



KIMCHI AND THE CABBAGE INFERIORITY COMPLEX

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THERE ARE NOW SEVERAL MICHELIN STAR KOREAN restaurants in the United States. This may come as a shock to diasporic Koreans; many of us still bear the childhood scars brought on by our non-Korean friends opening our fridge for a snack and being repulsed by the smell of Korea's national dish, the fermented spicy cabbage called kimchi.

And it's not a shame restricted to children; a Korean doctor I know who worked at a prominent Boston hospital early in his career was told by his boss that the nurses were complaining of his breath. His wife changed her kimchi recipe to include less garlic.

Being Korean in America when I was a child was like being a smoker now. We were pariahs with filthy smelly habits that made our friends not want to come over to play.

Bobby Kwak, a successful entrepreneur based in New York, is all too familiar with this scenario. Today, he is a posterboy for Korean American cool. He is a hip restaurateur,

inventor of the prize-winning *bibimbap* (marinated beef barbecue, vegetables, and a fried egg burger), and owner of Circle—one of New York's hottest nightclubs, catering to high-rolling Koreans. But he recalls that not long ago being Korean was not cool in America. In his swank midtown Manhattan office, I asked him about what it was like growing up as a Korean American in northern New Jersey in the 1970s and 1980s. "It was embarrassing," he said, shielding his face with his hands.

He recalls that a large part of the shame came from the food. "One time when I was in third grade, my mom packed *jjajang myun*"—noodles with black bean sauce—"and *kkakdugi*"—pickled radish—"and put it in a thermos. My teacher made me dump it because the kids were all like, "Who farted?" So I had to tie it up in a plastic bag and take it outside. I was the only Asian American in my school at the time."

I hated Korean food as a child. My nanny was an American of Hungarian descent; she raised me on spaghetti and meatballs, mac and cheese, and stuffed cabbage. When my family moved to Korea, one of the biggest shocks for me was having to eat Korean food every day. The food was too spicy, and there were too many vegetables, some of them tough stems and roots that I was sure weren't edible, and chewing them made me feel like a cow.

My first winter in Korea, I saw something I'd never seen before: a *kinjang*—the nationwide custom of making enough kimchi to last the winter. This seemed to me like the lamest seasonal ritual ever. The Iranians have their annual rose festival in May, when the entire country celebrates roses and

turns them into fragrant rosewater for food and for perfume. In New England, autumn means going apple picking and turning the harvest into pies, apple butter, and cider. In Germany, September and October means beer. Yet in Korea, the whole nation's autumnal agricultural ritual involves cabbage. Every household, rich or poor, takes dozens, scores, even hundreds of heads of Napa cabbage, and piles them into large rubber vats (the same kind in which many women washed their clothes) or, in many cases, the bathtub. Every individual leaf of every head of cabbage has to be massaged individually with a mixture of red pepper, salt, garlic, and fermented anchovy paste. To me this makes about as much sense as making sure there were enough cow pies to last the winter.

From an early age, I found *kinjang* absurd and irrational, which of course it wasn't. The fermentation process gave kimchi a long shelf life, enabling Koreans to eat vegetables all winter long and avoid vitamin deficiencies. Regardless of its origins, however, witnessing this ritual made me feel like Gulliver in all those strange lands with their incomprehensible customs. Gulliver arrives in new land and discovers acrid smell; finds whole country massaging cabbages; concludes they are doing it in service to the Wicker Man. Surely there must be a human sacrifice involved because such a society could not be sane. I simply did not see the payoff. Especially since I developed an anchovy allergy later in life, which meant I couldn't eat kimchi even if I wanted to.

Japan enjoys kimchi and has imported it by the ton for decades; they also make a less spicy version, called *kimuchi*. But historically, the Japanese nonetheless viewed kimchi as a sign

of Korean peasant primitiveness. We were cabbage eaters, like the Irish. We delighted in the cheapest vegetable.

