

The Growth and Influence of Korean Cuisine in Western Regions

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Abstract: With the rising popularity of South Korea's culture, Korean cuisine has begun to spread and influence many western regions. This paper traces the impact and accessibility of Korean cuisine as showcased by media such as the international award winning film *Parasite*. We analyzed and researched the history of packaged Korean foods as well as Korean restaurants and franchise to understand the impact of its flavors in an international scope. By tracing the history of Korean cuisine to the current boom, the paper achieves a deeper cultural analysis and understanding of the impact and meaning behind the global growth.

Keywords: Korean cuisine, Korean culture, Korean food, cultural appropriation.

1. BACKGROUND

When western citizens hear "Korea," many may think of K-Pop due to the influence of BTS. However, cuisine is one of the most significant and prominent aspects of the nation's culture.

Korean culinary traditions and practices are greatly influenced by the country's geographical location. From seasonal influences such as the harsh winters and long, warm summers to the impacts of natural landscapes such as mountains and valleys, Korea has a very diverse agriculture. In the valleys, Koreans grow rice, beans, and vegetables, which became a staple of their diet. In the mountainous regions, there are wild ferns and native roots, which are still considered sacred today (Kraig 1).

Furthermore, since the country is a peninsula, citizens have access to a variety of seafood. The ingredients are often dried to preserve them for a long period of time. One example is dried anchovies which are sautéed as a side dish, or *banchan*. However, ingredients besides seafood such as meats and vegetables are dried as well (Kraig 1).

Preservation is very important to Koreans as it allows them to have food during the cold winters when agriculture is not a possibility. Especially since the geographical location of Korea experiences all four seasons, food is greatly influenced as well. It is very common for households to have large earthenware pots to store pickled vegetables or pastes. One of the most common foods stored is *kimchi*, which is a salted and fermented cabbage. *Kimchi* is a traditional and staple side dish that can be enjoyed with any meal. Furthermore, soybean pastes, *doenjang*, and **chili** pastes, *gochujang*, are stored in these pots as well. These pastes are still prominent ways to flavor foods in present-day Korean dishes (Kraig 1). Preservation allows Koreans to endure the winters and maintain a balanced and healthy diet year-round.

These traditional Korean foods made their way to the western regions during the rise of Korean immigration in the 1900s. Often associated as three waves, the first Korean Americans arrived in Hawaii to work on the sugar plantations. Overtime, due to various reasons including the Korean War, many Koreans immigrated and settled in America, bringing their culinary cultures with them (Chung 2).

In 1905, the first Koreatown was established by Ahn Chang Ho, a Korean independence activist, in Riverside, California. Pachappa Camp first started off as an employment agency to help other citizens find work. Over time, the number of residents grew, eventually reaching almost 1,000 Koreans at its peak (Cowan 1).

The establishment of Los Angeles Koreatown could be credited to Lee Hi Duk who opened Olympic Market to allow Koreans to purchase groceries. The success of the market led the businessman to open VIP Plaza, a shopping center with Korean businesses, and VIP Palace, a Korean restaurant where people hosted weddings and birthday parties (KORE Limited 4). He was so passionate about his vision to create a Koreatown that he managed to put up a Koreatown sign with minimal funding. Now, despite the LA Riots of 1992 which destroyed many Korean businesses, it is a vivid and bustling hub of Korean culture, attracting many citizens from around the world (KORE Limited 6).

With the rise of Koreatown, Koreans not only established their own restaurants, but also brought popular franchises with them. Bonchon was the first Korean franchise to expand in North America, and it was established in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The Korean fried-chicken franchise quickly grew, and it is now proudly serving over 110 US locations (Bonchon 1).

However, most people will think of Korean barbecue, when someone mentions Korean franchises. Popular restaurants such as Kang Ho Dong Baekjeong and Park's BBQ attract both Korean customers and customers of other ethnicities. The start of Korean barbecue can be traced to the Goguryeo Era when the higher class citizens enjoyed a traditional form of *bulgogi* called *maekjeok*. Overtime, this dish became known as *neobiani*, a thinly sliced marinated beef, which was served to the royalty during the Joseon Dynasty. However, most of the Korean diet was based on agriculture, and common citizens did not have the luxury to enjoy meat (CP 3). It wasn't until the 1920s when the demand for meat rose, creating restaurants that specialized in *bulgogi*. Another major obstacle to the rise of meat was the Japanese's rule over Korea. From 1910 to 1945, there was a beef shortage, and prices increased tremendously. However, *bulgogi* became popular once again, especially due to the invention of the slicing machine, which allowed beef to be cooked quicker (CP 4). The sweet and salty marinade makes a perfect collaboration with the tender beef, capturing the palette of all citizens.

