Aesthetics of Korean foods: The symbol of Korean culture

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1. Introduction

Modern society is the era of developing a new taste. Natural and refined food culture is the symbol of the privilege of the elite. Typically, it is said that the desire to seek high-quality food comes after the craving for luxurious goods. Expensive clothes and luxurious bags are a means of showing-off the wealth to buy them. However, eating is a cultural experience for every day or every meal. It is a one-of-a-kind experience that is shared with people eating together. Dainty (epicurean) sense, topic for conversation, and cultural taste must be laid out behind this experience.

Economic allowance and cultural taste are necessary to spend money for such eating. However, what if you do not have enough money but have refined taste? When French cuisine was expensive in the past, intellectuals with less money preferred Italian or Chinese cuisine because they were cheaper than French cuisine and still offered an experience of other cultures. Recipes which uniquely combined peasantry cooking were adopted in the past. This adaptation may be considered a contemporary cuisine. The birth of a contemporary cuisine took the course similar to the birth of contemporary art, which is a significant trend in the world art market.

During the late 20th century, the United States led the world's economy and politics. The world’s food culture was also led by the United States in the direction of efficiency, easy calorie absorption, reduced eating time, and a decrease in the cost of production through mechanization, automation, and mass production. Namely, American fast food and family restaurants were prevailing.

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Available online 14 September 2016

Accepted 6 August 2016

22 July 2016

Article history:

Received in revised form

Received 16 March 2016

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However, it is clear that American fast food is declining, and Asian slow food is rising in the 21st century due to its diversity and cultural uniqueness. The 21st century is an era of an information-oriented society. In this postmodern era, the food culture is also changing. Its focus is shifting from “fast and much” to “slow and healthy.” The mainstream food culture will be “returning to nature” which is focused on health and environment. Moreover, new elite classes who are living in this global era accept various kinds of foreign foods easily. Organic Asian food is welcomed by the elite classes who are living in this global era accept various kinds of changing. Its focus is shifting from healthy.

Is it a foolish dream to seize the taste of people around the world because of their diversity, uniqueness, and healthiness [2]. The trend of world food culture is heading towards the Orient from the West because of their diversity, uniqueness, and healthiness [2]. What shall we do? Traditional food has to be considered in a cultural code. If not, Korean food will not survive. We have excellent food such as kimchi and a dish of mixing cooked and seasoned vegetables for the “well-being” generation. We need to package and promote these to the international level and to claim a firm position for our food among advanced countries in the 21st century. For this, it is necessary to read about and communicate Korean food through a cultural aspect. The answer is simple. We can make food a cultural product. Korean food has already become an excellent cultural product, which has caught the attention of the world, and it also has great future opportunity.

The drama “Daejanggeum (大長今)” (Fig. 1), which was a great hit not only in China but also in many Asian countries, even in African countries, shows how cooking can make a region as the grounds for sustaining our food life. This was a live text example that showed how Korean food can become globalized. Jangkeum was a local scientist and a medical scholar. Her cooking process involved an integrated action with knowledge on the ingredient, local ecosystem, and the effect of food on the body. The reason Daejanggeum was such a big hit was not only because it “directly” showcased Korean food, but it interestingly revealed that cooking

Fig. 1. Dae Jang Geum, a television series produced and broadcasted by MBC based on the life of the first woman to become a royal physician in the Joseon era. It depicts the use of various traditional foods to treat certain ailments, as well as the story of how the heroine became the king’s personal physician.
affects other lives while using the resource of social relationship and local resource. With the big hit of Daejanggeum, many foreign people understood Korean food and they wanted to learn more about Korean food culture. Cooking is to pursue the knowledge on the local ecosystem and a way to cure our body. The food itself needs to be developed as an excellent cultural product, at the same time it is also important to be developed as cultural contents.

3. Aesthetics of Korean food

An old Korean proverb says “What looks good tastes good.” In short, ancient Koreans carefully considered both the taste and visual appeal when preparing food. In the authors’ opinions, not many cultures can match Korea’s devotion to the aesthetics of its cuisine. Analyzing Korean food from an aesthetic standpoint, therefore, is an incredibly meaningful and fascinating endeavor.

3.1. Foods that show the aesthetics of mixing (harmonization)

One of the Korean dishes, that had in many ways succeeded in being widely acquainted with global tastes and which is emerging as one of the representative dishes of Korean food is “bibimbap” [6] and “tangpyungchae (蕩平菜).”

