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Food

by Vina Yun

TRANSIT Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

Translated by Thomas B. Fuhr and Wojtek Gornicki

"Oh, yeah, yeah," K-Pop superstar Jay Park croons. "Oh, the wholesome *samgyetang*, the sweet-and-sour *galbi jjim*. *Haemul pajeon* on rainy days, *andong jjimdak* on those depressing days." In this saccharine R&B ballad, Park is not idolizing his far away loved one. Rather, he's indulging in the idea of culinary delights: chicken soup with ginseng, braised beef spare ribs, pancakes with seafood, one-pot chicken stew from the provincial capital Andong. This song is called "I Like It"; it was commissioned by the Korean Food Promotion Institute (formerly Korean Food Foundation), and is part of an entire music compilation about the merits of Korean cuisine. The organization pursues an ambitious goal: the globalization of *hansik*, Korean food culture. Ever since taking into account the potential of its soft power, South Korea has not only promoted its domestic IT-industry, but also pushed the advancement of Korean movies, soap operas, and pop music. With support from the state, Korean cuisine—known as "K-Food"—has been expanding its international footprint since the late 2000s.

Lately, in many Western and Eastern metropolises of the world, there has indeed been a downright hype around Korean food. And who would say no to *Kimchi*, this crispy salad of fermented Chinese cabbage, seasoned with chili and other condiments into an addictive mélange of spicy, sweet, salty, and sour? Or take *bibimbap*, a bowl of rice with beef and a variety of possible vegetables to choose from, topped with a fried egg. The Korean-German blogger Miss Boulette calls it "the universe in a bowl." Others might see it as an excellent use of leftovers, refinable according to your tastes by enlacing it with *gochujang*, a savory fermented chili paste. One of its variations, the *dolsot bibimbap*, is served in sizzling hot stoneware, allowing for a crispy rice crust to form at the bottom. Instead of topping this with an already fried egg, some like to crack a raw egg into the hot rice, where it then starts to solidify when stirred into the mix. Similarly hard to resist is *doenjang jiigae*, a soup stew based on a thick, fermented soybean paste, and flavored with *dashima* [dried seaweed] and *myeolchi* [dried anchovies]—a classic staple of Korean home cooking and guaranteed comfort food material.

Korean cuisine is not only a real eye-catcher, it's now considered hip and healthy, as well. Ever since the recent outbreak of fermentation fever, Korean food (which is frequently comprised of pre-fermented ingredients) is in especially high demand. My Facebook timeline is crowded with workshop events: from "Wild Fermentation Uncensored" and "Fairmentation" to the "Vegetable Fermentation Masterclass"—there is something for every fan of the lactobacteria. "Are you in?" my friend asks me. She has only recently discovered *kimchi* for herself, and now wants to study lactic acid fermentation at a DIY seminar. I respectfully decline.

Korean recipes are nothing new. They'd already found their way to Europe long before the current fermentation trend, namely with Korean (im)migrants. *Kyopos* [Koreans living abroad] are among the biggest diasporic communities worldwide. Few people know the history of Korean migration to the German-speaking countries, even though the first migrant workers from South Korea had already arrived in the 1960s and 1970s. Many came as nurses; in Germany, some worked as miners, too. They were specifically recruited as "guest workers," and they stayed.

When I was growing up in Austria in the 1970s, however, there wasn't much enthusiasm shown for Asian cuisine. Back then, "exotic" food was neither a part of a chic lifestyle nor was it considered beneficial for your health. On the contrary: Things that looked so peculiar and smelled even more remarkable were seen as inferior and suspicious. Let alone eating with chopsticks: a real curiosity! Did we even know how to eat with a knife and fork—those hallmarks of European "civilizedness" and bourgeois class consciousness?

The very notion that people in Asia would eat food from shared plates seemed suspect: Wasn't that completely unhygienic? One day, I was having lunch at my friend Stefanie's. She embodied everything I wasn't: a slim, blond, white girl from a well-established family—the perfect *Mädchen*. Every day Stefanie's mother cooked fresh food for the whole family. The readymade products and packet soups we often had at home when my parents were either out of money or out of time (I used to mix a few spoons of rice into the Maggi Eggshell Soup), were frowned upon in Stefanie's home. Before me lay a big bowl of salad. Great, I thought: There's enough for all. I helped myself with gusto. I remember to this day the awkwardness in the eyes of all present. This "foreign girl" obviously had no manners! Only after each person had shoveled a tiny portion of greens onto their own plate, was one allowed to enjoy the garnish. I felt ashamed.

In retrospect, these white Austrians panicking about aromatically and creatively spiced dishes or unknown ingredients may seem ridiculous and downright provincial. But in the country of *Wiener Schnitzel* and *Kaiserschmarren*—the all-time-favorites of the regional tourism industry—it took a while until foreign food items could be treated as taste buddies. In the NBC documentary "Our Man in Vienna" from 1962, the journalist David Brinkley describes the Austria of the *Wirtschaftswunder* years as follows:

> An Austrian citizen in his middle 40s has lived through so much, and all of it so bad, he thinks now he needs a rest. And Lord knows he gets it. One place he gets it is in a little wire chair set on the grass in Vienna's *Stadtpark*, of a summer's afternoon, eating heavy pastry and listening to light music. A Viennese—now 45 years old—was born under the last emperor of what was the Holy Roman Empire. And in his own lifetime, he has seen the emperor and the empire collapse, his country fight two World Wars, and lose both of them. He has lived through a Republic, a homegrown fascist dictatorship, a civil war, a ruinous inflation, occupation by Hitler, occupation by the Russians, and seven years ago by some miracle he saw Austria get a peace treaty and freedom. Now, it is independent, socialist, neutral, overgoverned, underworked, overfed and tired. A remnant of nineteenth-century Europe, preserved in milk chocolate and whipped cream.

