, 8 May 2011).

In many of Ulleungdo's churches, the use of technology extends beyond accompanying machines to include sophisticated PA systems and computers wired up to project religious imagery, information, hymn words, and notations onto a large screen. Pastor Chōng Ch'iho of Todong Baptist Church, which has one the island's biggest church communities, was keen to point out:

It was *me* that first introduced computers and projectors to Ulleungdo... about ten years ago I think it was. Of course, they had those things on the mainland a while before... and I wanted to do the same as they do there. But some people really didn't like it. They thought it was a waste of money and didn't like the change. Now everybody's got them, of course (Interview, 29 August 2010).

Sophisticated technological equipment has also been embraced by the island's Buddhist temples; for example, the monks in Taewōnsa (the island's oldest temple, in Todong) and Podōksa (the island's smallest temple, in Chōdong) similarly employ microphones and amps to augment their chanting (adding a hint of reverb) and, on special days in the Buddhist calendar, both temples project recordings of Buddhist music through loudspeakers.

### **Internet and Satellite Connections: 'We've become inseparable'**

In South Korea, 95% of households have easy access to wireless broadband (more than in any other OECD countries<sup>27</sup>) and high status and importance is attached to having fast, efficient, and up-to-date operating systems (Ahonen and O'Reilly 2007). Ulleungdo is no different from the mainland in this regard and, even in remoter communities like Ch'önbu, people are well-accustomed to using such equipment in connection with a wide range of activities. For many people, computer usage is now integrated with music-making from a young age. Writing in 2007, Yi Kich'öl, a teacher in Ch'önbu's primary school, pointed out that every single child in the school (roughly 40 pupils) had a broadband-enabled computer at home, while the school itself possessed many work-stations; at the same time, according to Yi, none of the children had a musical instrument in their home. In response to these circumstances, Yi developed a computer-based music teaching method, in which the children would use simple MIDI software to listen to sound recordings, compose their own simple pieces, and share their creations (Yi Kich'öl 2007: 286–291).<sup>29</sup> The piano teacher Yi Chöngi identified similar methods in the larger schools of Todong and Chödong although she expressed grave concerns about them, revealing herself to be a rare skeptic of technology's effects (the only one that we encountered on Ulleungdo):

These days, children don't know children's songs anymore: they prefer pop songs and computer games. They don't even know how to sing without a backing track. They should learn instruments—real sounds not artificial ones—and play in nature... Even church music is becoming artificial (Interview, 22 April, 2011).

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<sup>27</sup> See the OECD Broadband Portal: <http://www.oecd.org/sti/ict/broadband> (last accessed 29 April 2012)

<sup>29</sup> Fred Kersten (2004) details MIDI computer-based teaching methods that are much the same, isolating similar objectives and advantages.

On Ulleungdo, a primary function of the internet is to get information from and communicate with people on the mainland, for example, in the contexts of shopping, blogging to advertise accommodation for tourists, and hobby-based social networking. The saxophonist Sŏng Han'gyo explained to us that he had of course connected to the internet as soon as he had established his new home, situated in one of the island's most remote mountainous areas, only reachable by four-wheeled drive vehicle. He says that he now depends upon the internet for all three of the aforementioned purposes and he devotes much time and effort into maintaining his own Daum Café website, one of the several million hosted by the South Korean portal Daum (Ich'ae 2003). Here, he also includes videos of himself playing saxophone with accompanying machine. Even Kyŏn Chaeshik's booth at the entrance to the ancient forest is internet-enabled. Because there are no instrument shops on the island, the internet is particularly indispensable for the sourcing, comparison, and purchase of instruments and accessories. Kyŏn, for example, obtained all his equipment through the internet, beginning with his first, extraordinarily cheap Chinese-manufactured instrument, which turned out to be almost unplayable.

Kyŏn, Sŏng, and many other Ulleungdo saxophonists explained that they regularly visit Korean saxophone-oriented social networking sites, not only for guidance about accessories and equipment but also for ideas about musical interpretation. Many singled out the website 'Saxophone nara'<sup>30</sup> (saxophone country) as being especially useful because it is visited by so many enthusiasts. Some mentioned that, ever since their teacher Kim Tŏkshik left the island in 2009, they have particularly benefitted from online lessons, in which experts provide detailed explanations with demonstrations. Police Officer Pak Hyogŭn explained:

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<sup>30</sup> See: <http://www.saxophonenara.net> (last accessed 29 April 2012)

When Kim Tökshik left, we tried learning from each other but that was really difficult. And then we found the internet site ‘Music field’<sup>31</sup> which has lessons on it, costing about £60 for six months..., with lessons lasting about 15 minutes. We pooled our money and subscribed, sharing the ID and password... The tenor sax player Kim Chöngüm teaches very well! I think we learnt about 20 pieces like that (Interview, 3 September 2010).

