

RE-ORIENTING CUISINE

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Re-Orienting Cuisine

*East Asian Foodways in
the Twenty-First Century*



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Kwang Ok Kim



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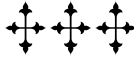
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Introduction

Kwang Ok Kim



Positing food and food practice in the context of time and space, this book aims to further expand a genre of anthropological study of human agency in and through material culture. Previously, most studies of food, like other subfields of material culture, have been focused on the so-called authentic culinary methods, forms, and meanings of a particular “national” or “ethnic” cuisine or dish, produced and consumed in its supposedly “original” social place. However, as the movement of foods and the emergence of foodways across national and geographical boundaries produce a world in motion (Inda and Rosaldo, eds. 2002), the boundaries of authenticity and originality are blurred and multiplied. In this global fashion, the image, meaning, value, or identity of a nation or an ethnic group is competed over, negotiated, and compromised through the rediscovery, regeneration, remaking, and even invention of cuisine and dishes. Faced with this newly emerging cultural landscape of food, the authors here offer ethnographic observations of various forms of the transnational and cross-boundary movement of culinary cultures. In so doing, they address related topics, such as the dynamic process of cultural encounters, cultural brokerage, the relations between producers and consumers, markets of imagination, and the politics of culture that emerge in relation to the social biography of a food practice. Food itself becomes a world in motion.

In the field of food studies, the most popular current is perhaps what may be categorized as “nutritional and medicinal studies.” In this vein, cultural materialists have provided us with many ethnographic studies that attempt to explain and rationalize a given people’s food substance as something “good to eat,” in the sense that the food can be understood ultimately as a reflection of an adaptation to the ecological condition in which people are placed (see Harris 1985), or in the sense that food practice is an alternative form of folk knowledge of medical sciences. We can observe this in postmodern cultural fashions such as alternative medicine movements or well-being lifestyle movements. In the field of Chinese

2 Introduction

food studies, for example, scholars usually focus on a particular item within a cuisine to explore its cultural meanings, as well as regional variation in terms of ingredients and tastes in the context of ecological and environmental conditions (see Chang, ed. 1977).

Food, however, is laden with much deeper meanings than simply providing necessary nutritional and medicinal results. It is a space for social and cultural practice. Anthropologists have also observed that various kinds and forms of food are something “good to think.” Numerous studies have approached food as a mechanism to materialize modes of thought and to express a group’s identity, cultural system, or social classificatory system. Many new attempts began to appear to illuminate the symbolic meanings (see Douglas 1966) as well as political and social functions (see Goody 1982) embedded in particular food practices. These studies have shown how particular social and historical conditions determine the forms of certain foods, the specific ways foods are prepared and consumed, and by extension, how food practices have evolved in adapting to the changes of those conditions.

On the other hand, there is also a danger of essentializing certain foods and foodways as unchanging and linked to a specific region or an ethnic group. Countering the tendency toward this kind of crystallization, anthropological study reveals that the food and foodways of a particular region or a group are continuously constructed for various purposes. It is important, therefore, not to lose sight of the selectively constructed nature of an ethnic or national cuisine which, like tradition, is a process of selection, remaking, and even invention (Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds. 1983).

More recently, as food industries and agribusiness have increasingly commoditized food, various efforts have been made to promote the national and local cuisine competitively, and also to expand the cross-boundary marketization of these cuisines at the global level, a project that sometimes involves state-driven initiatives. It is in these contexts that competitive discourses appear and claim the uniqueness and superiority of a specific national/local cuisine. These claims are not confined to straightforward production and consumption patterns or nutritional and scientific values, but also draw on the aesthetic and philosophical meanings attached to certain foods. Accumulation of such studies has helped us understand how specific forms of cuisine have emerged under specific kinds of historical or ecological conditions and how they have acquired particular cultural meanings. It is in this context that food can be understood as genre of the politics of culture.

