

From “Paocai” to “Xinqi”:

The Role of Kimchi in Korean Culinary Nationalism and Cultural Identity

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This paper is a great example of investigation on “identity” in the field of the humanities. The paper explores conflicts of interest when kimchi, a staple food item in Korean cuisine, is promoted outside of the peninsula as a “traditional” and “national” cultural product of Korea. When South Korean government steps in as the main promoter of Korean cultural products overseas, many problems arise and the case of kimchi bears all the complicated questions of promoting a specific national cultural product to the global community. Being familiar with the domestic success of centrally-orchestrated economic development programs, South Korean government has not shunned away from actively promoting Korean movies, TV dramas, music, and culinary products outside Korea. In the case of kimchi, the paradox is more pronounced: how can you make a very distinct local taste appealing to foreign countries? To sell kimchi to non-Koreans, overseas campaigns try to refashion kimchi as a “globally” acceptable culinary item, and at the same time, try to focus on the “Koreanness” of kimchi. The author successfully demonstrates the fascinating attempts and failures of government agency-driven campaigns, including the backlash from Chinese consumers over the changes in the Chinese translation of kimchi. This could be closely related to the current K-pop boom in Asia. Since there is recent history of China-Korea cultural war among internet users, fan-driven K-pop boom can burst its bubble by any nonsensical intervention of South Korean government.

One of the strengths of this paper is the range of languages involved in the research of the topic. Although the paper was written in English, the author did extensive research in primary sources written in English, Korean, and Chinese. In addition, since the topic involves a time-sensitive cultural issue, the author includes various on-line sources, including the promotional websites of kimchi. Overall, the paper is an excellent read on cultural identity at the age of globalization.

-- Dr. Sun Yun Kim

Kimchi is one of the most widely known Korean dishes as it invariably accompanies a Korean meal. Traditionally it refers to sliced vegetables which are highly seasoned with pepper, onion and garlic, and fermented in large earthenware jars. In recent years, the Korean government has been active in promoting this traditional food overseas, and interestingly paying special attention to how Kimchi is called in foreign languages. Therefore, in this research paper, I examine the relations between the Korean cultural identity and the international promotion of Kimchi, arguing that the government strategy is a paradox between globalization and nationalism.

The paper begins with the recent controversy surrounding *Xinqi*, a newly invented Chinese name of Kimchi by the Korean government. Expanding from the controversy, I explore the dynamic behind Korea’s sensitivity to Kimchi’s names in foreign languages. With reference to the concept of *culinary nationalism*, I argue that the promotion and renaming of Kimchi, is an attempt to counteract the force of globalization.

Internally, as more Korean people are shifting away from traditional, made-in-Korea food products, the encouragement of Kimchi consumption then becomes a way to reconstruct the shared cultural identity and ethnic group loyalty. While externally, the Korean government has invested heavily in the campaign of Kimchi globalization to maximize foreigners' reception of the dish. Yet, ultimately, this globalization effort still inextricably intertwines with nationalism. This can be illustrated by a range of clips and printed advertisements placed overseas, which explicitly stress the "uniqueness" and "authenticity" of Korean food products, revealing the government's goal to enhance national image and pride through this national cuisine. Lastly, I turn to the response of this paradoxical and national push of food promotion. I argue that the traces of nationalism permeated in the global Korean food promotion, are the reason why most foreigners respond unfavourably to the campaign. Especially in countries competing with Korea over cultural ownerships, such as China, the display of Korean nationalism through Kimchi promotion has added fuel to the cultural war.

The Controversy of Name – Kimchi, Kimuchi and Paocai

The inspiration of this research paper comes from a controversial issue surrounding the Chinese name of Kimchi. In November 2013, the Korean government announced a newly invented, official Chinese name of Kimchi – *Xinqi* 辛奇. Originally, Kimchi is widely known as *Paocai* 泡菜 in Chinese language, which literally means fermented vegetables. However, the Korean government worries that the name Paocai could cause confusion with Chinese fermented dishes so the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs of the Republic of Korea announced *Xinqi* to be the new trademark of Kimchi in Chinese speaking regions, claiming it to be the transliteration of "Kimchi" in Mandarin (Seoul Sinmun 06 Jan. 2014; Chosunilbo 08 Nov. 2013).

