

Research Paper: Korean Cuisine and its History

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Work Study

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August 4, 2020

Korea is a country that is located on the Korean Peninsula in Northeast Asia; the Yellow Sea surrounds the peninsula to the west, and the East China Sea to the south. Korea's cuisine is one of the most interesting and unique cuisines you may be able to experience, especially with the many benefits their food tends to associate with, the great amount of history behind every single food, and the overall accomplishments of the country. Korean cuisine is one with a great history, especially with all the hardships it had to endure to be independent and stand still today. Korea became what it is today through the course of its decision-making into looking at what was best for its people and expanding Korea's horizons. Other countries were constantly trying to take away its independence, but even yet, after all the attempts to do so, Korea remained strong and unified and saw another bright day. Korea is truly a country that never stops growing miraculously as the years pass, even when hard obstacles are laid on its path, Korea strives to move past it.

The legend of Korea begins going back to the time the Three Kingdoms existed and China was the one in charge. At the time China possessed the power of ownership of Korea and Japan; in fact, it possessed the whole Asian continent (Kim et al., 2016, pp. 26). Though China tried to take Korea under its command, Korea resisted and remained on its will to be independent and free from China. After gaining the upper hand on China, Korea was its own independent country and could now create its own unique language and culture. Throughout the years in trying to find who they wanted to be, Korea was influenced by many obstacles they went through. Korea was especially inspired by the Chinese language and decided to develop one of its own. Soon Korea had created its own language that was very much different from the Chinese language. The Korean language belonged to the Altaic language group along with the Japanese, Mongolian,

Tungusic, Hungarian, and Finnish (Kim et al., 2016, pp. 26). Although Koreans had the language down (in terms of speaking), they did not yet have Korean characters, so they used Chinese characters in the meantime. That was until the year 1433 when King Sejong invented Hangeul—the Korean character (Jang et al., 2015, p. 126). Although building Korea from scratch was hard for Korea, no task for them was impossible, no matter if they had to use any means necessary to accomplish their goals. The goals that would help improve Korea and for Korea to grow in the future as well.

Another reason for Korea's extraordinary development was because of the separation of North and South Korea. Since the year of 1945, Korea has been divided into two states; North and South Korea. North Korea is bordered by China to the northwest and Russia to the northeast. Meanwhile, South Korea is located on the southern half of the Korean Peninsula. This separation was called the Korean War. According to "Korean Kimchi: Promoting Healthy Meals Through Cultural Tradition," the overall population of Korea is about 75 million, with North Korea having 25 million and South Korea having 50 million (Hongu et al., 2017, p. 172). This was a war that would break all sorts of contact with either of the sides, sides that are not even friendly towards each other even up to this day. The wall that is between North Korea and South Korea can be used to show how their ties have broken apart. The wall is a symbol of a lack of a lot of knowledge about North Korea's doings and whereabouts. Although there may not be enough information going on about North Korea, because of the United States ties it has with South Korea we know much more about South Korea than North.

In South Korea, because of all the events it has gone through, its religion has been damaged and not many people follow the practice anymore. All Koreans have different views

and opinions on the matter. Although most of them are without religion, some do still follow the practice but in low numbers, and various kinds of practices. These practices are known worldwide as Protestants, Buddhism, and Catholicism. In a study held in 1995 about religion percentages in South Korea, 59.1% of the South Koreans had no religion at all. 19.71% of South Koreans were Protestants, 19.71% were Buddhists, and Catholics represented 7.9% of the South Korean population(2001, p. 3). The separation and other situations that happened before that as well as Koreans finding their culture, made some Koreans lost. Making every single one of them choose the life they wanted to live, who they wanted to worship, or just live an ordinary life. All the percentages of all different religions are scattered and diverse. Although this is true, one thing can be certain they still follow rituals.