The characteristic features of a local cuisine thus formed are gradually treated as a brand of the region concerned. By examining culinary biographies, therefore, we can understand the historical processes by which ethnic and local cuisines are continuously invented, reproduced, and standardized for various political and social purposes. In specific contexts, we can approach a dynamic process of trans-

formation and recuperation of a local cuisine by focusing on culinary practices of cultural resistance, negotiation, and accommodation between the traditional and the modern. The expansion of colonial encounters and the increasing transnational flow of migration and lifestyles in modern history have stimulated a radical and rapid process that constitutes multiple kinds of alternative or new dietary trends. It is often in postcolonial contexts that we find native intellectuals seeking to rediscover and to elaborate the purportedly unique local cuisines as a venue for reclaiming the national cultural identity.

When discussing foodways, therefore, the concept of authenticity does not seem particularly useful. Searching for authenticity can be a futile endeavor. The same Chinese cuisine, for instance, can change in its taste, ingredients, forms, and cooking process with time and place as all of these dimensions are constantly being reinvented and redefined. What is needed, in this regard, is to find a way to approach and understand food as a genre of cultural history by trying to illuminate the process by which a certain food acquires a particular position and definition over history, rather than approaching it as a stationary cultural item that is unchanging over time and space.

Another notable aspect of food and foodways in modern times is its potential for “culture splash” (Bestor 2000). The industrialization of food and the development of information, knowledge, and technology have accelerated the movement of food and foodways across boundaries. The development of media technology in particular has brought about new fashions and styles in food and culinary practices, even without the actual movement of the people with whom the food is traditionally associated. It is necessary in this global age, therefore, to approach the changing cultural meanings that a particular food has come to acquire when it crosses national boundaries by treating it as a venue for the practice of, competition over, and negotiation of cultural meanings. James Watson’s study (1997) of McDonald’s hamburgers is considered as a pioneering work in this area. It is an ethnographic study of how the icon of American fast food is differently localized and consumed in East Asia including Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Within these transnational movements, food is not simply relocated but also is re-created through mutual borrowing and copying. While this phenomenon has often been referred to by such terms as *fusion* or *hybridization*—thereby suggesting its temporary nature—it often takes root as an independent culture in and of itself. We may find good examples of such a phenomenon in the foods of Mexican Americans or Koreans living in Japan. When food crosses boundaries, it is important to identify the main initiators of such changes. For instance, we find in most societies that those of an older generation are so accustomed to their own cultural practices that they are often much slower and more reluctant to accept a different culture, while the younger, by comparison, tend to be more adventurous and responsive to new cultural experiences. Food is no exception to

this general tendency, as can be seen in the fact that the recent popularity of Asian cuisines in Western societies is driven mostly by such young adventurers.

Here it is noted that fashion is shaped by the combined efforts of producers, mediators, and consumers. Well-known chefs, locally recognized cooks, experienced women with the image of a mother or a grandmother, or faceless industrial companies and chain restaurants produce their own brand dishes with “secretly endowed” or “newly invented” recipes and ingredients. Through expanded networks with multiple channels, mass-media organizations broadcast cooking programs and documentaries on the varieties of human food throughout the world. Gastronomic business companies, consumer journals, and culinary magazines propagate new lifestyle trends through the discourse of fancy food adventures. Tourism plays a significant role in developing people’s world of taste. Young people in particular use the internet and other forms of digital mediation to exchange their individual experiences of “new,” “foreign,” and “exotic” as well as “fancy” and “high-class” foods. The market is expanding to introduce new opportunities to experience “authentic” as well as “extraordinary” dishes, local as well as foreign cuisines, and traditional as well as modern foods. So, the transnational expansion and penetration of networks of transportation, information technology, cultural industries, migration, and so on have promoted the transnational marketing structure of agribusiness and the food industry. Experiences of new foodways are evaluated through the discourses of modernity, refined taste, and contemporary lifestyles. Eating a foreign dish means opening and practicing a new world in everyday life. Various human agents such as tourists and travelers, business people, short- and long-term migrant workers, returnees from study abroad, and so on, return with new tastes and styles of life that are foreign to their neighbors at home. Local people are stimulated to consume newly fashionable foods and their related knowledge and information as a space in which people can “taste” a different imagination of modernity or globality. By confronting “parallel modernities” through food, they participate in the imagined realities of other cultures as part of their daily lives (Larkin 1997).