The issue came up last year when I was renting out my Paris apartment to a prospective tenant, a young student from Japan. As she only spoke Japanese, she had brought an interpreter, as well as a clueless French real estate agent who declared that it was a perfect fit of landlord and renter, because I was Korean and the renter was Japanese. The agent had no idea that she was dealing with inter-Asian tribalism—that the young woman and I were silently growling at each other like dogs, totally involuntarily. She opened the fridge and turned up her nose, saying something in Japanese to her interpreter. The latter told me, “She wants to know if you can get rid of the kimchi smell.”

I said, “Please tell her I’m allergic to kimchi, I don’t keep it in my fridge, and THAT IS THE SMELL OF FRENCH CHEESE.” *Good luck living in this country*, I thought to myself.

Where was I? Yes, inter-Asian tribalism aside, in the 1990s, other countries—both Asian and non-Asian—began developing a taste for kimchi and started to import it. TH Lee, president of GSA Public Relations and Korean culture guru, explains: “In the 1990s, there was a wave of people seeking healthy cuisine. They discovered that Korean food was healthy. That was the beginning of the boom.”

Lee Charn gives some insight into the philosophy underpinning Korean food. “Confucianism made its way into every aspect of life—even food. Food is based on the theory

of the yin and yang, and the five elements. Every meal has to have five tastes: sour, bitter, sweet, spicy, and salty. There are also supposed to be five colors and five textures. Every housewife, without thinking of it, follows these rules. That’s why Korean food is so healthy. It’s based on the philosophy of the cosmic energy.”

Many people outside Korea subscribe to the belief that Korean food contains mystic healing properties. The SARS bird flu epidemic of 2003 made kimchi ubiquitous throughout Asia. SARs raged throughout China, Southeast Asia, and even Canada and parts of Europe, with about 8,000 reported cases and about 750 deaths. Meanwhile, South Korea experienced zero bird flu–related deaths (there were two cases, both nonfatal). Many theories as to South Korea’s immunity have been postulated; none were conclusive. One study suggested that the enzymes contained in kimchi strengthened immunity in birds; some people made the mental leap to assume that this also protected them from bird flu.

Through a combination of South Korea’s own reports, a post hoc fallacy, and urban legend, China and other Asian countries concluded that kimchi was the magic elixir protecting the Koreans from the disease. In 2003, Korean kimchi exports went up 40 percent over the previous year; in China alone, the increase was 245 percent.¹

Despite the preponderance of “evidence,” I remained unconvinced about kimchi’s medicinal benefits, so I consulted Jia Choi, who holds a PhD in Korean food from Ewha Womans University in Seoul. Choi is the president of Seoul-based O’ngo Food Communications.

I asked Choi why Koreans needed to eat something as extreme-tasting as kimchi, whose sodium, spiciness, and sourness literally draw the moisture from one's mouth. She explained that it had to do with compensating for the neutrality of rice. "In other countries, fish or meat is the staple," she said. "In Korea, it's rice. And kimchi goes really well with rice." Choi elaborated that all fermented items are highly addictive, not just kimchi. "It's the same with cheese and beer. When people start eating fermented items, it's hard for them to stop."

The Korean hot pepper used in kimchi is actually from Japan, which got it from Spain, which got it from the Americas. The pepper has only been in Korea since the seventeenth century. But the Japanese don't use the pepper. It leaptfrogged over to Korea.

At first, said Choi, Koreans thought the hot chili pepper was inedible. Kimchi existed before that, but it was cured using salt alone. However, "salt was very expensive. In the 1750s, in order to reduce salt consumption, the government recommended using red pepper flakes, because this allows you to reduce the amount of sodium you use." Even back then the Korean government had a hand in micromanaging such matters as its citizens' diet.

Which is a trend that continues today. According to Choi, the popularity of kimchi spiked significantly after 2008; she believes this may have something to do with a campaign by former South Korean president Lee Myung-bak to raise global awareness of *hansik*, Korean food. His wife, Kim Yoon-ok, headed the government-funded Hansik Global Association, known abroad as the Korean Food Foundation.

Well, at this point, I'd have been surprised if the government *didn't* use its funds to promote Korean cuisine.

I went on a Seoul street food tour offered by Choi's company, O'ngo; it was a delight. There I found even more evidence of the Korean government spending public funds to promote Korean cuisine.