Undoubtedly then, the internet is vitally important for the island’s saxophonists, connecting them with kindred spirits on the mainland, ‘overcoming the distance’ between Ulleungdo and the many thousands of Korean saxophonists across the water (Jones 2000: 218). It provides avenues for them to challenge their marginality (Lange 2001: 137); by chatting in web forums, publicising their own activities to a broader audience (in a few cases), or simply by reading about others’ activities, they become members of an enormous affinity community, in which members are bound not so much by geographical proximity but by sharing ‘straightforward aesthetic and personal preferences’ (Shelemay 2011: 373; see also Lysloff 2003: 256). As indicated by portal name ‘Saxophone nara’ (saxophone country), this community stretches across geographical boundaries and traditional regional rivalries to incorporate people of all ages, both sexes, and from many walks of life; there seem to be very few diacritica in operation (Shelemay 2011: 373), with the only obvious boundary being that of nation, as demonstrated by the exclusive use of the Korean language. Within this broad social network, it is obviously up to the individual to decide how engaged they become, either establishing ‘real connectedness’ through two-way communication (for example, via participation in

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<sup>31</sup> See: <http://www.musicfield.co.kr> (last accessed 29 April 2012). This website has the catchy and incisive slogan ‘People making culture’.

forums) or allowing themselves to be passive, invisible community members (Wong 2003: 134; see also Lysloff 2003: 236; Shelemay 2011: 364).<sup>32</sup>

Another musical circle that makes extensive use of the internet is ‘band club’ (*baendūbu*), a student-run group based in the island’s only high school (in Chōdong), who play rock music on electric guitars, bass guitar, drumkit, keyboards, and vocals. The group performs for the graduation ceremony, annual school festival, and sometimes other events too. When it was established in 2004, the group had five members but has now grown to have 12, becoming particularly popular since the making of ‘Wandering Children’ (‘Paramūi aidūl’)<sup>33</sup>, a Taegu KBS documentary film about the band and its members, made in 2009 and broadcast in two parts on national television in 2010. While following the students’ daily lives and preparation for the Taejōn high school rock band competition, the film clearly shows that they are frustrated by the lack of entertainment options. Accordingly, the students told us that the group was extremely important, providing focus and ambition. However, they perceived a general lack of support and understanding from adults; ‘whenever we go to practise, we receive looks because we should be studying’ (Interview, 16 May 2011).

This lack of adult support for the ‘band club’ extends to a complete lack of musical tuition, which the students unanimously agreed resulted in them feeling limited in what they could achieve. The students’ discomfort at being left to their own devices is not surprising when one considers the nature of Korean education. In accordance with the enduring influence of Confucianism, students are still accustomed to learning in a systematic fashion from authority figures, fulfilling tightly prescribed tasks according to clearly delineated rules; they are therefore ill-equipped when faced with the task of having to learn through pooling

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<sup>32</sup> The Ich’ae freelance research group isolate three interrelated motivations for using networking sites: dissemination and reception of information, fostering hobbies, and linking with likeminded individuals (Ich’ae 2003). The Ulleungdo saxophonists’ usage is clearly guided by all three.

<sup>33</sup> This title can also be interpreted as ‘Children of the Wind’.

skills within the peer group and through personal and in-group trial-and-error experimentation. At the same time, Korean school music education (like foreign language education) is thoroughly text-based from the very outset, so most of the students also find themselves ill-equipped to learn by ear. Accordingly, the ‘band club’ members make frequent recourse to the internet,<sup>34</sup> as Kwŏn Ohyŏn (b. 1993) explained:

We learn music by ourselves... but it’s hard. Whenever we come to a difficult part, we lose interest and feel our limitations. We think: If only we had an instructor... We download notations, watch videos of people playing and try to learn from those,... playing along on our instruments in our practice room... – things we find on naver.com [one of South Korea’s most popular search engine and portal sites]. When our leader, Changsu, was here, that was a good time, but he’s gone to the mainland to study in university now (Interview, 16 May 2011).