The debate over the name of Kimchi in foreign languages, in fact, is not a new issue. Before the modification of the Chinese name, the Japanese name of Kimchi also seized the spotlight. In Japan, Kimchi is commonly written as キムチ (Ki-mu-chi). It is mainly because Japanese script does not have the final consonant which unable the pronunciation of the sound "Kim" the way it sounds in Korean. As Kimchi made and sold in Japan is also usually slightly modified to suit the Japanese taste (less spicy), together with the different pronunciation, the Korean government and the media have long been sensitive to the "Japanese version" of Kimchi, lamenting that the former colonizer has stolen the food culture and made Korea a colony

once again (Kyung-Koo Han 162). As a result, the Korean government made an application to the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) in 2001, an organization under the umbrella of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Through the Commission, the Korean government urged for a unified definition of Kimchi by announcing the Korean one to be the only authentic one. The Commission's decision was in favour of the Korean government's request and the Korean media was overjoyed to proclaim the victory of authentic Kimchi over the imitators, as Korea is now internationally recognised to be the “*종주국*” (the ruling country) of Kimchi (Yonhap News 06 Jul 2001). Afterwards, the Korean media's sensitivity over the political correctness of Kimchi kept growing. For example, when the Korean actor Chŏng u-sŏng and a member of the girl band KARA wrote and pronounced Kimchi as “Kimuchi” in Japanese television shows in 2009 and 2010 respectively, they were criticised and urged to apologize by the Korean media (The Hankooki 11 Aug. 2009; Kukinews 02 Dec. 2010). These examples proved that how Kimchi is called in foreign languages is an issue that can easily be escalated into a concern with national dignity and Korea's ownership over this cultural item by the media and public discourse.

Motivation: Korea's Search of Cultural Nationalism in the Era of Globalization

Putting aside the controversy caused by the name *Xinqi*, it is also important to first understand the motivation behind the move. According to the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Agro-Fisheries and Food Trade Corporation, the objective is in two folds: (1) Kimchi's authenticity is threatened by the name Korean Paocai thus the new name *Xinqi* can highlight the uniqueness and the Koreaness of Kimchi; (2) to construct a more high-class image of Kimchi and, so as to raise its economic and cultural value, as well as its popularity internationally (Apple Daily 09 Nov. 2013; Seoul Sinmun 06 Jan. 2013). The explanations above clearly reveal the dual approaches of the Korean government as the former represents the Korean cultural nationalism and the emphasis of her own cultural authenticity, while the latter displays the government's ambition to push Kimchi overseas as an international product.

Beyond the promotion of Kimchi, the Korean government's overall globalization policy is also paradoxical in this way too. Since President Kim Yong Sam's *Segyehwa* Policy (the national policy of

globalization), the Korean government has been actively launching the process of globalization in all aspects. Yet, the nature of “national push” itself embodies the force of nationalism. As Samuel Kim argues, though globalization is full-fledged in Korea since the early 1990s, deep down Korea remains mired in the “cocoon of exclusive cultural nationalism” (263). In other words, globalization has been a means to enhance Korea’s competitiveness in the world market. Meanwhile, the government has upheld ethnic nationalism to counteract the cultural assimilation of globalization by preserving, promoting or even inventing Korea’s “traditional” and “native” cultures and values. For example, in the 1990s, the Korean government began to revive and invent regional folklore festivals such as Andong Folk Festival, the International Confucian Festival and other similar “traditional” carnivals (Shin 215). Through commercializing these folklore performances, the government constructs the way of living of typical “Korean ancestor”, and educates the Koreans their common ethnic roots.

Why food matters? - Eating and Culinary Nationalism

Similar to the construction of cultural nationalism through folklores, the promotion and rebranding of cuisine could also be a means to strengthen cultural identity. As Tim Edensor argues, identity is not necessarily formed through a reflexive and self-conscious identification, but can stem from feels of things and embody sensual experience, thus fundamental emotional subjectivity is the main part of one’s national identity (28). Specifically, the presence of objects or commodities provides material proof of shared ways of living are crucial in determining what items are worth displaying as “our ways of doing things” (Edensor 104, 105). As in our daily life people define cuisines by countries while food is usually a part of racial/national stereotypes, food is undoubtedly a commodity which serves the function of “we-they distinction”, defining ethnic boundaries and shaping one’s sense of cultural identity (Surak 7).