The tour group included Mike Traud, an associate professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia, where he teaches hospitality law in the culinary arts department. Traud had been taking a one-month cooking class at O'ngo because Drexel was planning to offer a semester-long course in Korean cuisine. This was unexpected, especially since, as he told me, the curriculum only offers three other nationally specific cuisines: French, Italian, and Chinese.

So why does Korean food have the good fortune to be singled out? The answer should not have surprised me, but it did: "We've been lucky to have the Korean government sponsor classes in the past. Three years ago, they brought ten students and two professors [to Korea] to understand Korean cuisine and cooking and bring it back to the States."

Even with government assistance, though, it's hard to convince people to try a new cuisine. So I asked him to explain the recent popularity of Korean food.

"In the United States," he said, "it stems from David Chang; he's the first one to make really mainstream Americanized Korean food. After Chang, you started to see his influence in menus. . . . People are experimenting with kimchi, pickles, fried chicken. Korean ingredients are being incorporated into various cuisines." The sudden popularity of Korean

taco trucks in major U.S. cities—particularly Los Angeles—have helped popularize Korean flavors even in neighborhoods without a Korean community.

David Chang—who used to be a junior professional golfer—is one of the world's most famous chefs; with two Michelin stars, he is the pride and glory of the Korean American foodie community. While most people can't afford to eat at his New York restaurants Momofuku and Momofuku Ko, food trends in the United States start with gourmards and reviewers and trickle down to influence the tastes of the masses.

Full disclosure: the particular O'ingo tour I was on was technically a drinking tour. Koreans drink *a lot*—in higher quantities than such booze stalwarts as United States, UK, France, Germany, or even Japan, according to the World Health Organization.² The pastime of drinking has many rituals. A night of drinking in Korea happens in upwards of three different drinking establishments, in three phases. It's not considered sporting to go home until everyone does.

The staples of a Korean bar crawl are beer and *soju*—a potato wine cheaper than most types of bottled water. It's sweet and goes down easily, so it's easy to overdo it, and it really packs one wallop of a hangover. Jimro Soju is the most popular brand; astonishingly, it is also the world's number-one-selling liquor brand, surpassing the likes of Smirnoff vodka, Bacardi rum, and Johnnie Walker scotch. In 2012, Jimro sold over 580 million liters worldwide.³

Even when you're totally plastered, you have to observe basic Korean boozing etiquette: You don't pour your own al-

cohol; if you want some more, you hint at this by pouring alcohol into someone else's glass, whether this person wants it or not. That person must then offer to pour some into your glass. This is one of the reasons why there's so much peer pressure among Korean drinkers: if everyone around you has stopped drinking, you might have to wait for quite a while before someone offers to top off your glass.

A second and very important rule is that when you are pouring alcohol for someone, you pour with your right hand and use your left hand to hold your sleeve. My tour guide, Daniel Gray, explained that there are two reasons for this: in the old days, sleeves were big and billowy, so holding the sleeve closed was a way of keeping it out of the other person's drink; and by having both hands in plain sight, you are proving that you are not holding a knife.

Koreans know a lot of drinking games. Gray showed me one I hadn't seen before. "This one is called 'Titanic,'" he said. "It was taught to me by the very smart students at Yonsei University, who have no livers. It's kind of like Jenga but with beer." Basically, you're making a boilermaker very slowly. There are over a hundred different kinds of boilermakers—*pokkanyu*—in Korea. You put an empty shot glass in a large glass of beer, and everyone takes turns pouring *soju* into the shot glass. Whoever makes the shot glass sink has to drink the whole mixture.

Gray explained why *soju*, which is kind of rough on an empty stomach, was the perfect accompaniment to Korean food: "It's good at cutting the grease of the food," he said. "In

fact, it's so good at cutting grease that they put it in spray bottles to clean the tables."

Hooni Kim, a renowned Korean American chef, owns two restaurants in New York: Danji (which has a Michelin star) and the brand-new Hanjan. He was in his third year of medical school and planning to specialize in neurosurgery when he decided to become a chef. Yes, his mother was very upset. "My mom didn't speak to me for almost a year," he said.