It is in this context that we note the rapid increase of transnational migration in the transformation of food and foodways, where migrants and travelers often assume the role of cultural innovators. In search for a taste of different culture, people in this global age enjoy leaving their familiar surroundings to set out for various foreign corners of the world. It is these innovators who introduce, commoditize, and industrialize new and exotic ways of life by bringing the food they have experienced in far-off regions back to their own society. Similarly, the migrant-settlers may start an ethnic restaurant in their new society as a means of preserving their livelihood and also as a way of maintaining their identity. They do not simply reproduce the ethnic food of the hinterland but also invent and re-create the food in negotiation with the taste and preferences of the local consumers. It is by this means that localized ethnic food is often very different

from the food eaten in the migrants' homeland. The food consumed in the name of Chinese, Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean cuisine in different parts of the world is often very different from what is eaten in their places of origin. Nevertheless, these cuisines are promoted and accepted as "authentic." Authenticity here is something that is invented and imagined through mutual recognition and collaboration between the producers and consumers (see Caldwell 2009).

In this regard, what is essential in the study of food seems to be an inquiry into its life trajectory that shows how the form, cooking method, ingredients, tastes, aroma, etc., of a specific food have come to be formulated over the course of time and as a consequence of its traveling over space. It will then be followed by an analysis of its social and cultural aspects, as the same food may also be differently classified or be given different meanings in different contexts of time and space. Food is a part of material culture because the way it is produced, transacted, and consumed constitutes a part of culture. In this sense, food can be seen as "en-culturated material" and "en-culturated nature," and it thus needs to be studied with an insight that goes beyond the usual dichotomy of culture and nature.

The fourteen chapters included in this volume have approached food through the framework of cultural dynamics discussed above. They explicitly and implicitly raise questions about "authentic ethnic cuisine," as well as about ethnic or national boundaries with regard to food. The authors present interesting ethnographic observations on why people come to claim the place of an ethnic group or a nationality through food while they also pursue a so-called global standard for modernity. Caught in between the two grand forces of globalization and localization, food provides a venue for a close examination of the political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics practiced through various forms of competition, negotiation, and complementarity among capital, technology, power, and ideology.

The four chapters included in part I are concerned with the question of how local/national identity is constructed through food practice. Okpyo Moon (chapter 1) addresses the phenomenon of the rapid popularization of a specific genre of food known as royal court cuisine in South Korea. Various intellectual projects to rediscover and reestablish this cultural tradition were attempted as a postcolonial response to the violence impinged upon the Korean nation by Japanese colonial power. The reproduction of and even invention of tradition have been attempted at various historical junctures and, here, it is royal court tradition that was abruptly discontinued by colonial aggression. Court culture had epitomized the most sophisticated of Korean tradition, and the recent revival and popularization of courtly culture is seen as an expression of the desire and ideology to restore the essence of the lost and subsequently distorted national culture. In the name of cultural heritage, a cultural entrepreneur offers royal court cuisine reconstructed for foreign visitors as a specific brand of haute cuisine through a form

of commoditization that leads foreign consumers to imagine the host country, nation, and culture in a more desirable fashion.

It is according to the same logic that state banquets are often designed to provide a special cultural space to taste food as an emblem of national cultural tradition. For example, the different foods offered at a People's Republic of China (PRC) state banquet are believed to be drawn from the recipes and dishes of the emperor's meal in the prerevolutionary historical past. They are considered to be a selective representation of prerevolutionary culture. In the same vein, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Khay-Thiong Lim (chapter 2) discuss how certain food is selected for state banquets in Taiwan and Malaysia and treated as representative of, and having the status of, national cuisine. Both being multiethnic societies with a rich variety of different ethnic cuisines, the state uses banquets to provide a political space to define and delineate both the content and boundaries of newly created national cuisines.