3.2. Global dish—bibimbap

Bibimbap (Fig. 2A) is truly a unique dish. We are so used to it that we forget its uniqueness, but there is nothing in the world that is a messy mixture of ingredients like bibimbap is. Bibimbap is a very colorful dish with various colorful vegetables and eggs, which are mixed with the addition of gochujang (red chili paste) [7], making its texture very different from what it was in the beginning. Furthermore, its taste is very unique. This is because the mixture of the ingredients gives this dish a taste that is of a different dimension altogether, and yet, paradoxically, you can actually taste all of its individual ingredients. This is where the mystery of bibimbap lies—there is the unique taste of mixture, and yet, there are also tastes of individual ingredients. This dish truly reflects the character of the Korean people—we love to mix and group together. There are many Korean dishes that involve mixing and harmonization.

In written literature [8], Korean people like bibimbap, also called bubibumbap (mixing bap) in ancient times, for thousands of years [6], thus bibimbap can probably be categorized as one of most famous traditional dishes. Bibimbap was written as “hondonban (混沌飯)” and “koldongban (骨董飯)” in Chinese characters by taking the original meaning of bibimbap (cooked rice with many vegetables) [6], which does not hold much meaning except it suggests the meaning of “orderly or disorderly mixture (混混沌).” Bibimbap has now become not just a national cuisine, but a global one. This is especially so in Japan, where it is known that bibimbap’s popularity is at its peak. The Japanese took it one step further and started to make bibimbap as a fast food item. They developed the take-out bibimbap in disposable containers with the rice and vegetables and the sauce.

Bibimbap, before mixing, looks like a well-maintained garden. It is a well-blended and familiar harmony of cooked yellow bean sprouts, cooked white roots of balloon flowers, natural wooden colored bracken, well fried marinated meat (or red raw meat), and chungpomuk [green-mungbean muk (muk is a jelly-like food)]. It is truly what is called in an old Chinese saying a “fiery blossom of a hundred flowers (百花齊放),” or what is called the “flower dish.” Therefore, bibimbap is characterized by the fact that its flowery beauty fades by mixing, giving birth to an even greater taste. Not only does mixing enhance its taste, bibimbap’s beauty is also typified by each ingredient giving its distinct and exquisite taste upon the harmonization (mixing) of the ingredients.

Bibimbap is suggestive of the character of the Korean people. We love to mingle and group with other people, and bibimbap seems to represent this aesthetic of mixing very well. Some people summarize this Korean character of combining many elements and mixing them into one in an expression “Korean culture is of a bundle culture.” Koreans like to carry any contents in a bundle. Also, gochujang that combines all these ingredients together is an extraordinary food item (see the article “Sunchang Gochujang” by Kim et al in this issue). It is impossible to imagine bibimbap without the gochujang. The beauty about gochujang is that it not only unites different vegetables into one taste, it also actually combines a variety of tastes with one another. Many people say

Fig. 2. Traditional food. (A) Bibimbap: various kinds of healthy vegetables and a small amount of meat are put into a bowl of nicely boiled rice. Then a generous amount of gochujang is added to mix these ingredients together. (B) Tangpyungchae: the word “tangpyung (蕩平)” means “balance”, meaning not to lean onto one side, so most people are aware that this policy was established and enforced in order to resolve the conflicts between different political parties. The dish of “tangpyungchae” represents the intention or motive of the “tangpyungchae” policy. (C) Juchae: Juchae is a mixture of meats, carbohydrates, vitamins, dietary fibers, and vegetables and actually becomes a complete food similar to bibimbap with harmonization.
that bibimbap represents the convergence of various vegetables and sometimes meats [6].

3.3. Reconciliation dish—tangpyungchae

Tangpyungchae (蕩平茶) is also a well-harmonized mixture of chungpo-muk (green mungbean-muk, jelly-like food), beef meat, and vegetables. There are no available records that indicate how this particular dish got its name. It is clear, however, that the beauty of the dish’s balanced assortment of acorn jellies, beef meat, and vegetables. There are no available records that mixture of chungpo-muk 3.4. Highly nutritious dish—japchae

Japchae (雜菜) is also another dish that is empowered by the philosophy of mixture (Fig. 2C) as in tangpyungchae. It is mixed with meat and vegetables with Korean noodles (簡慢, tangmyun noodle from the starch of sweet potato) rather than chungpo-muk. Japchae is well mixed with meats, carbohydrates, vitamins, dietary fibers, and vegetables and actually becomes a complete food like bibimbap with harmonization. Japchae is one of the most popular dishes among Koreans, and is also widely popular amongst foreigners based on the preferences of Korean food. It is popularly believed that japchae is a very traditional Korean food, but it is controversial whether they used noodle in the original japchae. However, when japchae is mentioned, people tend to think about the noodle and find it difficult to imagine japchae without the noodles.

