

Food History in Modern and Contemporary East Asia

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Introduction

“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are” (*Dis-moi ce que tu manges: je te dirai ce que tu es*). Thus said Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a French politician and gastronome, in 1825 in the *Physiologie du goût, ou méditations de gastronomie transcendante*.¹ This statement is usually shortened to “You are what you eat.” The act of eating thus is both a basic activity for sustaining life and a cultural symbol reflecting an individual’s identity. Indeed, diverse foods in each country are transmitted to members of that society from generation to generation, thus assuming particular cultural forms. In other words, food culture integrates a variety of elements including the social group’s lifestyle, modes of behavior, mental structures, and industrial structures.

Even without necessarily mentioning Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism, the food that we eat is one of the important elements constituting our daily lives. Though the expression *uisikju* 의식주 (“clothing, food, shelter”) is commonly used in Korea to refer to the three elements of everyday life, also persuasive is the argument that the expression *siguiju* 식의주 (“food, clothing, shelter”) is appropriate because food is the most important element. The question of what we have been eating since when and how is one of the fascinating approaches for understanding ourselves at present and also a topic that has received attention among researchers of the history of science and technology in recent years. It provides diverse objects of analyses to not only cultural history and the history of daily life but also the history of science and technology. The history of science and technology comes to take interest even in changes to the industry producing food and related technologies.

Fernand Braudel sought to understand the origins of contemporary society through material culture including the reception of and changes to the three crops of wheat, rice, and maize. In his view, each society had no choice but to cultivate a particular crop due to its climate and soil, thanks to which a particular lifestyle came to be

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¹ English translations of this book have been titled *The Physiology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendent Gastronomy*.

formed. The explanation was that whereas East Asians enjoyed stable sedentism because of the completeness of rice, which exhibits high productivity, for Westerners, the active exchange of crops, meat, and dairy goods was inevitable due to the insufficient productivity and nutrition of wheat, thus making possible the earlier advent of the capitalist economy in turn. Based on the explication that if wheat gave birth to a loosely specialized commodity exchange economy, then the self-completeness of rice created social organization based on close cooperation, sociologist Cheol-Sung Lee 이철승 has located the structure of inequality in Korean society in the system of rice farming as well.² The explanation is that the activity of maintaining the food called “rice” against repeated disasters played a key role in the process through which a structure of inequality evolved. Arousing a heated debate, his argument has demonstrated well that food and the labor to prepare it overlap with diverse elements of a society such as its environment, economy, politics, and culture.

Though East Asia can be classified in general as a rice culture sphere, wheat is the staple crop in a sizable portion of China. In addition, even when rice is the staple, countries and areas in this region differ from one another considerably in the preferred rice cultivars, rice cooking methods, and what is eaten in what ways with that rice. Because of such heterogeneity amid commonality, there exists considerable differences of opinion regarding food culture among neighboring nations in East Asia.

On July 29, the Northeast Asian History Foundation 동북아역사재단 held an academic conference on the topic of “The Aesthetics of Korean Food Culture, a Historical Understanding of the Journey 한국 음식 문화의 미학, 그 여정에 대한 역사적 이해.” With the recent spread of the claim that Korean food culture originated from China on Chinese websites, this issue has become one factor behind conflict between the two countries. In such a situation, the conference was prepared in order to search for solutions to the cultural conflict while discussion patterns in and characteristics of Korean food culture. Though it will not be possible to resolve all differences of opinion through a few conferences, an academic approach to food culture and history will be a starting point.

For such purposes, food history in modern and contemporary East Asia has been decided on as the topic of the special issue of no. 44-2 of the *Korean Journal for the History of Science*. Because this is the first time for the journal to address food culture as a special issue, we have sought to deal with as many topics as possible. Instead of simply dealing with particular foods, we have sought to take interest also in industrial aspects related to the production of food or cultural contexts underlying the reception of particular foods. While six researchers gathered and exchanged opinions at first, with the omission of a study on duck breeding in South Korea, five papers were collected in the end. Though we did not have a chance to get together

² Cheol-Sung Lee, *Rice, Disasters, and the Nation: How Have Koreans Become Unequal?* 쌀, 재난, 국가—한국인은 어떻게 불평등해졌는가 (Seoul: Moonji Publishing, 2021).

and hold discussions, the results of the prior circulation of paper drafts and the addition of each person's opinions have been collected in this special issue.