Jean DeBernardi's study of the Daoist tea culture of Wudang mountain in China (chapter 3) shows a strategic compromise between the state and a global trend toward commoditization to create a local brand for a tourist market. The representation of Daoism constitutes an important part of cultural politics that emphasize the unique features of Chinese culture. It seems that the state is deeply involved in this process by combining tea and Daoist culture in its attempt to revitalize the glorious Chinese civilization of the past. The participation of the state leaders in the opening ceremony of a reconstructed Daoist temple and the performance of martial art and tea ceremonies in the name of cultural heritage transform a local culture into a space for the political production of national identity, thus contributing to the sanctification of tea, Daoism, and the state all at once.

While the above studies focus on the reproduction of specific food as haute cuisine often in the form of state banquet menus and national cultural heritage, Kwang Ok Kim (chapter 4) highlights reinvention of more common food items, such as rice, as a response to global modernity. In response to the growing multinationalization of dietary life, numerous items of rice cuisine are invented and reproduced in Korea to emphasize the positive quality of its national food. Kim maintains that the phenomenon can be understood both as an expression of cultural nationalism vis-à-vis Western modernity and as a reflection of the postmodern lifestyle of middle-class people who are deeply conscious of health, aesthetics, well-being, and environmental issues.

The six chapters in part II deal with the formation of new cultural spaces in the process of crossing boundaries. A dish that crosses national boundaries is often redefined and reinterpreted depending on the social and cultural context of the local place where it is consumed. Noting that noodles are considered nearly as important as rice in East Asian diet, Kyung-Koo Han (chapter 5) shows how a specific noodle, known as *ramyeon*, has come to occupy different positions in

Chinese, Japanese, and Korean dietary life with different functions and meanings. What is particularly emphasized in this observation is the process of its industrialization, commoditization, and market competition. David Wu (chapter 6), on the other hand, discusses the recent popularization of Japanese cuisine in Taiwan as a combined phenomenon of nostalgia for the particular Taiwanese experience under Japanese colonialism and newly rising concerns about globalization. In early 2000s, there emerged a street of Korean food in an urban district of Taipei. This emergence was due partly to the influence of overseas Chinese returnees from Korea and partly to the impact of the more recent boom of Korean popular culture known as the Korean Wave (*hallyu*). More recently, however, Japanese cuisine has come into vogue, taking over Korean cuisine as the most popular ethnic food in Taiwan. According to Wu's interpretation, the Taiwanese consider things Japanese to represent the more global and thus the more sophisticated and modern. The phenomenon is indicative of a growing materialistic concern of the young in particular, a yearning that overrides the adverse historical memories of colonial oppression of a particular sector of the population.

By comparing the very different nature of the appeal of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cuisines to Russian consumers, Melissa Caldwell (chapter 7) shows how food reveals larger cultural attitudes about Russia's stakes and position within the global flows of immigration and capital. This analysis is intended to challenge prevailing paradigms in globalization and consumption studies that have privileged a West-to-East geographic orientation by shifting the vantage point to a very different set of East-to-West interactions. Yuson Jung's analysis of Chinese food consumption in postsocialist Bulgaria (chapter 8) can be placed in a similar vein, as she also attempts to challenge the notion of a one-way flow of commodities and ideas from the West to the East often advocated by globalization theorists. Noting that Bulgarians use Chinese food-consumption practices to evaluate their political economic position within the global hierarchy during intensive social transformation, Jung argues that the meanings attached to the Chinese food consumption by the Bulgarians are nonetheless filtered through a Western lens that projects the hegemonic standards of modern consumption practices.

Also addressing the transformation of food and food ways in the context of globalization, Sangmee Bak (chapter 9) explores the domestication process of ethnic food restaurants in contemporary Korea. She argues that, while Koreans construct and express global identities by consuming these ethnic cuisines, each ethnic cuisine acquires its own global identity in this process of localization. Michael Herzfeld (chapter 10) observes, on the other hand, the subtle differences between the domestic and global consumption of Thai cuisine. He maintains that a tension between hierarchy and egalitarianism plays out in the consumption and presentation of Thai food (in both current and historical practices) through complex tastes created by a careful mingling of spices designed to orchestrate

the intricate timing of gustatory experiences. He argues that these complexities and ambiguities are often erased in the tourist and overseas versions of the Thai cuisine.