3.5. Gujeolpan and shinsunro

Although not commonly seen in everyday life, gujeolpan (九折坂) and shinsunro (神仙壠) are two dishes that embody the culinary principles of harmony and variety. Yet, rather than everyday platters that were enjoyed by average citizens, they were used more for ceremonial purposes such as ancestral rites and weddings. Many have claimed that shinsunro, in particular, was a palatial delicacy, but all research thus far shows that it was a ceremonial dish and was not served in palaces. Many people continue to misunderstand this distinction, necessitating further research and public clarification.

As an extraordinary dish for ancestral rites or ceremonies, its recipe does not appear in any book from the Chosun era. Even a lacquered dish box for gujeolpan excavated from Kyungju Cheonmachong (天馬陁, a king’s tomb of the Shilla dynasty) shows that this dish is only for ceremonies when a death occurs.

There hides a very deep philosophy in this dish. It is known that there is the principle of cosmic dualism (yin and yang, 隱陽) and Five Elements (五行) in our traditional dishes. Amongst our many traditional dishes, there is none that this principle is realized more than gujeolpan. In gujeolpan, the duality (yin and yang) between vegetable (yin) and meat (yang) are well in unison. Furthermore, each ingredient has five different colors (blue, red, yellow, white, and black) and five different flavors (tart, bitter, sweet, hot, and salty), making it an extraordinary combination. These flavors are combined together in harmony by wrapping these ingredients with the wheat flour pancake-shaped dough placed at the center compartment for consumption. Thus, this dish is the most authentic version of Korean “wrap” cuisine culture.

Shinsunro (神仙壠) is one of the representative ceremonial dishes of Korea (not as a royal food). This is the reason why most people may not be aware of this dish. However, it has been introduced frequently in books as a royal food, especially in books like traveller’s dining guides of Korea etc [11]. However, there is no evidence that shinsunro (神仙壠) is a royal food in the Chosun Dynasty. “Shinsun” means a mountain wizard or a wise man, and “ro (羅)” means a vessel or container. Shinsunro, in one word, is a kuk (soup) of the very best of flavors that contain rare ingredients of both vegetables and meat. Most people can remember the shapes of the shinsunro dish as displayed on ceremonial tables. As ceremonial foods to the ancestral rite, people are willing to pay for expensive ingredient items. There are more than 25 ingredients that include beef rib, shreds of lightly boiled omasum, shreds of oil-fried chicken or pheasant, egg battered slices of crucian carp or mullet, dried abalone, sea cucumber, spring onion, Korean leek, dropwort, turnip, pheasant, egg battered slices of crucian carp or mullet, dried abalone, sea cucumber, spring onion, Korean leek, dropwort, turnip, root, radish root, ginger, green chili leaf (green red pepper leaf), pine nuts, date, ginkgo nuts, the white of an egg, and so on [16]. The aesthetics of shinsunro also focused on respecting the ancestors and going together among descendant with harmonization.

3.6. Foods that exhibit the aesthetics of waiting slowly (fermented food): kimchi, kanjang, doenjang, and gochujang

One of special characteristics of Korean food is that many of them are fermented. Needless to say, kimchi is the most favored fermented food [7,17]. Soy sauce and soy bean paste are also very important [18]. Bibimbap and the others mentioned above are mixed together physically; however, in kimchi and others fermentation takes place chemically for a long time within ingredients by the consilience action of microorganisms.

3.7. The Korean people’s food—kimchi

Some Korean food scientists cautiously assert that kimchi is the best vegetable dish invented by Koreans. The fermented vegetable is called “dimchae” and is written as “joo (聚)” [12,19]. This