2. MEDIA INFLUENCE

Culinary traditions are also greatly influenced by the current media. From K-pop and K-dramas to movies, Youtube, and social media platforms, the craze captivates audiences from around the world. When *Parasite* was released in late 2019, taking over the movie industry by storm, the food *Chapaguri* introduced in the film gained popularity. *Chapaguri* is a portmanteau of two popular ramyuns: *Chapagetti* and *Neoguri*. Although this dish was enjoyed by many Koreans before the trend, it was not until *Parasite* that people outside of Korea started to become interested. Imports of *Chapagetti* jumped 116 percent, while import growth in February of 2020 was 120 percent higher than the previous year. In fact, the immense popularity influenced manufacturer Nongshim to release a cup noodle version of *Chapaguri*, pre-combined, in April of 2020 (Jo 1).

Another popular form of food media is *mukbang*, which is an eating broadcast, often watched by many people on YouTube. Although there may be a number of reasons the entertainment became popular among Koreans, one possible reason is loneliness. Like many other nations, Koreans have a culture of eating together and sharing the same food. However, the number of single-resident households has increased, with many people not being able to enjoy food with their family. YouTube comments reveal that many watch *mukbangs* while enjoying their meal for company and comfort (Kang 2). In the context of Western viewers, *mukbangs* initially became popular in 2015 when an American YouTuber uploaded a video reacting to South Korean *mukbang* videos. Overtime, the trend caught-on, as other YouTubers recreated their own versions of eating broadcasts, providing audiences with both entertainment and psychological satisfaction (McCarthy 2).

Currently, there is a new food craze going around on all social media platforms due to the Korean show "Squid Game" which was released in September of 2021 on Netflix. In one of the daring games of survival, contestants have to cut out a shape from a *dalgon*, a traditional Korean snack, without breaking it. The sweet and comforting treat can be easily made with just two ingredients: sugar and baking soda. The convenient and entertaining snack has taken social media platforms by storm with audiences attempting to see if they would have a chance in surviving the "Squid Game" (Reuters 1). However, this is not the first time *dalgon* has swept the Internet. Back in 2020, *dalgon* coffee captivated people quarantined in their homes. By whipping coffee powder, sugar, and water, people were able to enjoy a creamy coffee froth with milk (Buzz 1).

Although Korea's population is very small with less than 52 million citizens, their GDP of \$1.51 trillion is one of the highest in the world. Thus, the influence of Korean culture, especially on online platforms, have been astronomical. Korean trends have been going viral overnight, influencing top companies such as Netflix to invest more money. From 2015 to 2020, Netflix invested \$700 million in Korean content and Korean production facilities, yet in 2021 alone, the company is predicted to invest \$700 million (Choudhury 1). Especially in the 21st century when the media controls the daily lives of people, it is beyond imagination on how much more influence Korean food will have globally.

3. KOREAN PACKAGED FOOD IMPORT INDUSTRY

With the rising popularity of Korean food globally, Korean companies have begun to place a greater emphasis on packaged food exports. One of the most popular frozen foods is dumpling, with Bibigo being one of the primary producers. CJ Group, which owns the Bibigo food line and is tied under the family branch of Samsung, dominates the dumpling section at Costco Wholesale U.S. by sales, beating China's Ling Ling which has topped sales throughout the last 25 years (Jo 7). In order to better target their Western audience, the company uses chicken and cilantro in their dumplings instead of the typical garlic, chives, and pork which would be used in the fillings sold in Korea. Many Korean companies use localization strategies, such as Orion with their Choco Pie flavors, in order to maximize their foreign sales (Jo 8).

Furthermore, on September 20, 2021, Bibigo partnered with the Lakers for a \$100 million jersey patch deal. The value is unheard of as the average jersey patch deals have sold for about \$7 million to \$10 million a year. Yet, Wookho Kyeon, marketing officer of CJ, believes the number one team, the Lakers, will serve as a cultural icon amongst younger audiences (Shaikin 1).