First, Mariko Noma 野間万里子 and Sung-hee Kim 김성희 address meat eating in Japan. Meat-eating culture in Japan differs considerably from those in Korea and China. Abolishing the prohibition on meat eating, which had continued for over 1,200 years, through the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan sought to establish the practice on the level of government policy. However, eating habits shaped over a prolonged period did not change easily, and the Japanese government endeavored to inculcate in the people the equation of “meat eating = civilization.” Two of the papers present that process. Mariko Noma traces the technological effect of the reception of beef eating on the Japanese livestock industry from the 1880s to the 1940s and, in particular, seeks to elucidate the changes brought about by the introduction of Korean cows in a multifaceted manner. For this reason, her paper partly resonates with Myung-Sun Chun's 천명선 study on livestock in Korea during the Japanese colonial era published in the previous issue of the *KJHS*.³ Sung-hee Kim demonstrates voluntary moves among Japanese civilians, which indirectly buttressed the government's attempts to spread the “taste of civilization,” through *Aguranabe* 安愚楽鍋 (1871), a text that hitherto has failed to win much attention from both literary circles and historical circles in Japan.

Yujen Chen 陳玉箴 and Pintsang Tseng 曾品滄 introduce the contemporary history of food in Taiwan. Their discussions are quite fascinating because they present the possibility of future research comparing the situations in Taiwan and South Korea. Tracing the history of the spread of the baking industry and of a great increase in the consumption of bread in Taiwan with a focus on the period of American aid (1951-1965), Yujen Chen determines the diverse political, economic, and cultural factors that acted on that process. This paper recalls Se-mi-na Oh's 오세미나 dissertation, which examines the processes through which bread was introduced into the local community and the confectionery industry grew through the example of Iseongdang 이성당, an old bakery in the city of Gunsan in North Jeolla Province.⁴ In addition, Pintsang Tseng analyzes on technological and cultural levels the growth of the Taiwanese drink industry brought about by the “Cola Wars” in the nation, persuasively demonstrating that Coca-Cola, a cultural symbol of the United States, did not lead to simple “Americanization.” It will be even more useful if this paper is read in comparison with Eun Hi Lee's 이은희 paper on “Cola Wars” in South Korea.⁵

³ Myung-Sun Chun, “Veterinary Medicine of Empire and Livestock Animals of Colony: Epizootic Control during the Japanese Colonial Period 제국의 수의학과 식민지의 가축: 일제 강점기 가축 전염병 관리,” *Korean Journal for the History of Science* 44:1 (2022), 171-192.

⁴ Se-mi-na Oh, “A Study of Korean Sweet Bread, Its Birth and Growth through the Case of Iseongdang 한국 단과자빵의 탄생과 확산: 군산 이성당의 사례를 중심으로” (PhD thesis; Jeonbuk National University, 2018).

⁵ Eun Hi Lee, “Cola Wars in the Park Junghee Era 박정희 시대 콜라 전쟁,” *Critical Studies on Modern Korean History* 역사 문제 연구 34 (2015), 87-132.

Robert Winstanley-Chesters presents an aspect of the food culture of the social elite in North Korea through a high-end seafood restaurant in Pvongvang named Taedonggang 대동강 and also attempts to understand changes in the nation's marine environment. His perspective on North Korea's society and environment as a geographer is all the more valuable because he raises many intriguing issues that researchers of the history of science and environmental history must illuminate in detail in the future.