1 The teaching of the Yin-Yang and Five-Elements Theory consists of two parts: light (sunny)/dark (night) and five movements. Together they were believed to govern the universe. Light and dark consist of the moon and sun and the five movements consist of fire, wood, water, metal, and earth. Each day of the week was named after these seven elements: sun for Sunday (日), moon for Monday (月), fire for Tuesday (火), water for Wednesday (水), wood for Thursday (木), metal for Friday (金), and soil for Saturday (土).
Chinese character jeo (菹) is also found in China and Japan. Some food scientists, especially Joo [20] claim that the Chinese salted vegetable, paochai (泡菜), is the originator of Korean kimchi. However, once you get to know the characteristics of kimchi, you will see that the claim of Chinese salted vegetable as the originator of Korean kimchi is totally wrong [21]. To make kimchi, cabbages need to be mixed well with all kinds of vegetables, Korean red pepper, and jeotgal (fish seasonings) [22]. When it produces beneficial elements such as Lactobacilli through the process of fermentation, it can then be called kimchi. Therefore, kimchi and paochai are totally different. Kimchi is a food that embodies the aesthetics of mixing, a leading principle of Korean food. Vegetables are mixed with various seasonings and fermented anchovy or shrimp to make kimchi in a totally different form of food. That is why kimchi is called the best vegetable dish ever invented. Remarkably, only Korean red pepper, among hundreds of kinds of red peppers, can be used to make kimchi [21,23]. Capsaicin, the element that makes red pepper spicy has a lot of vitamin C and antioxidant properties which slows down aging. Furthermore, red pepper inhibits the growth of harmful microorganisms but promotes the growth of beneficial microorganisms (Lactobacillus) and prevents food from getting spoiled. The difference between Japanese and Chinese salted vegetables and Korean kimchi lies here. The Japanese salted vegetables, tsukemono and paochai, require a lot of salt to keep the vegetable from getting spoiled by microorganisms [21]. However, Korean kimchi does not require a lot of salt because it uses red pepper powder to control the harmful and beneficial microbial growth. In this sense, it is very scientific to use red pepper powder in kimchi. Thus, kimchi could not be stored for a long time in ancient times, even though it can be stored for a couple of days. Nowadays, however, it can be stored for a long time in kimchi fridges.

3.8. History of kimchi

The history of kimchi has been well described in previous papers [17,19,21]. From the tribal Kingdom Period (三國時代; 0–7 AD), cabbage kimchi was a favorite food and Korea red pepper was cultivated [24]. Diverse vegetable kimchi such as cucumber, leek, dropwort, bamboo shoot, radish, eggplant, leek, and other kimchi were served in Korean bapsang [17] since the Koryo Dynasty. The origin name of kimchi is dimchae (딤채) and dihi (디히) in Korean (Fig. 3B), but some people—especially men—want to write it in Chinese characters as chimchae (沈菜) or jeochae (菹菜), respectively [19].

Over 200 types of kimchi are known to date. Probably, there is no nation in the world except for the Koreans to have the tenacity to develop 200 varieties from a food. They found that more than 200 kimchi can be prepared with various kinds of vegetables and with different kinds of yangnyum and jeotgals [17,22]. In “Imwonsipyukji (林園十六技),” a book written by Sub [25] (1827) in Chinese characters, more than 90 types of kimchi are listed. The author, a man,
included Chinese types of salted vegetables in the kimchi category such as umjangchae, jachae, and jeochea. He also wrote kimchi in Chinese characters as chimchae (沈菜) instead of jeo (蔥) by imitating the meaning and pronunciation of dimchae (蔥) in Korean. In contrast, in Duhangkyounghumbang (痘瘡經驗方) [14] and Ahakpyeon (見學編) [15], kimchi is written as jimmichi (浸汁) and kimchi (漬汁) in Korean (Figs. 3C and 3D). She mentioned the types of kimchi in this book including winter kimchi, vegetable preserved in soy sauce [26], and abalone kimchi made with abalone, citron, and pear. Maybe Suh wrote a book by copying the given published book in Korea and China because he never prepared kimchi, while Lee [26] wrote a book based on the experiences of making kimchi and other Korean foods. This is the reason why Suh’s book mentions different kinds of kimchi made with Chinese vegetables which were not favored by Korean women.

Kimchi contains scientific ancestor’s wisdom. Geographically over the years, the type of kimchi has been verified in number to be about 200, and each region of Korea has invented with new types of kimchi. For example, Korean lettuce kimchi developed in jeolla-do, kat-kimchi in Chollanam-do [27], bossam kimchi in Kaesung in North Korea, and Kukuri in Chongju in Chunchung-do, and so on. It is true to say that kimchi is one of the greatest inventions of the Korean people.  

3.9. The older, the better: kanjang and doenjang

When we talk about fermented food, we cannot omit soy sauce and soy bean paste [18]. It is never enough to emphasize the importance of these. Almost all Korean foods require kanjang (soy sauce) as a seasoning, and gochujang (red pepper paste) [7] and doenjang (soy bean paste) are important ingredients that determine the flavor of kuk and chigae [28,29]. Thus, sauce is the most important ingredient that determines the taste of a food. Accordingly, kanjang and doenjang are used like a synonym or pronoun for Korean food.  