The internet has also played a crucial role in the formation of the Sadong village *p’ungmul* group—a percussion band consisting of 18 people (mainly housewives and farmers). In 2007, the island administration decided to reintroduce the Lunar New Year Festival (Talmaji Ch’ukje) and it was agreed that such an occasion demanded the participation of a traditional percussion band. Faced with the task of forming the band and getting it trained up, the head of the Ulleung district office teamed up with the former regional officer Kim Chŏngsu—a prominent resident of Sadong (and another keen saxophonist). The pair turned to the internet for solutions, beginning with a simple search: ‘Cultural Preservation Asset... North Kyŏngsang Province... Farmers’ music’. Just two months later, having travelled to an

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<sup>34</sup> The island’s students are well-accustomed to using the internet to supplement classroom learning. There are no extra-curricula educational institutions (*hagwŏn*) on Ulleungdo so, unlike their mainland counterparts who are obliged to attend many additional classes (to beat the competition), they rely on online classes available through subscription.

institute near Taegu for a week-long training course, collected recordings and videos to aid improvement in the teacherless environment of the island, and purchased some instruments and costumes, the new band gave its debut performance at the Lunar New Year Festival.

For some time now, the islanders have been turning to digital satellite broadcasting, granting access to hundreds of radio and TV channels. The Korean system ‘Skylife’ is particularly popular in Ulleungdo, favoured for example by Cho Wŏn’gu (b. 1946), who is unquestionably the island’s most widely listened-to DJ. Born and raised on the mainland, Cho and his wife relocated to Ulleungdo for good in 1988, first establishing the Waterwheel (Mullebanga) DJ cafe in the small village of Naesujŏn. Following an accidental fire in 2003 that destroyed thousands of his CDs and records, Cho and his wife set up a refreshment stall in a car park near the top of a mountain and they have continued running this stall ever since (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7** Cho Wŏn’gu’s refreshment stall. Photographs by the authors, 2010 and 2011

Tourists regularly arrive in car- or bus-loads in order to walk still further up the mountain for a spectacular view of Ulleungdo’s Eastern area or to walk in the opposite direction down

through an ancient forest. Cho does not merely provide refreshments (including island specialities such as rowan berry tea); he also provides a musical accompaniment to their trip. Right next to the ice-creams and drinks, he has a large array of audio, computer, and internet equipment which is wired up to two large speakers. He has also had the stall equipped to receive ‘Skylife’ digital satellite broadcasting. From this base, Cho continues his work as a DJ, selecting tracks from a now endless reservoir and projecting them out across a 2km radius:

I play music for more than 10 hours a day, selecting tracks according to the appearance of the tourists walking past, my mood, the season, the weather... What do I play? All sorts of things: Elvis—I like him—Western pop songs, Korean pop songs—I particularly like songs from the 70s... Sometimes I play YouTube videos or just switch to the radio or give my own commentaries—information about weather forecasts, introductions to songs, that kind of thing... Me and music: we’ve become inseparable (Interview, 27 April 2011).

It is testament to Cho’s skills as a DJ that he receives numerous compliments every day and, in eight years, only one person has complained, asking ‘why are you playing music in such a beautiful natural place?’

## **Conclusions**

Many people have pre-conceptions about small remote islands, especially when they have names like ‘Mysterious Island’. The initial conception may be of an idyllic haven, the notion of the paradise island being deeply implanted in people’s minds through the representations of fiction, non-fiction and (existing somewhere between the two) tourist industries. Or the conception may be of a place that is ‘redolent with the melancholy of detachment and solitude’

(Bowring 2011: 253). In any case, a degree of isolation is expected—unsurprisingly, with the word ‘island’ coming from ‘isola’, the Latin for ‘isolated’ (ibid.)—and, deriving from this condition of isolation, a degree of distinctiveness is also expected, both cultural and ecological.

Accordingly, ethnomusicological studies of island musics tend to highlight areas of distinctiveness within island musical practices, showing how the subject island’s individual story—in many ways peculiar to itself—comes to be ‘registered in music’ (Dawe 2004: 23). Studies examine the various comings and goings of people over the course of the island’s history, identifying episodes of cultural importation, adoption, rejection, adaptation, preservation and reconfiguration, and exploring how the islanders have forged distinctive musical identities in the process. Some islands have developed their own musical languages through long periods of isolation, existing as almost closed cultural systems (see, for example, Moyle 2004). Others, which have remained relatively unvisited on the fringes of a nation’s territory (Alaszewska 2004; Viera and Manuel 2006) or which support diasporic communities (Myers 1999), hold onto, but still inevitably revise, musical forms from the distant homeland. Still others, which are scattered across large areas at varying distances from dominant hegemonic centres, are home to local musics that reflect chains of successive migrations spanning multiple locations (see Diettrich, Freeman Moulin and Webb 2011; Gillan 2012; McLean 1999) and, on those islands that have experienced migrant influxes from different sources, musical hybrids reflect social and political relations of past and present (see Guilbault 2007; Ramnarine 2001).