Another popular packaged food produced by Korea is *ramyun*. Some of the top *ramyun* brands include Nongshim Co., Ottogi Corp., and Samyang Foods Co. Nongshim's most popular *ramyun*, *Shin Ramyun*, sold 32 billion units in 2019. It is sold in over 100 countries, making more than \$302 million in 2019 alone (Nongshim 11). Especially after the Oscar-winning film "Parasite," *Shin Ramyun* operating sales were seen to increase by 38 percent. Furthermore, sales jumped 10 percent to 275 billion won in the first quarter alone. Specifically in the United States, sales have been estimated to increase by 14 percent to 81 billion won (Pulse 1). Similarly, Ottogi was estimated to see a 3.4 percent rise in the first quarter of 2020. Their *ramyun* sales in January and February of 2020 jumped 10 percent compared to 2019. The last top three *ramyun* manufacturer, Samyang, was estimated to increase their operating profit by 41.2 percent to 21.6 billion won in the first quarter. Setting the best quarterly result since their establishment in 1960, sales jumped 24.2 percent to 149.5 billion won. *Ramyun* sales specifically jumped 20 percent during the January to March pandemic period (Pulse 1). Especially since people preferred easy meals that could be enjoyed during their quarantine, *ramyun* sales increased dramatically.

4. KOREAN RESTAURANTS AND FRANCHISE

Starting with the establishment of one of the first Korean franchises in America, Bonchon, in 2002, numerous other businesses have expanded and prospered (Bonchon 1). Although Korean barbecue was not as common in Korean history until more recent years, it is one of the first things that come to mind when discussing Korean restaurants. From *Baekjeong* to *Ahgassi Gopchang* to *SaeMaul Sikdang*, many people patronize these franchises to satisfy their Korean barbecue craving. In fact, the number of U.S. independent and micro chain restaurants increased by 120% in 2017 (Fact Casual 1).

However, it is not only Korean barbecue restaurants that have captivated hundreds of new customers. *Tteok-bokki*, a spicy stir-fried rice cake, is another popular Korean franchise food that has set ground in America. One popular store is *Yup Dduk*, which has become more popular through the spicy rice cake challenge on various social media platforms. Boasting for their irresistible and tongue-biting spice, customers wait hours at the LA restaurant just to try and be part of the #ktownspicychallenge (Kwon 1). Especially since people are able to choose from one of the four spice levels from "extra mild" to "challenge" as well as add on any of their favorite toppings including cheese or glass noodles, the dish has been a fan favorite. With over 500 locations in Korea and over a dozen locations in the United States, the franchise has been extremely successful in capturing their customers.

Dessert franchises have also gained immense popularity within the U.S. One popular street food is *bungeo-ppang*, which is a fish-shaped pastry stuffed with a traditional sweet red-bean filling. However, it can be enjoyed with a variety of fillings including custard, nutella, or even cheese. Although Somi Somi is an American franchise founded by Korean Matt Kim, they are known for selling this popular snack. By pairing soft serve in their *bungeo-ppang* cones and desired fillings, the store has taken a new approach in attracting dessert-lovers (Somi Somi 1).

Matt Kim is also known for his dessert cafe Sul & Beans. After Kim's initial hardship with his crepe and waffle shop in San Diego in 2012, he was more than relieved with the success of his new cafe. 'Sul' which translates to snow in English and 'Beans' representing the traditional sweet red bean paste, were the inspiration of the franchise name. The name is perfect for the popular dessert the store sells: *bingsoo*. *Bingsoo* is a traditional Korean shaved ice served with sweet toppings including but not limited to red bean paste, sliced fruits, fruit syrup, and condensed milk. It is a favorite among all age groups, especially in the hot summer months. Now, the franchise has seven locations throughout California and Nevada.

5. KOREAN FLAVORS IN WESTERN PACKAGED PRODUCTS

Korean flavors such as *gochujang* or *bulgogi* have widely become more available in western foods and menus. *Gochujang*, which is a fermented red pepper paste, is a staple flavor in many traditional dishes.

Yet, now, we can find this flavor at local American franchises such as Shake Shack.

In January of 2021, the chain released a Korean-style fried chicken sandwich which included a *gochujang* sauce. Furthermore, the new menu includes *kimchi* slaw and *gochujang* fries (Park 1).