Koreans love kuk and chigae [28,29], and kanjang and doenjang are the basic ingredients for these. This point is the essence of Korean food. A food tastes very different when it is eaten in different conditions. In particular, the temperature of the food is very important. Usually, a food tastes best when it is eaten right after it is cooked. However, there are foods that taste better with time. There are many traditional Korean foods that embody the aesthetics of waiting. Recently, slow food (in comparison with fast food) is receiving attention worldwide as health food. There was a practical reason for the development of sauces in Korea. In the past, there was no refrigerator, and preserved foods were very important for eating at a much later time [30]. They became basic Korean foods. Kimchi is one example, and jang (soy sauce) is the basic seasoning [7,17]. In particular, soy sauce was made with soy bean and it was an excellent source of protein. Therefore, the skill to make excellent soy sauce was the shortcut to keep family members healthy. How long does it take to make Korean representative slow foods, kanjang and doenjang? It takes about 5–6 months to make these [18]. How many foods in the world take this long to make except for wine?

The term “slow food” was coined in Italy against fast food but no other country has more slow foods than Korea. Korea has a lot of fermented foods. There are countless fermented foods including kimchi, a variety of jeotgal (seafood) [22], and jang-jeolim (salted vegetables) [7]. What is the basic principle behind these fermented foods? It can be summarized in one word, and that is “waiting.” In other words, these foods taste differently according to the fermentation process. As for the case of soy sauce, the older the better. It is well expressed in the saying, “use the kanjang made when the mother was pregnant with a child for the child’s wedding.” The best kanjang is almost black, solid, and is aged for over 60 years. Some are aged for over 60 years. However, doenjang and gochujang are made every year in principle. The Korean food culture is beyond any imagination. When I study traditional Korean food culture, I feel the depth of Korean culture. But not all sauces are aged this long like kanjang. Various seasonal sauces also demonstrate the skills of Korean people in fermented food. As these sauces are made of soy bean, they are very nutritious. Furthermore, recent studies have discovered the anticancer effects of soy bean paste [18].

3.10. Foods that show the aesthetics of care of seok-ggakdugi, seop-sanjeok, and tarak-juk

The reason for the existence of these foods is because Chosun was a Confucian society. Confucianism teaches to respect or care one’s seniors. Therefore, there were foods that took the elderly into account. These are very thoughtful foods that cared about the majority and the elderly.

ggakdugi ( 까득두기 ) is tasty but a little hard to chew. As the elderly do not have good teeth, it is difficult for them to chew. This is why seok-ggakdugi (석נכ두기; Fig. 4A) was made and it is simple to make. Before making ggakdugi, with radish, the radish is steamed first. When the radish is steamed, it becomes soft and easy to chew. Another example is seop-sanjeok (설산조; Fig 4B). Most elderly people know sanjeok. Beef fillet is minced, marinated with soy sauce, and broiled. It was an excellent source of protein when beef was rare. However, there was a slight problem with this food. Unless the beef was very soft, the food was too tough to chew and not good for the elderly. However, the elderly like beef just like most people. Seop-sanjeok is a food made for the elderly who like beef. It is a sanjeok but is easy to chew. Tarakjuk (타락죽; Fig. 4C) is one of the representative foods that demonstrate the reverence for the elderly in the Chosun period. The elderly can digest juk (porridge) more easily than rice bap [17] due to teeth problems. In addition, milk is added for nutrition, especially for malnourished seniors. Now, milk is everywhere, but it was a precious food in the Chosun period. Such a precious ingredient was used to show reverence for the elderly.

3.11. Foods that show the aesthetics of beauty

Our ancestors always pursued beauty in their life, such as in constructing houses, clothing, dancing, and even in preparing foods. They showed beauty especially in preparing the colorful foods by some yangnyum [17] and additives. Considering Korean food, there are many great visual factors such as the natural colors of ingredients of Korean food containing beauty that is hard to find anywhere else.

3.12. Pyun (jelly-like cookie): vegetable starch

There are many Korean foods that embody the aesthetics of beauty. Firstly, cherry pyun (pyun is a jelly-like cookie; Fig. 5A) is a beautiful food that shows the fantastic sense of color and scientific mind of our ancestors. Western fruit jelly is made of fruit juice and animal gelatin, and it feels soft. However, Korean pyun is made of starch. Starch can be obtained from a variety of pulse crops; in particular the starch from mung beans has the best texture. Our ancestors used mung beans to make mung bean starch and made pyun using the coagulating characteristic of starch.