Why Kimchi? –Symbolism of Kimchi in Korea

As food is important in the formation of a national identity, Kimchi, one of the most representative foods of Korea, naturally becomes a source of nationalism. Even though today’s Kimchi has already been transformed from a home-made food to be a kind of pre-packed and ready-made food produced in factories

and sold at supermarkets, its emotional affiliation remains strong. In the study of the commercial advertisements of Kimchi in Korea, Kyung-Koo Han argues that today's pre-packed Kimchi is a "nostalgic business" that "hominess, tradition, naturalness, and nostalgic appeal to motherly love" are still the main elements of the advertisements. He suggests the example of the brand Chonggajip that though this brand is more expensive than its counterparts, it sells well as its television commercials has been successful in arousing the sense of homeliness and Koreaness to the audience (154, 155). On the other hand, not limited to the Korean people within Korea, the feeling of homeliness linked to Kimchi is also explicit amongst overseas Koreans. Francis Leo Collins did an empirical research on the Korean students in Auckland about the importance of Kimchi in their sense of home. In his research, he found that many of the Korean students first lived in homestays sooner or later moved to live with other Korean schoolmates, because the absence of Kimchi and rice made them realise the difference between "homestay" and "home", thus they chose to move out and prepare Korean meals with their Korean friends (Collins 161). Also, taking the two articles published in *Gastronomica- The Journal of Food and Culture* as examples, Kimchi is also frequently depicted by diasporic Koreans as a symbol of their childhood memories with their mothers (Ahn; Grace M. Cho). In short, to a large number of Koreans, either residing in Korea or migrated overseas, Kimchi is a food related to the sensations of home and group identity. This is also the reason why Kimchi is frequently utilized by the Korean government in the construction of cultural identity and nationalism.

The Construction of Culinary Nationalism: Koreans should consume made-in-Korea Kimchi

Other than providing a "we-they distinction" as mentioned above, even within a nation or ethnic group, food can also create psychological connections such as security, belonging and pride amongst the members internally (Hyojŭng Cho 210). As Kristin Surak argued in her research on Japan's tea culture, food embodies the functions of "specification" and "differentiation", which divide "good members" and "bad members" in a group, based on their knowledge on national food cultures. For instance a good Japanese should be well-versed to tea-making (13). In the same sense, the Kimchi-led culinary nationalism pushed by the Korean government also upholds the notion that a good Korean should adopt a Korean eating habit, and consume locally produced food. In the late 1980s when the country was preparing for 1988 Olympic Games,

the Korean government began to open the markets to foreign material culture including food cultures. American fast food shops and coffee shops then continued to increase in popularity while Korean people's diet shifted to heavier consumption of bread, meat, sugar and instant coffee (Kwang-ok Kim 16, 18). On the contrary, consumption of traditional Korean food items, including Kimchi, is facing constant decrease since the last two decades (Kyung-Koo Han 151; BBC News 04 Feb. 2014; Chonsunilbo 22 Mar. 2014). More importantly, due to the cheaper production cost, presently in Korea, a large proportion of Kimchi sold in supermarkets and served in restaurants is imported from China. These factors worried the Korean government, the Kimchi industry as well as the media, who frequently relates the loss of market to a loss of cultural ownership over Kimchi (Seoul Sinmun 20 Jul. 2013; Midas Dec 2013). This trend then became a threatening alarm to the Korean government which triggered a series of actions.

To remind Korean people to consume more Kimchi, firstly, the government has nationalized and homogenized Kimchi to be a single cultural item. Citing from Hyojŭng Cho's study of the National Folklore Museum and The Pulmuone Kimchi Museum in Korea, though over 200 types/tastes of Kimchi exist in Korea, the diversity of Korean Kimchi is ignored in the museums, as a way to arouse the sense of belonging amongst Korean people and to indoctrinate that all Koreans eat exactly the same food nationwide (Hyojŭng Cho 215; Kyung-Koo Han 157). Cho also pinpoints that the display boards in the two museums are commonly written in a nationalistic tone. For instance "Our wise ancestor" in Korean script is frequently spotted. She regards it as something with "education purpose" to promote ethnic nationalism amongst Koreans (213). More than merely encouraging Kimchi consumption amongst ethnic Koreans, since the market loss of Kimchi to China is deemed a loss of cultural ownership, "where the Kimchi is produced" and "the origins of the ingredients" are also stressed by the government. The Korean government manipulates the Buddhist philosophy of Sintopuri **신토불이** (which means "body and earth are one") by mixing it with the modern concept of well-being and food safety, in order to assert that "food from Korean soil is best for Korean bodies" (Kwang-ok Kim 18). With this logic, Korean people should not only consume more Kimchi, but only the Kimchi produced in Korea and made with local ingredients, arguing that the wholesomeness of Kimchi can only come into effect in the made-in-Korea ones. For example, Yong-jik Lee, the Deputy