They've long since made amends, but now there's a new group of people who are almost as upset: Koreans who come to dine at one of his restaurants for the first time and discover that he charges for kimchi. It's downright revolutionary. From the point of view of Korean patrons, that would be like charging for tap water. He said proudly, "This is the only restaurant in New York that charges for kimchi. We don't charge a lot, but if it's free, people don't eat it. If it's free, we can't make it well. I'm a businessman. How can I focus on something that isn't generating revenue? If kimchi were free, it would always be the last focus, where it should be the first focus because it's our national dish." It's hard to argue with that logic.

Kim has a kind but warrior-like demeanor and a commanding presence. His staff clearly adore, fear, and respect him. I met him at Hanjan (Korean for "one glass"), and when he exited the kitchen and entered the restaurant area where I was sitting, the staff—none of them Korean—seemed excited to see him.

Kim told me about his unique path from the surgical scalpel to the chef's knife. He had intended just to take a year off between his third and fourth years of medical school. On a lark, he enrolled in classes at the International Culinary Center (formerly the French Culinary Institute) in New York. He offered to work as an unpaid intern at Daniel, New York's celebrated three-star Michelin restaurant of French chef Daniel Boulud.

Whatever he did during those two weeks impressed his bosses enough for them to offer him a full-time job. "I pretended to think about it, but as soon as I heard that, that was it, I was not going back to medical school."

It's hard to imagine a better training for a chef than the kitchen at Daniel. "I learned to cook the French way," he said. "It's the only way to cook. It is the right way to cook. It's the philosophy and principle that there are no shortcuts. There are, but in the end product, you'll see there is a difference. So do everything the right way." Then he said with an oratorical cadence that really reminded me of a French chef, "The right way is always longer. The right way always costs more money. The right way is just more difficult. But the food doesn't lie. People can really tell."

He went right to the third rail of Asian cooking: MSG—monosodium glutamate, a controversial food additive that supposedly enhances flavor. "For me, MSG is a shortcut. It's cheating. It's like athletes taking steroids. They're chemically trying to withdraw more flavor where there isn't any."

Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the dishes I sampled were a revelation. I tried his *dakbokki*,

which is a spicy rice cake snack that Korean schoolchildren often get when they're hanging out after classes. It's a comfort food, almost a junk food. But not the way Kim makes it. He cooks his in pork fat and garnishes it with tiny slivers of pepper that resemble saffron.

Hanjan's decor is chic, cozy, and modern, with very little in common architecturally with most of New York's other Korean restaurants. But Kim resists typifying his restaurant as an upscale one. "I still don't think Korean food is fine dining," he said, which made me raise my eyebrows. "The best food in France is cooked by the three-star Michelin chefs." By contrast, "I think the best food in Korea is cooked by the mothers and grandmothers. There is a history of restaurants in certain countries, Korea doesn't have that. Korean dining food history is *jumak*—home-cooking, casual street food, market food."

Surprisingly, Kim says his mother never cooked at home, noting that chefs usually fall into extremes in that regard: either they were inspired by their mother's cooking or they were forced to learn to cook because their mothers didn't. In Kim's case, the cold stove at home encouraged him to go out to eat with his friends. "I fell in love with the restaurant scene—the atmosphere, energy."

Another detail to which Kim pays fastidious attention is garlic; he says almost all the garlic out there is useless for his purposes. "Ninety percent of the garlic used in restaurants is from China," he said. "The flavor profile is that it's really powerful for the first four hours, but if you look at it as a graph, the line goes down. The next day you don't taste it anymore."

Kim is pleased at the global Hallyu phenomenon, but he doesn't think that food has a place in Hallyu. "For me food is so much more real than a pop song or a video," he said. As with all great chefs I've met, he talks about food as a man would talk about a woman he's in love with. Once more adopting his lyric speech rhythms, he said, "Looking, hearing is one thing. Tasting, touching is another. Smelling and tasting is the heart and soul of what Korea is. As much as pop culture wants to globalize, food is the best way for Koreans to share their soul and culture."

Turning the expression "you are who you eat" on its head, Kim said, "No. You eat who you are. No one describes who you are like your food."