Rituals in Korea can be traced back to when the first-ever Korean was born, the maker of Korea, to be precise. The known existence of this was through an ancient Myth passed throughout the generations of Koreans. The legend is known as the Myth of Dakun, and it goes like this, Hwanung, Hwanin 's son, the «King of Heaven,» came down to earth to rule human society. When a bear and a tiger came to Hwanung asking to be made human, he gave them each a bundle of sacred food to eat and told them to stay 100 days in a cave, after which time they would become human. The bear persisted for 21 days while the tiger gave up, and the bear became a human woman named Ungnyeo. Ungnyeo gave birth to Dankun and mated with Hwanung. The newborn was then called Dankunwangkeom(belonged to Korea's mythological origins), Korea's first kingdom(Lee et al., 2018, p. 122). This legend is where the beginning of rituals began. Many Koreans recall back to ancient times, a story which they greatly take to heart since it's the beginning of Korean origin. In order to honor their ancestors and what they did for

them to exist, they developed rituals that consisted of formal ways to position meals on a table, each place having a strong and different meaning behind it. Praising their creator, honoring their previous ancestors, and appraising their great deeds. Many changes were brought upon these very rituals through tough times they overcame, going to meetings about the setup that day or viewing the positioning online. This was all thanks to the attempts of Japan to overtake Korea.

Japan, over the years after gaining liberty from China as well, decided to go after Korea after discovering it's unique culture and techniques it had picked up in its journey towards independence and self-growth. Japan made an attempt to control Korea through a series of trades that were going on at the time. The main contributor who was trading with Korea was Japan. Sending different kinds of goods, such as soy sauce and other Japanese Ingredients(Janmaat, 2017, p. 5). Allowing Japanese ingredients to go to the Korean cuisine kitchen. Despite its consistent amounts of attempts, Japan had never once succeeded. Instead, it gifted Korea with ingredients that further helped Korea strive towards improvement and the invention of new foods and techniques, especially since the soy sauce the Japanese granted them served as another way to conserve their food(Janmaat, 2017, p. 5). Adding another preserving method to their food besides fermentation. Despite getting gifted by the Japanese, Korea did take an unexpected hit from Japan; their table food setup was chaotic and ever-changing because of the sudden influence of the Japanese. According to a scholarly article, "Ancestral ritual food of Korean jongka: Historical changes of the table setting," Confucian rituals that Koreans followed went through drastic changes after the rule of the Chosun Dynasty came to an end; the government had published standards for family rituals after the country's liberation from Japan's colonial rule(Lee et al., 2018, pp. 122). The government imposed reglaments that changed the whole

structure of the rituals; new sources now had to be used to enable them to be able to complete the rituals. The information needed to complete the rituals was released through the media and it had instructions on how to do the rituals, such as placements and costs.

Japan had left a dent in the spirits of the Koreans, and there was a lot of uncertainty in Koreans, especially since their rituals were ever-changing; meaning the placement of their foods was constantly changed. Later on, a glimpse of hope arrived, and a guidebook on the etiquette of occasions such as coming of age, weddings, funerals, and ancestral rites came about in Korea (Lee et al., 2018, pp. 123). This guidebook changed how Korea would act later in the years. This book was the beginning of Koreans seeing a brighter future and a prosperous Korea; because Koreans had seen a promised world. This guidebook was written by a Confucian philosopher of the Southern Song Dynasty, and soon afterward, many books came about soon after about rituals, society, family rites, and people of the nation, further explaining the guidebook (Lee et al. 123). This guidebook was mainly helpful, setting a guide to Koreans showing that not all was lost. Later on, a scholar provided a book with a template that provided table setting and such which made it easier for Koreans to be able to follow the rituals. This book was specially made for the Koreans who were confused on the basis of the rituals since there were many books released, so a template made their lives simpler and easier. Now Koreans could follow the rituals to honor their ancestors, their predecessors, and their good deeds. Soon peace had finally arrived in the Country of Korea. Many new discoveries were soon made by Korea, especially one named Kimchi.