In order to make colorful and beautiful pyun, fruit juice is firstly made with the fruit of omija ( Maximowiczia typical), apricots, or strawberries. It is then boiled over a low heat and cooled after adding mung bean starch into the fruit juice. Various colors of pyun
such as yellow and green depending on the mung bean and fruits used were created (Fig. 5B). As it is made with plant starch rather than animal gelatin, it is softer than Western jelly. The softness created by mung bean starch cannot be compared with gelatin. It is not just the softness that charms us. Cherry pyun (pyun from cherry) has a clear, transparent, red color, which is beautiful enough to amaze us. It is easy to say how to cook this food, but it is really difficult to make it delicious and look beautiful. Unlike the gelatin that coagulates easily, mung bean starch requires an excellent control of heat to make it coagulate. And it needs to be cooked over a low heat with extreme care to bring out the clear and transparent color. In other words, our ancestors had the scientific wisdom to apply the coagulating characteristic of mung bean to a food.

3.13. Vegetable hoe (膾): vegetable sashimi

Among Japanese foods, sashimi is known throughout the world. The sliced fresh/raw fish or aged fish without cooking can be eaten with wasabi soy sauce. In Korea, some colorful vegetables such as dropwort, green onion (scallion), or bamboo shoot are eaten with gochujang vinegar sauce as sashimi, and called vegetable hoe (膾). In a book called “Korean foods transferred to Japan” written by Jeong [31], the sashimi preparation method might be a food transferred from Korea to Japan, and from vegetables to fish. However, his idea is not fully supported scientifically.

Dropwort and green onion (scallion) are the vegetables used for this type of dish, and it is not difficult to make. This dish can be made simply or as complicated as you choose. You can parboil green onion or dropwort and bamboo shoots, rinse them in cold water, roll it, and eat it with gochujang vinegar sauce (Fig. 5C). You can then enjoy the true taste and flavor of the simple vegetable dish. This kind of dish is very good for health. Green onion and dropwort contain a lot of vitamins and bioactive compounds. In particular, in spring, people need a lot of vitamins. We cannot help but be impressed by the fresh green color and excellent nutrition of the fresh parboiled green onion and dropwort. Korean people had a delicate palate and enjoyed sashimi made not only of fish but of vegetables.

Dropwort tastes the best in late winter when it starts to sprout. There is a saying [32] “The best time to go to the in-laws for the New Year’s greetings is the time to eat dropwort.” This means that around the 15th of January, the first full-moon (dae-boreum) in the lunar calendar, dropwort tastes best and you may want to delay your New Year’s greetings until then. This saying conveys men’s reluctance to go to the in-laws through the food humorously. It is also interesting to see that people enjoyed the taste of fresh vegetables in season and tried to seek the delicacy at the right time. As seen from these accounts, Korean food is filled with taste and charm.

3.14. The beauty of seon (膳): oiseon (cucumber) and hobakseon (zucchini)

One of the dishes that please our eyes is decorated vegetables and foods called seon (膳). Seon is similar to kimchi; however, it is not fermented vegetables and also not steamed cooking vegetables. Oi-seon was prepared with fresh cucumber and hobak-seon was prepared with slightly blanched Korean zucchini not pumpkin (Fig. 5F). Another similar food using cucumber is oi-sobaki (오이소 박이) kimchi, which was prepared using fresh cucumber stuffed with some yangnyum [17] but fermented. We called these yangnyum “소(소).”

The preparation method of oi-seon is very similar to how oi-sobaki kimchi is made. Just stuffing some yangnyum within the sliced fresh cucumber or slightly blanched zucchini is enough to make this dish. Using steamed fish, oiseon can be prepared by
making a fish fillet, stuffing, rolling it, and steaming it. The “so” (yangnyum) is important for these seon, generally cooked beef, mushroom, and pan-fried egg are preferred because of the taste, flavor, and color. The color and smell of cucumber or squash is maintained and the color harmony of beef, mushroom, and yellow and white pan-fried egg makes this dish look very beautiful. When pine nuts are sprinkled over it, the dish looks scrumptious and enhances the taste as well. The crunch taste of cucumber or

Fig. 5. Traditional snacks. (A) Cherry pyun is a traditional Korean snack (hangwa) made from a mix of sifted cherries, honey, and starch that is boiled down and hardened. (B) Omija-pyun is a type of hangwa made with honey, sugar, and starch that are cooled down and hardened in an omija infusion. It is cut into slices for serving. (C) Dropwort hoe is raw or blanched dropwort that is served with chogochujang. (D) Green onion hoe is a dish made from washed rolled green onions that are either consumed blanched or raw with chogochujang (a type of red pepper sauce). (E) Bamboo shoot hoe consists of soft bamboo shoots that are blanched and cut into thick slices then served with chogochujang. (F) Oi-seon is a dish made from cucumber stuffed with beef, mushrooms and eggs. (G) Hobak-seon is a steamed pumpkin dish with stuffing.
zucchini is mixed with a small amount of beef, mushroom, and egg to create a refreshingly delicious taste.