Director of the Division of Food Industry Policy, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Republic of Korea, claimed in an interview:

"It's Korea where those elements exist, so the kimchi made in Korea is full of very healthy enzymes. In China, the ingredients are different, and the environment is different as well, so you don't get the same enzymes. Korean kimchi and Chinese kimchi are two totally different things."(BBC News 04 Feb. 2014).

Also in 2005, amid the competition over Kimchi trade, the Korean Food and Drug Administration announced the discovery of parasite eggs in Chinese Kimchi products, blaming the safety standard of Kimchi produced in China. Rather than being merely a food safety issue, it is also an action of the government with the hidden agenda of encouraging the consumption of domestic Kimchi (Kyung-Koo Han 162). As Raymond Grew argued "it is the greater freedom of choice and availability of more foreign foods causes the issue of identity to arise, and it is the consciousness of change that stimulates the inventive use of tradition," (11) the Korean government's construction of Kimchi with nationalist sentiment is also out of the identity crisis brought about by the declining traditional food culture.

Global Korean Food: Healthy Food and National Image

Other than a source of cultural nationalism within a nation, as depicted in the last section, culinary nationalism also embodies an outward expansion towards the cultural superiority over the others, like what Kushner argued with the example that ramen was exported by the Japanese military government to China as a symbol of modernity and civilization during the World War Two (228). Similarly in Korea, the government and some Korean cultural entrepreneurs considered food as a cultural genre in which "national or ethnic traditions compete with and challenge one another" (Cwierka 264). Hence, in today's promotion of Kimchi overseas, its objectives to gain international recognition, to enhance the national image and to obtain national pride should not be overlooked too. Global Hansik Campaign (한식세계화추진, Global Korean Food Campaign), an international project launched by the Korean government in 2008, officially announced its aim to make Korean cuisine "one of the five most popular ethnic cuisines" in the world by

2017. The Korean Food Foundation, a government funded organization in charge of the campaign, also stated its mission as “making sure that Korean Food is recognized in major foreign countries” (“Our Mission” Official site of Korean Food Foundation, n.d.). Television advertisements, printed advertisements, Korean food fairs, exhibitions are also promotional activities held by the foundation. Amongst the Korean foods, Kimchi, which embodied the strong culinary nationalism in Korean society, has been brought to the forefront of the campaign. For instance in 2011, the government announced the plan for the establishment of the *Kimchi Industry Promotion Act* which aims to “accelerate international awareness of Kimchi” and to “promote overseas market entry and international standardization” (Official Website of Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Republic of Korea 05 Sep. 2011).

With a goal to enhance the national image and pride through Kimchi, gaining recognition and popularity in foreign countries, especially in the United States, is of utmost importance in the campaign. Firstly, indicators of Kimchi's “success” are usually responses in Caucasian societies. For example, in the National Folklore Museum of Korea, the popularity of Kimchi is mostly represented by photos in which Caucasians enjoying the dish, and also a world map of Kimchi export (Hyojŭng Cho 221). In addition, the Korean government particularly rebrands Kimchi to be a “well-being” food, matching the recent international awareness of healthy diet. Hence keywords like “well-being”, “slow food”, “balanced diet”, “anti-obesity”, “prevention of diseases”, “superior in preventing arteriosclerosis” with the support of “scientific research” frequently appear in the publicity of Korean food promotion (Cwiertka 376; “Balance and Harmony” Official Website of The Korean Food Foundation n.d.; Yang, Kim, Shin and Cha 701). Though the reliability is still doubted, promotional phrases like “prevention of SARS” are also commonly referred when introducing Kimchi to foreigners (Official Website of Korea Tourism Organization n.d.). Meanwhile, how foreign media and celebrities evaluate the healthiness of Kimchi also attracted much attention in Korea. The most known example took place in early 2013, when American First Lady Michelle Obama reposted a Kimchi recipe on Twitter. The tweet led to widespread coverage across Korean media, in which Kimchi is thereafter hailed as “The First Lady’s Choice”. A Korean scholar even placed an advertisement of Kimchi

on the New York Times with Michelle Obama's tweet, and later claimed that Kimchi can solve the problem of obesity of American society (The Chosunilbo 12 Feb. 2014; Newis 19 May 2014).