Earlier, in 2012, TGI Friday's released a Korean steak taco which featured corn tortillas, steak, ginger-lime slaw, cucumber, cilantro, and Sriracha. In other words, there was nothing authentically Korean about the menu. Due to misinterpretations and violations of Korean culture, some food critics have concerns about the Korean trend. Labeling foods as "Korean" without any appropriate credit or appreciation can lead to concerns of cultural appropriation.

6. SAMPLE STUDIES OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

When Shake Shack released their "Korean-style" fried chicken sandwich, the chain restaurant was faced with many backlash and disproving comments. Many believed putting *kimchi* on a menu does not suffice to be labeled "Korean." Social media users labeled it as a "lazy interpretation," while Brooklyn-based writer Giaae Kwon sardonically displayed her contempt for "slapp[ing] some *gochujang* on something." Furthermore, stand-up comedian Dash Kwiatkowski tweeted, "It feels like white people slapping together a bunch of things because they perceive it as Korean and then profiting off of those things," accusing Shake Shack of cultural appropriation (Adams 1).

However it is not only restaurants receiving backlash for their unethical inclusion of Korean cuisine in their menus. In May of 2020, Alison Roman, a cookbook author and food critic for Bon Appetit and the New York Times, was in a controversy due to her criticisms of Marie Kondo and Chrissy Teigen. Her racist comments sparked concerns about her past recipes, specifically her famous stew. By watering down an ethnic recipe of either chana masala, or Caribbean chickpea curry, Roman received backlash for not appreciating the traditional spices and flavors. Although there are differing opinions, Roman acknowledged her mistake and publicly apologized on her Twitter account.

7. KOREAN RESTAURANT CLIENTELE

As Korean cuisine becomes more popular, it has become more common for non-Korean customers to enjoy their meals at Korean restaurants. In fact, 45.1% of respondents on a survey claimed that Korean food was very popular in their country (Jobst 1). The rising popularity has many benefits including a wider and more diverse customer base. In addition, Korea's economy grew substantially as they saw an all-time high of exported agrifoods which reaped \$7.57 billion in 2020, a 7.7% increase from the previous year (Prieto 1).

In order to better target their new audience, many restaurants have simplified their menu or started efforts to incorporate fusion menus. For example, Roy Choi's Kogi Food Truck serves *bulgogi* tacos served with *kimchi* instead of salsa. Choi also offers ramen with American cheese at his restaurant Pot. Similarly, Phil Lee serves *kimchi* tacos in hopes to "make Korean food more accessible by simplifying it" (Surico 12).

Unfortunately, some people view this shift in a negative light. By perceiving it as a loss of authentic Korean food and culture, concerned critics believe the rising popularity changes the traditional Korean palette and makes it more westernized. Yet, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the clientele of Korean food has continued to rise and become more diverse. The variety of sweet, salty, sour, acidic, and spicy flavors all in one dish delights customers no matter their ethnic background.

8. REFLECTION

From the traditional agricultural strategies to the current popularity all over social media, it is evident how diverse and rich Korea's culinary culture is. Not only have I gained a deeper education and understanding, but I have truly begun to appreciate my culture and background. Although I was born in America, I identify myself as Korean-American. Thus, connecting more deeply with my ethnicity is very important to me.

Personally, I am very proud of the rapid rise of Korean culture. When I hear K-pop as I walk the streets or see Caucasians enjoying a bowl of hot-stone *bibimbap*, I still find myself surprised and smiling.

However, I have also first-hand experienced the negative effects including “white-washed” restaurants and stealing of Korean palette without proper credit just to attract more customers. For example, my parents and I visited a *soondubu* house that we have enjoyed going to for over ten years. Recently, however, we realized the restaurant had a larger customer base of different ethnicities. When we tried the food, we quickly realized the flavors were too sweet and salty, the restaurant’s attempt to better please their new customers. Although it may have been a successful change in terms of overall customer satisfaction, my family was greatly disappointed. The food no longer felt authentically Korean. Instead, our culture was molded to fit other people.

I did not enjoy the feeling of our culture being taken away from us. However, after reading numerous articles researching for this paper, I started to realize that sometimes change is necessary. It is not that our history was being stolen from us, but more widely shared so that everyone can appreciate and enjoy Korea’s rich culture. I want more people to enjoy everything I took for granted, including the delicious foods I grew up eating. Now, *miyeok-guk* no longer has to be a birthday dish only Koreans enjoy, but a warm comfort food for people of all backgrounds.

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