The color harmony and the refreshing taste of steamed cucumber or squash hold us in awe. Personally, I think we can boast of this dish to the world. This is because it uses vegetables as basic ingredients but a small amount of animal ingredients add the savory flavor. Furthermore, the ideal ratio between vegetables and beef make it an excellent health food. Compared with salads from Western countries, Koreans cooked and enjoyed vegetables in a variety of ways. This variety puts Korean foods into a class distinguishable from other countries' cuisine. This proves that Koreans truly love and care about food. Otherwise, this kind of dish could not have existed.

3.15. Colorful transformation of cow feet: cow feet jelly

In addition to plant muk (jelly), Koreans also like animal originated muk (jelly). Most well-known food made of animal foot is pork hock, but for making jelly cow's feet are used. This soft and chewy texture comes from gelatin, which is also used to make a fruit jelly in Western countries. This means that our ancestors knew that cow feet had collagen and that it turns into gelatin when collagen is boiled for a long time. Pan-fried egg, thin red pepper slices, green onion, and other spices are added to these boiled gelatinous cow feet to enhance the color, taste, and nutrition. That is why this surpasses the fruit jelly of Western countries.

It is written that the preparation method of cow feet jelly was originally written in old literature, “Onghujipji (応和集記). 優軌雑志” by Suh (徐宥憲) who is also the author of “Imwonsipuji (林園十六志)” [25]. However, unfortunately, this book does not exist anymore. Thus, we can conjecture method by the quotes from “Imwonsipuji.” To make this dish, cow feet are boiled for a long time, and seasoning is added to it. It is amazing to see the transformation of ugly cow feet into this beautiful dish that is soft and chewy.

3.16. Foods that show the aesthetics of refinement (elegance)

3.16.1. Seasonal foods

In our previous paper [5], we analyzed the aesthetics of Korean food in terms of seasonal foods. Here, we review the aesthetics of refinement of Korean foods based on this paper. Each country has a long history of agricultural society. Korea has more than 5,000 years of agricultural history. In the agricultural society, seasonal foods were very important. It was because agricultural society revolved around the seasons. Each season of the agricultural schedule marked a point in time, and special food was prepared for each occasion. Therefore, our ancestors followed the principle of eating food by its season. Korea has four distinct seasons, and the best food is made of seasonal ingredients. This kind of food is called healthy food (補食食品). Foods related to folk medicine or folk religion were also healthy foods, and eating this kind of healthy food forms its own food culture. Therefore, eating seasonal food was considered very important, and people never skipped making and eating special seasonal food. It went well with the characteristics of Korean people who enjoyed the refinement of their unique food culture [3].

Firstly, when we look at seasonal customs, we can see that these are celebrated with food. For example, among many seasonal customs, Seolnal (lunar new year) and Chuseok (秋夕, full-moon of Lunar August similar to Thanksgiving day) are representative holidays that are related to food. Probably, it needs no detailed explanation. Teok-kuk (rice cake: kuk) (Fig. 6A) and Songpyun (crescent moon-shaped rice cake; Fig. 6B) were made and shared with family and neighbors.

Secondly, seasonal food brings out the best of the food ingredients in season for health. This kind of food is called “sijesolj” meaning seasonal food. For example, bosintang (dog meat hot-pot) eaten by some people (evidently, not a pet owner) in the hottest days of summer, yongbongtang made of chicken and crucian carp, and samkyetang with chicken and jinseng. It was a way to maintain health by adapting to the physiological changes caused by seasonal changes. In addition, “seasonal herbs” that used seasonal material such as tree sap and motherwort were also very beneficial. These plants keep people healthy throughout the hot summer. At the same time, seasonal food supplemented nutrition. For example, Iphun (立春, start of spring) falls in late December or early January in the lunar calendar. Osinban (Fig. 6C) made of fresh vegetables sprouted under the snow was eaten to supplement the vitamins that were lacking in the diet during the long winter. Osinban is made of five different vegetables including the first sprout of green onion, leaf mustard, angelica, radish, and ginger. It is a spicy dish that stimulates the appetite.

Thirdly, it seems that seasonal customs played an important role in comforting the common people. In the past, people did not have enough to eat, but on holidays, they enjoyed special foods such as rice cake and cookies, as seasonal food is the product of an agricultural culture. Seasonal foods are significant also in that they were used for the ceremonial rites for the Gods.