As a source of life, food is produced and consumed not only in relation to symbols, meanings, and power but also with a concern for safety. As food production and distribution have come to be increasingly dominated by capitalism, market relations, and mass production, these processes have also become closely connected with issues of safety, health, and environmental concerns. These are the issues addressed by the four chapters included in part III, showing that they have become key areas of anthropological studies of food.

In chapter 11, Young-Kyun Yang analyzes the changing position and meaning of Chinese food in contemporary Korea. When Chinese food was introduced as one of the first foreign cuisines in the country during the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was mostly the nutritional value that was appreciated by the Korean consumers. More recently, however, with the growing concern for “well-being” along with changes in the overall criteria for what counts as health, the nutritional value of the Chinese food has come to be reinterpreted with new concerns about obesity, hygiene, and environmentalism. The growing popularity of Vietnamese noodle dishes, Indian curry, and Thai cuisine, which Koreans understand to be based on rice and vegetables and to use fewer meat ingredients or other food flavorings, may also be understood in relation to the widely held belief in Korea that Vietnamese, Indian, and Thai bodies have a slim constitution.

On the other hand, Sidney Cheung (chapter 12) shows how crayfish harvested in the United States were imported into China via Japan and have been reinvented and transformed into a new local specialty food of the Nanjing area, now serving as a critical source of income for the local residents. What is particularly emphasized in this process is the fact that the reinvention of crayfish into an economically profitable crop in the fish farms of Nanjing and its restaurants involves serious ecological destruction, but such consequences do not draw the slightest attention of the local authorities, the farmers, and the consumers.

Jakob Klein (chapter 13) discusses the meanings and practices surrounding the consumption of “organics” and other ecologically certified foods in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in southwest China. Noting that the depiction of the Chinese consumption of organic foods as the practices of a “health-conscious” or “quality-seeking” elite has little relevance to “ordinary” Chinese, Klein nevertheless maintains that this consumption is both shaped by and influential to wider food culture and experiences of change in urban China. Yunxiang Yan (chapter 14) reviews the development of food safety problems in China, identifying the shift from the public hazard of food poisoning to the social fear of poisonous food. Emphasizing that food safety is not a singular issue in contemporary Chinese society, Yan argues that, socially and ethically, it is the unsafe food caused by modern modes of farming and food processing that presents the

severest challenge to the public trust, regulatory governance, and general well-being of Chinese individuals.

The fourteen chapters briefly reviewed above all indicate that an analysis of specific forms of food without considering its changes over time and across space is no longer meaningful. Food must be observed and analyzed in the global contexts where different tastes, lifestyles and imaginations easily cross boundaries and blend with each other to create new forms. Food is constantly changing and being adopted by new consumers, making the concept of authenticity useful only in a very limited sense for food studies. A dish that originated in Beijing and is reproduced in New York under the same name is not necessarily of the same form, ingredients, or taste, even though authenticity is often claimed and utilized for marketing its newer forms.

Foods are invented, modified, and re-created not only by those who produce and supply them but also by those who consume them. Thus, foods that were once tied with specific ethnic groups or classes are now being consumed by others beyond the traditional ethnic or class boundaries, offering opportunities for an ever-varied and dynamic cultural life, and forming the basis of new communities of heterogeneity. The contributors to this volume have attempted to expand the scope of food studies from medicinal or nutritional studies to social scientific approaches, pursuing food's social and cultural meanings, and functions and aesthetic considerations. Furthermore, these authors show that foods with the same origin, history, and narrative grow out of the meanings of a specific locality and time, being transformed and consumed by different people in different regions according to different imaginations. Food and foodways thus become a genre of explaining culture and its changes.

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