A Kimchi advertisement appeared on page 8, the New York Times on 02 Apr. 2013, described Michelle Obama as a "Kimchi Fans" by displaying her tweet about Kimchi.

(New York Radio Korea 02 Apr. 2013)

Similarly, on the homepage of the Korean Food Foundation, the “healthy awards” given by various foreign media/organizations are listed (“Our Mission” Official Website of the Korean Food Foundation n.d.). To continue this campaign, the Korea government is investing heavily in producing the “scientific proof” by setting up laboratories and funding research projects. As of the year of 2014, the Korean government is due to invest almost USD 9 million in the Research and Development of Korean traditional foods, while USD 34 million will be available for improving Korean food manufacturing facilities (BBC News 04 Feb. 2014). From the plenty of examples above, I would summarize the ultimate aim of Kimchi promotion is “gaining national fame as a country which produces healthy food for people around the world.”

Is “Globalized” Kimchi still Authentic Kimchi?

The goal to gain recognition in foreign lands, yet, led to a question of authenticity. In a bid to maximize foreigners’ reception, the Korean government and the Kimchi-making industry have also invested heavily in the modification of Kimchi’s taste. For example, Kim Soon-ja, an owner of a Kimchi Theme Park, runs a laboratory to work on Kimchi's R&D. In an interview, she said that traditional Kimchi has strong smell and is too spicy for foreigners. Consequently, she is developing a new, less spicy and salty trademark

Kimchi. Meanwhile, the Kimchi recipe retweeted by Michelle Obama is also a version modified according to American's taste (BBC News 04 Feb. 2014). Other than taste modification, the Korean government and some Korean scholars also argued that Kimchi can only be truly globalized through mixing with foreign cuisines (Dong-sŭp Kim 165). For example, the displays in National Folklore Museum and Pulmuwon Kimchi Museum pay much effort on exhibiting how Kimchi is now a “fusion” with foreign countries (Hyojŭng Cho 221); while on the website *Koreataste*, run by the Korean Tourism Organization, a large number of Kimchi fusion recipes were provided in English. In 2010, there was even an English recipe of "Kimchi Bloody Mary" which triggered widespread online discussions (Koreataste, Korea Tourism Organization 22 Nov. 2010.). Mixing Kimchi with cocktail is an extreme example for sure, but the above cases reflected that modifying Kimchi closer to foreign tastes/eating habit is not an uncommon means for Kimchi's globalization.

However, the problem of authenticity emerges. As written before, the Korean government has been keen on emphasizing the authenticity and Koreaness of Kimchi since 2001, by complaining Japan's *Kimuchi* and the Chinese name *Paocai*. Yet, the greatest dilemma today is that, in order to enhance the reception of Kimchi in foreign countries, even the so-called authentic Korean Kimchi is now changing its ingredients and taste to fit the context of globalization. Thus can the Kimchi promoted overseas presently be called authentic Kimchi as claimed by the Korean government? Is the Korean government still legitimate to criticize Japan and China for producing fermented food similar to Kimchi? These questions have illustrated that the attempts of Kimchi globalization indispensably collide with the Koreaness highlighted by the government, thus the whole campaign then inevitably falls into the paradox of globalization and nationalism.

Cultural Nationalistic Approach of Food Advertisements

The 2000s marks the beginning of the global promotion of Korean food, and most of the advertisements featured Korean pop stars. In 2008, the Global Hansik Campaign first invited pop singer Rain to shoot the advertisement of Korean grilled pork and Korean mixed rice (Youtube channel of the Korean Food Foundation 21 Oct. 2011). Later in 2001, K-pop boy band Super Junior was titled the Korean Food Ambassador by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (Official Website of the Ministry

of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Republic of Korea 03 May 2011). In 2013 another boy band CNBLUE took part in the series of Korean food advertisement produced by the Korea Agro-Fisheries Trade Corporation (Youtube channel of the [Korea Agro-Fisheries Trade Corporation](#) 06 Jun. 2013). On the other hand, besides the promotional activities done directly by the Korean government and government-funded organizations, Professor Sŏ Kyŏng-dŏk of Sungshin Women's University in Seoul is also well-known with the endorsement advertisements he made. He produced a number of Korean food endorsement advertisements, featured different Korean celebrities such as Lee Yŏng-ae, and posted them on the New York Times. The one showing Michelle Obama's tweet is also his work (Midas Dec. 2013; Newis 19 May 2014).