As we all know, the former Austro-Hungarian Empire stretched as far as Transylvania to the east, Bohemia and Moravia to the north, and bordered Bosnia and Dalmatia to the south. The most diverse culinary traditions came together and blended in its capital. Nonetheless, it took until 1960 before Austria's first Balkan restaurant, Beograd, opened in Vienna. Again, it was guest workers from the former Yugoslavia who brought their food and initiated culinary change in Austrian daily life, which had previously been dominated by *Wurstsemmel* and apple strudel. (By the way, another side effect of this "guest work" was that more men than women stood behind the stove. They had to learn cooking on their own, since many of these migrant workers initially came without their wives.) Beograd was followed in Vienna by the first Chinese restaurant in 1963, the first pizzeria in 1965, and finally, the first kebab stands in the early 1980s.

There are few certainties for migrants and refugees who find themselves living abroad, the Serbian-Austrian philosopher Ljubomir Bratic observes. One of these few anchor points is food from home. As long as you can eat "your" food, you know: The world is still in order. Often, the tastes of childhood provide a sense of stability and comfort. My mother was only in her early twenties when she arrived in Vienna from Seoul in the beginning of the 1970s. She first learned to cook Korean food in Austria, using cookbooks that she'd borrowed from friends. Since many foods and spices were not available anywhere—Asian grocery stores emerged only later—she relied on constant improvisation. She never spoke of homesickness, but I believe she compensated for the separation from friends and family with her cooking skills.

I do not know to this day how she managed to hit the culinary nerve of so many Korean guests who came to us to eat and found her dishes even better than "back home" in Korea. Each of the rare (because expensive) "visits home" meant mercilessly overstuffed suitcases filled with *gochugaru* [chili powder] handcrafted by my grandmother, *doenjang* [fermented soybean paste] and other essential basic ingredients. Every time we passed through Customs, I broke out in a cold sweat. If I were searched, how would I explain to the officials all these weird, stinky things in their suspicious, black plastic bags? Luckily, it never happened.

When my mother fell ill with cancer last year, she did not and could not eat anything but Korean food. My aunt travelled from Korea to support her sister during the difficulties of chemotherapy. I learned from her how to cook different types of *juk* [rice porridge]: with *pat* [adzuki beans] for instance, or with *jat* [pine nuts], *nokdu* [mung beans], or oyster shells and mushrooms. On some days—the good ones, my mother consumed nothing but *juk* and *tteok* [rice cake]. Thoughts of death and the potential loss of my mother not only encouraged me to learn her recipes (my previous efforts to get her to show me how to prepare Korean dishes failed at her vague instructions and even vaguer measurements: "Mom, how much of that do I put into the dish?" - "So much, until it looks like this." - "Yes, but how much is that?" - "In Korea, you do not have to measure everything!"). The prospect of losing her also made it clear to me that my mother and Korean food—her food—were my strongest connection to Korea. They still are.

Korean dishes are made to be shared, which is why I still associate Korean food with big circles of happy faces. But for children like me who came from immigrant families,

the food we knew and loved from home was also a source of shame. The primary thing that made us and our parents "foreigners" was our alleged stench. I can well remember the fear of blowing my own cover when my Turkish schoolmates were ridiculed as "garlic munchers." Garlic and foreignness were practically synonymous. Fear of the former—as much so as the latter—was ever-present. And unlike Chinese or Japanese food, Korean dishes are quite garlic-heavy.

On the whole, Korean food is a cuisine of extremes, and a spectacle of the senses: the bubbling and boiling of the *kimchi jjigae* stockpot a blazing scarlet on the table right before your nose. The sharp hissing sound and the aromatic steam rising up the moment the *bulgogi* meat touches the sizzling table grill. The brief moment of shock that sets in with the first spoonful of *mulnaengmyeon*, an iced noodle soup which provides instantaneous refreshment in the summer.

Under no circumstances would I have dared to serve Korean dishes to the school friends whom I invited home. It would have been like an attack on their lives and limbs. Instead, there was ready-to-serve "Pasta Asciutta" from the packet and beetroot salad from the glass, which was much 'healthier' anyway. I myself did not raise a hair at the lunch table of my Austrian friends when I choked on their sweet rice soufflé, presented to me so benevolently. They would have never understood how much security and belonging—community and empowerment—the strange, stinking food they so despised provided for us.

As for many other *Ise*, the second-generation members of Korean immigrant families, Korean cooking is one of the few ways for me to feel "Korean" without having to commit, because the options to combine and modify are endless: just try a *Schnitzel* or pea soup with *kimchi*—mhmm! Even if the label "K-Food" might suggest so, no *one* Korean cuisine exists. Just like the normative idea of "family" as sitting-together-at-a-dining-table is a fabricated fiction, the idea that one or several dishes can represent a nation is equally a figment of the imagination. As fabricated, for that matter, as an institutionalized, state-run campaign to market "exotic" food more efficiently.

Since my Korean is not particularly good, I nearly break my tongue every time I try to speak with relatives. However, I know the names of many Korean dishes and ingredients, I know what they taste like, their texture and consistency. Culinary conversations in Korean are so much more interesting because the language has many more expressions to offer and more ways of differentiating than German does. And since sensations in taste often evoke specific feelings or memories, talking about similar experiences, aversions, and preferences in relation to food establishes strong bonds. Perhaps that is why so many *Ise* watch the cooking videos made by Maangchi, one of the most successful YouTube stars with nearly three million subscribers (her favorite word: "delicious"). By test-tasting, experience-tasting, decipher-tasting, re-tasting together, we remember the pains and pleasures of our "otherness." It is through taste that we come to recognize ourselves, and it is taste that we continuously strive to share and to pass on.