3.16.2. Beef eaten on a snowy night: seolyamyeok

When we think of Korean food, bulgogi (Fig. 6D) comes to our mind first. Bulgogi means meat broiled over heat which is written as Maekjeok (鴨炙) in Chinese characters. “Maek (鴨) means the area, northeast of China of the present time or kokuryo (高句麗) and jeok (炙) is meat brochure broiled over heat according to “Yegi (鴨記)” [34]. Thus, maekjeok means grilled meat of Kokuryo. Even bulgogi is a Korean ethnic food, but the written character is Chinese characters. The food written in Chinese characters never means Chinese food. For this reason, they cannot say the origin of bulgogi is Maekjeok (鴨炙) and Chinese people liked this and it was served first during important feasts.

In the world, not many people cook meat as deliciously as the Koreans do. Steak is the representative meat dish of Western countries. It is classified into only three types: rare, medium, and well done. But Korean meat-cooking methods are truly diverse. In a book called “Haedongjikui (海東竹枝)” [35], it says “Seolyamyeok (雪夜風炙) is a specialty of Kaesonghu. Beef rib or heart is seasoned with spices and oil, broiled until it is half cooked, then dipped in cold water for a while, and broiled over high heat again. The meat is then soft and tasty and it is a wonderful side dish for rice wine on a winter night. Seolyamyeok means meat eaten on a snowy night. Its name is romantic and beautiful. It is no wonder that bulgogi is considered as one of the representative Korean foods. In particular, bulgogi tastes best when it is broiled over charcoal. Currently, a lot of research is being carried out about charcoal as it emits the mystic far infrared rays.

Heat is very important in cooking bulgogi to create excellent flavor. Korean people knew when meat tastes the best. Furthermore, they knew meat tastes the best on a snowy night and gave the dish a romantic name like seolyamyeok. They certainly knew that different moods create different flavors.

3.16.3. Azalea rice cake: rice cake of refinement

One important characteristic of the Korean people is that they enjoy drinking and dancing. In the spring, women went to the hills and mountains to pick azalea flowers to make azalea rice cake and enjoyed the season. In the spring, they picked mugwort and made mugwort rice cake and steamed mugwort.
Fig. 6. Traditional food. (A) Tteok-kuk is a type of kuk (soup) made with thinly sliced rice cake boiled in a clear broth. (B) Song pyun is a type of rice cake made from nonglutinous rice flour dough that is molded, stuffed, and steamed. (C) Osinban refers to namul (herbs or roots) made from five pungent vegetables. (D) Bulgogi is a dish made from thinly sliced beef that is marinated then grilled on a gridiron. (E) Juuk is a type of pan-fried rice cake made from glutinous rice flour dough that is stuffed and molded like song pyun. (F) Tteok (rice cake) is made from steamed or boiled grain flour that is molded into various shapes. Azalea tteok (rice cakes made with azalea petals). (G) Rainbow tteok (rice cakes colored with gardenia, mugwort, or omija infusion).
Flower cake is made with glutinous rice powder. The dough made of glutinous rice is pan fried with oil, and sprinkled with honey or syrup. Sometimes, stuffing is put in the middle and the dough is folded to make what is called “juak” (주각) (Fig. 6F). For the azalea cake, stuffing is what is needed. Round dough is pan fried, and flower petals are placed on the dough to bring out the vivid color of the petals. People knew that azalea flowers were edible. This dish came to exist as Koreans celebrated the change of season with special foods. Rice cake frames have been noticed for their beautiful patterns: uniqueness and naturalism of the embroidered patterns on a rice cake (Fig. 6F). For example, flower-shaped cake is decorated with red jujube, black mana lichen mushroom, green mugwort, yellow pine nuts, and red azalea.

4. Conclusion

The food itself needs to be developed as an excellent cultural product. However, it is also important to be developed as cultural contents. Considering our food, there are many great visual factors. For example, the natural colors of ingredients of Korean food contain beauty that is hard to find anywhere else. Moreover, the garnishes on top of Korean food can be an item of great cultural content. Based on previous papers, our food will be used very practically as contents if humanity scholars and content experts cooperate together with food specialists. As a result, we classify four categories: food as a symbol of power, food as disease prevention and treatment, food as a medium to share affection (情), and food as a medium to communicate with God. Going beyond material abundance, the core values of Korean food strive toward spiritual maturity, consideration for others, and balanced living. Countries need to continue efforts to rediscover and re-evaluate their native traditions, cultures, and customs. Native cuisines—unlike other cultural elements, which have become diluted as a result of globalization—are perceived as retaining the traditions, uniqueness, and diversity of individual cultures. It is more important than ever for people and countries to expand and preserve their respective cultural currencies. This paper is a simple example, but it indicates that our food will be used very practically as contents if humanities scholars and contents experts cooperate together with food specialists.

Conflicts of interest

All authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

References