As the whole campaign is in the paradox between nationalism and globalization, though targeted at foreigners, nationalistic tones are still readily found in the above advertisements. For example on 12th March 2014, Professor Sŏ Kyŏng-dŏk made an advertisement of Korean grilled beef on the New York Times, featured Chu Shin-soo, a Korean baseball player of Texas. Korean media mostly praised Sŏ's "heroic act" of promoting Korean cultures (Sisainlive 28 Apr. 2014) but many English media gave negative comments due to the its weird use of English. For instance Adweek, a PR magazine in the U.S., teased the advertisement as the "year's oddest celebrity endorsement" (Adweek, 17 Mar. 2014). The incomprehensive vocabulary *Bulgogi* (불고기, which means Korean grilled beef. The word *Bulgogi* is transliteration of its Korean pronunciation), is also a point of criticism (Dailian 23 Mar. 2014). Interestingly, not limited to Professor Sŏ's advertisement, the Korean food names *Bibimbap*, *Kochujang*, *Kalbi* (all are transliterations of Korean dishes) appeared in Rain's and CNBLUE's advertisements also contain the same problem (Youtube channel of the Korean Food Foundation 21 Nov. 2011; The Korea Times 08 Oct. 2013; Zenkimchi 10 Oct. 2013).

Though the critiques seemingly focused on the problem of English, I regard the expression of nationalism in these advertisements to be the source of criticisms, since nationalism is the reason why the Korean government and the PR experts just transliterated the names of dishes instead of telling what the foods exactly are in English. Similar to the government's motivation to replace the Chinese name Paocai by Xinqi, the use of transliterated name is to stress the uniqueness and Korean identity of these Korean foods. But unfortunately these names are incomprehensive and difficult to be understood by the English speakers.

More importantly, other than the transliterated terms, the nationalistic odour found in the advertisements is also explicit. For example, Rain's promotional videos are abruptly ended with a phrase "Great Korea!" (Youtube channel of The Taste of Korea 21 Nov. 2011); while Professor Sō marked a webpage Forthenextgeneration.com on every advertisement he posted on the New York Times. However, the website includes only videos and texts reiterating Korea's positions in Sino-Korean territorial disputes, issues of comfort women, and the Liancourt Rocks dispute with Japan, etc. These further made foreign audience confused and doubt the message and intention behind the food promotions (The Korea Times 19 Mar. 2014; The Korea Times 08 Oct 2013; Adweek, 17 Mar. 2014; Union Press News 30 Mar. 2014). Therefore, as national sentiments were overloaded in the advertisements, despite the original goal to improve Korea's image in the English speaking world, the promotional strategy turned out to be a weird and nationalistic subject.

From the above cases, it is clear that the effect of international advertisements overseas was not very satisfactory. Hence within Korea, more opinions have emerged to doubt the necessity of such campaigns. For example Korean legislator Kim Chae-won criticized that the KRW 760,900,000 spent on Korean food promotions was a waste since no concrete result has been witnessed (Kyunghyang Sinmun 04 Oct. 2012). Especially after Lee Myōng-bak, the former president who launched the campaign, completed his tenure in 2013, the demand for suspension has become greater (The Korea Times 08 Oct 2013; Pandora TV 01 Dec. 2013).

Korean Food Globalization and Sino-Korean Cultural War

Compared to the cases in the English speaking world, the impact of Korean food promotion in Chinese speaking countries is much more complicated. Suggested by Koichi Iwabuchi, the Japanese popular cultures which spread across East Asia in the 1990s were mostly "odourless", since the explicit "Japanese identity" may irritate people in the countries invaded by Japan during the Second World War. In the case of Korean cultures, those with strong Korean odour, in fact, are also prone to nationalistic backlash in Chinese societies due to the long-developed cultural war. Since the 2000s, the cultural nationalism is ever-growing in