Kimchi was made from the beginning of time, and it has been documented to be around 3000 years since the invention of Kimchi (Chen-yun, 2016, p. 2). Ever since then, it has been

discovered that a series of 200 forms of making kimchi is the number it is today, thanks to the previous generations of Koreans. Today Kimchi is one of the most essential dishes in Korean Cuisine; prepared with different kinds of ingredients but mainly, but the most important ingredient is Cabbage. The most famous Kimchi is made from Chinese Cabbage; during the old times tracing back to when trading was happening with Japan, China was one of the traders as well(Koreyo Period)(Janmaat, 2017, p.4). China had traded Korea some of their Cabbage which made itself into Korean Cuisine. During the Joseon Dynasty, kimchi became even more diverse; the introduction of soy sauce from the Japanese, which would later be used as another food preserving method, and the introduction of sweet potato and chili peppers, brought spicy flavors to kimchi.

Today in Korean households, Kimchi is considered a necessity; without the presence of Kimchi, dinner is just incomplete. Especially since Kimchi is one of the traditional side dishes in South Korea, although this was not always the case, when Kimchi was first known during the era of the Three Kingdoms Period when agriculture was popular, Korean families had to survive harsh cold winters and lay their food in the hands of fate; with the rapid changing of seasons their food would rot sooner or later(Hongu et al., 2017, pp. 173). Luckily Koreans had a persistent mindset in preserving their food, and soon the discovery and creation of fermentation was a reality. The new discovery of the process of fermentation led to Koreans having a method to preserve their food for the winters to come. Historical records indicate that the first product to be fermented was red pepper Kimchi(Hongu et al., 2017, pp.173). Especially with the method of agriculture it is not surprising that red pepper was one of the first items for the process of

fermentation to happen. Soon many benefits of Kimchi and fermentation were discovered by scientists.

The process of fermentation Koreans had created during their most difficult times actually brought benefits to it; the fermentation process encouraged the growth of natural microorganisms(bacteria) such as lactic acid. Scientists did a series of tests and discovered lactic bacteria had great benefits, such as anti-inflammatory, probiotic properties, immune system promotion, cholesterol reduction in relation to anti-atherosclerosis, and also has anticancer effects(Hongu et al., 2018, p. 174). These were shocking results to the scientists, especially because fermentation was an accomplishment made in the face of adversity. It was also discovered that lactic bacteria is present in raw ingredients such as cabbage, red pepper, spices, and more that help create these healing effects; and that Kimchi has a property called lactobacillus that is gained when extracted from kimchi and it is effective against Avian influenza(bird flu). Another food that has such a great history and contains such popularity is Bulgogi.

Bulgogi is also a popular dish in Korea; its name stands for bul (“fire”) and gogi (“meat”). Bulgogi is known to have originated in the Goguryeo era (37 BCE – 668 CE) in Korea and has been around ever since then. Its actual origins can be traced back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries, B.C. to be precise, when the early inhabitants of South Korea were called “Maek” and used to skewer meat on a stick, covered in sauce, and then cooked over a fire. The dish was called “Maekjeok,” “maek” referred to the people, and “jeok” meant “skewer.” Then during the Joseon Dynasty(1392-1910), maekjok had evolved into a royal court dish called “neobiani”(sliced grilled beef) that was eaten only by royalty and aristocrats. Neobiani was made

thick, flat, and with wide cuts of meat cooked over a charcoal fire. During the event of the Korean War(1950-1953), the U.S armed services introduced slicing machines into South Korea, and with the help of these machines, the meat used to prepare bulgogi dishes began to be thinly cut. Until recently, bulgogi was considered a celebration dish that was eaten only on birthdays or weddings or was used to serve guests. Nowadays, bulgogi has become a signature Korean food that can be found in nearly every Korean food venue. Apart from food, Korea has other interesting culinary-related places, such as schools.

In conclusion, Korea is an outstanding place that never ceases to stop growing into a unique country among others. From every event it has gone through, it has shone so brightly and embraced what had occurred. Many great things came to Korea as well from these attempts that helped shape the Korea we know today. It created new methods to survive, and for future generations to incorporate it into the Korean cuisine we know of today. The non-stop changing of Kimchi has grown so miraculously over the years, with benefits being discovered and proven to help Koreans for the good, preventing things such as diseases. There is still a lot to be discovered from the mysteries of kimchi. Another great food was Bulgogi which changed its name as it grew and developed into the meal we know today, which once was food for Korean Royalty. Korea sure is a splendid place that never has stopped changing. Korea grows each and every day.

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