Though papers on the food histories of Korea and mainland China regrettably were unable to join, a considerable number of studies on these topics have accumulated already. In the case of South Korea, active research on food culture and food history in Korea is under way in diverse fields including anthropology and folklore studies,⁶ and a researcher professionally examining only literature on food has emerged also.⁷ In recent years, research synthesizing the vast history of food in Korea since antiquity has been presented as well,⁸ and, as for rice, the staple of Koreans, studies with respect to the history of science are diverse, too.⁹ Having published many works on Korean food culture in the name of “food humanities,” Young-ha Joo 주영하 recently presented in succession volumes on Koreans' dietary lives in the modern and contemporary eras.¹⁰ Recent years have also seen the publication of an intriguing book analyzing the history of *samgyeopsal* 삼겹살 (grilled pork belly), which is considered a soul food in South Korea, from the perspective of the history of the pork industry.¹¹ This study entailed the participation not of historians but of

⁶ Studies published in Korean are innumerable, and English-language research on the food culture and history of Korea are not rare, either, as in Katarzyna Joanna Cwiertka, *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth-century Korea* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).

⁷ Yeong Go 고영, *Between “Castera” and “Castella”: Things That Food Literature Researcher Yeong Go Has Read, Eaten, and Thought about 카스테라와 카스텔라 사이—음식 문헌 연구자 고영이 읽고 먹고 생각한 것들* (Okcheon: Podobat Publishing, 2019).

⁸ Cheri-Ho Lee 이철호, *A History of Korean Food 한국 식품사 연구* (Seoul: Korea Food Security Research Foundation Press, 2021).

⁹ Tae-Ho Kim 김태호, *A Social History of Rice in Modern and Contemporary Korea 근현대 한국 쌀의 사회사* (Paju: Dulnyouk Publishing, 2017).

¹⁰ Young-ha Joo, *Meals over a Century: From Western-style Banquets during the Empire of Korea to K-Food 백 년 식사—대한제국 서양식 만찬부터 K-푸드까지* (Seoul: Humanist Publishing Group, 2020); Young-ha Joo et al., *An Oral History of Food: The Stories of Five People Who Have Accompanied Changes to Contemporary Korean Cuisine 음식 구술사—현대 한식의 변화와 함께 한 5인의 이야기* (Seongnam: Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2019); and Young-ha Joo, Hye-suk Gim 김혜숙, and Mi-gyeong Yang 양미경, *What Have South Koreans Lived on? A History of Contemporary Dietary Life in South Korea 한국인, 무엇을 먹고 살았나—한국 현대 식생활사* (Seongnam: Academy of Korean Studies, 2017).

¹¹ Jae-min Gim 김재민 et al., *A History of the Pork Industry in the Republic of Korea: How Samgyeopsal Became South Koreans' Soul Food 대한민국 돼지 산업사—삼겹살, 한국인의 소울 푸드가 되기까지* (Seoul: Farm Communication, 2019).

people who have actually engaged in the industry on a working level such as stock-breeders and marketers as contributing writers, thus making the descriptions all the more vivid.

If studies on the modern and contemporary histories of science in South Korea hitherto have centered on policies, institutions, and relevant figures, it is necessary now to expand the extension by broadening points of contact with neighboring fields such as social history and cultural history. Recent years have witnessed the increasing activation of research on the history of technology in everyday life,¹² and food is a representative topic for this and a fascinating topic that can be expanded into a variety of spheres. It is anticipated that, with this special feature as an occasion, scholars of the history of science in Korea, too, will conduct diverse studies on food more actively in the future. Lastly, I would like to thank Brittany Singler of Jeonbuk National University for proofreading the papers by non-English speakers featured in the special issue.

¹² Max Hirsh, Angela Ki Che Leung, and Izumi Nakayama, "Infrastructure, Modernity, and the Technologies of Everyday Life: Insights from a Collaborative Research Project on the Making of Modern East Asia," *EASTS* 14 (2020), 507-521 introduces a research project by a name identical to the title of this paper. Seeking to understand anew East Asian modernity through everyday technologies from the 19th century to the contemporary era such as food, transportation, automobiles, and communication, this project points out the need simultaneously for an exploration of daily technologies and for comparative research.