both Korea and China as the two countries have been active in making national cultures their Intangible Cultural Heritage listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). However, due to the geographical proximity and ages of cultural interaction since ancient times, China and Korea share a large number of traditional folklores and cultural practices. Thus, when either side tries to make applications to UNESCO for these common cultural practices, cultural nationalism and anti-Korean sentiment will then be triggered in Chinese media and the internet. The most well-known case is the debate over Dano Festival when Korea made it her own UNESCO intangible cultural heritage in 2009 (단오제/端午節, celebrated on 5th May in Luna calendar. It is a festival for shamanistic worship in Korea while the Chinese commemorates a famous poet on that day). Since both Korea and China share the same festival, even though the way of celebration are so different, furious criticisms lamenting the loss of culture can be found across Chinese media (Sun Daily 16 Sep. 2013). In addition, in 2007, similar argument took place when a Celestial Globe was printed on the newly-issued Korean Won bank note, as both countries claimed their ancestors did invent the Globe (Newis 18 Dec. 2007). Similar examples, to name but a few, led to an endless tug-of-war over cultural ownership, while criticisms labelling Korea to be “a theft of culture” are prevalent in Chinese media coverage and the internet constantly. Thus, cultural ownership and authenticity have become sensitive issues in both China and Korea, to an extent that even unproved rumours can easily lead to a strong nationalistic sentiment. In March 2014, the Korean government made an application to UNESCO for her ground heating system (온돌). When being interviewed by the media, the responsible Korean official especially highlighted that China will be the greatest obstacle. In most Korean coverage of this news, the main stress went to the point that “Korea should move faster than China” (Donga Ilbo 17 Mar. 2014). Nonetheless, there was not any Chinese official claiming that the ground heating system should be China’s intangible culture. On the other hand, whenever there is a rumour that Korea is going to “steal” Chinese cultures, Chinese netizens and media tend to believe it and give emotional responses. For instance, in early April 2014, the local government of Henan Province planned to launch the application of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage for Taichi, and one provincial official told the media that Korea is the major competitor. After the news report, a huge wave of criticism emerged on the internet and the number of

hashtags “Korea makes Taichi her own cultural heritage” reached 150,000 on Weibo (Sina 10 Mar. 2014). However, no such kind of plan could be found in Korean media.

Based on this accumulated hostility surrounding cultural ownership, the war has further expanded from shared folklores and festivals to every single national culture of Korea. In March 2013, there was a trend of writing about Chinese gourmet on Weibo because of a popular documentary named *A Bite of China*, and the Korean Embassy in China also started blogging *A Bite of Korea* to recommend Korean food on Weibo. The first post introduced **부대찌개** (Korean hotpot with chili sauce, instant noodles, sausages, ham, Kimchi etc.) and led to hot discussions amongst Chinese netizens, as the number of comments is 30 times more than other posts of the embassy. However, the comments are mostly very disdainful, saying that “Korean food culture is only Kimchi and Kimchi”, “How come instant food can be a gourmet?”, “Chinese food culture is much richer than Korean one” etc., and the embassy has discontinued the series since then (Tencent News 22 Mar. 2013). In this incident, Chinese comments online were mostly very cultural nationalistic, and this reflects that Chinese netizens and media tend to scorn every “Korean culture” promoted by the Korean government. On the same ground, I consider this relentless struggle of cultural identity in both countries to be the reason why the name *Xinqi* faces backlash. Though China and Korea had never fought over the cultural ownership of Kimchi, looking through the news headlines in P.R. China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, most of them criticise the cultural nationalism of Korea, saying that Korea always claims ownership over everything and deny the Chinese origins of Korean cultures (Ettoday News 08 Nov. 2013; Xinmin News 21 Mar. 2014; Ctitv 03 Dec. 2013). Until this point, in the supermarkets and restaurants in Hong Kong, rarely can we find the new “official” name *Xinqi*. To conclude, largely due to the tension between Korean and Chinese cultural nationalism, the *Xinqi* campaign only added fuel to the Sino-Korean cultural war.

Conclusion

All in all, by witnessing the rebranding and promotion of traditional food culture, the effect of globalization led to the competition between global modernity and local nationalism in Korea. The more

prevalent are the foreign food and dining cultures in Korea, the more active the Korean government is in strengthening her national identity through traditional food like Kimchi, in an attempt to counteract globalization through globalizing national cultures. However, this intention itself embodies the paradox between suiting the world market and stressing national identity. Thus the international advertisements of Korean food are inevitably mixed with nationalistic tone, which consequently made foreign audience find them difficult to appreciate. While in China, since the netizens and media have long been irrationally hostile to Korean cultures due to the accumulated Sino-Korean cultural war, the move of promoting the Koreaness of Kimchi did only intensify the emotional struggle of cultural identities in the two countries.

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