This present study shows that Ulleungdo belongs to an entirely different category of island to those outlined above: the Ulleungdo islanders’ experiences, values, and behaviours have engendered a situation wherein none of the musics played and listened to on the island are distinctive, being identified by listeners (be they outsiders or insiders) as different from

mainland music.<sup>36</sup> The absence of distinctiveness is an inevitable consequence of multiple factors: the island's late settlement followed by successive further waves of migration; the mainland's enduring cultural and political hegemony, encouraged (from the islanders' perspectives) first by their poverty and then by their condition of dependence; the frequent comings and goings of people, both for the short- and long-term; the ecological rather than cultural focus of the tourist industry; and all imports (including broadcasts) coming exclusively from the mainland rather than multiple sources. More recently, readily available and ever-more efficient communication technologies (especially the internet) have greatly augmented the in-flow of mainland culture, addressing the enduring 'imperative to connect' (Green, Harvey and Knox 2005: 807) and attaining a position of great importance in the islanders' lives—as in other island communities where people experience a separation from distant friends, relatives, and hegemonic centres (see Lee 2006; Miller and Slater 2000). As elsewhere, technology is helping the islanders towards their enduring dream of existing in what Appadurai calls a 'new condition of neighborliness' (1996:29).

At the same time, the incessant comings and goings of people travelling in both directions, the enduring condition of remoteness (albeit now much reduced), and the now deeply-rooted culture of dependence have conspired to generate profound obstacles to music making on Ulleungdo. In discussion, islanders have been remarkably keen to elaborate upon problems of ever-changing group membership, sparse musical expertise, and limited access to the craved-for mainland fashions—problems that are alluded to again and again in the interview excerpts presented here. But they have also been keen to highlight their own resourceful endeavours to overcome these problems, which, since the early 1990s, have

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<sup>36</sup> Perhaps a visiting ethnomusicologist might expect to find a greater preference for songs about isolation in the remote island of Ulleungdo, and for islanders to relate these songs' sentiments to episodes in their own island lives. However, the authors have found no evidence of this. Most islanders claimed to be happy in their local social networks and so considered the mainland's distance to be more a source of irritation and inconvenience than loneliness.

almost invariably involved technology (see also Gregory Diethrich 1999)<sup>37</sup>. In the present day, technological equipment has clearly become an indispensable facilitator and truly integral part of most music making on the island and one could argue that it is in this high degree of reliance on technology and in the particular patterns of cultural circulation that surround technological application that any distinctiveness in Ulleungdo's musical culture lies. The various accompanying machines—be they for karaoke, hymn-singing, or saxophone playing—serve not only as surrogate accompanists but also as guides and even teachers.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, for many music makers, the internet provides a multitude of life lines (rather than just helpful connections) to expertise on the mainland, allowing ready access to instrument suppliers, advice, notations and demonstrations. These links are vitally important not only for the islands' saxophonists but also for the school rock band, Sadong village *p'ungmul* group, DJ Cho Wŏn'gu, and, in fact, for almost everybody. As active members within larger nationwide affinity communities, the island's musicians are 'no longer alone' (as one saxophonist put it).

Being a relatively wealthy community belonging to technology-obsessed Korea (see Ahonen and O'Reilly 2007), it is perhaps not surprising that the Ulleungdo islanders would turn to technology to assist them and that they would embrace it with so few of the lingering anxieties that tend to accompany such adoptions (see Greene and Porcello 2005: 10). But Ulleungdo is just one small island out of thousands. Studies examining how communication technologies are used amongst island communities (see, for example, Kivisto 2005 and Landzelius 2006) suggest that there are many others elsewhere on the globe where musicians

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<sup>37</sup> Diethrich identifies sparse musical expertise as having been a problem in the Indian Diasporic community of Chicago in the 1980s and 1990s. In this case too, as in Ulleungdo, technoculture is seen to have "'solved" the issue of musicianship' (1999: 40).

<sup>38</sup> Alongside the island's saxophonists and *p'ungmul* enthusiasts, there are two other groups that remain active on the island today: the women's *nant'a* and 'sports dance' groups. Significantly, both of these are also wholly reliant on pre-recorded backing tracks during both practice and performance.

might well similarly be depending on technology to a high degree in their music making to overcome problems derived from their isolation. The authors hope that other researchers will provide further case studies, exploring the use of technology in music making on other small islands in non-genre specific surveys—examining practical applications ‘to get at what technology “does”’ (Wong 2003: 125) and building up a bigger picture of how people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cope (musically speaking) when they are far from the cultural hotspots. We assume that many island musicians may well share the sentiments expressed by Pastor An Jungjin:

We’re lucky to have been born when we were—to be here at this good time and to have all this good technology at our hands. It has enabled us to take the challenge of music—to learn musical instruments, to know the taste of lots of music, and get life energy from doing that... Ulleungdo is really thriving in the digital age (email, 7 April 2012).

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