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Abraham Ahn

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Is that *Kimchi* on My Plate?
Korean Cookbook Writers and *Kimchi* from the 1970s-2010s

BY
Abraham Ahn

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Spicy, sour, pungent, “tangy” and full of zest, kimchi is a Korean fermented vegetable eaten with rice and other dishes. Within Korea, kimchi is a general name given to the thousands of fermented dishes in Korean cuisine. Beyond Korea’s borders, however, it is synonymous with the spicy cabbage variety lining the shelves of the fermented foods aisle in Asian markets. Kimchi is currently well known outside Korea partially because of South Korean cookbook writers, who capitalized on kimchi’s standing in Korean history and tradition to brand it as a Korean dish. They also promoted its culinary properties by advertising its nutritional value and versatility in the kitchen. However, the extent to which these writers engaged in these strategies ebbed or intensified depending on key historical events like the 1988 Seoul Olympics and kimchi-related culinary disputes with China and Japan. Examining language around these events sheds light on how cookbook writers attempted to sell Korean culture to international audiences by praising kimchi as a traditional, tasty, convenient, and healthy Korean dish.

For many readers, it may seem odd and somewhat excessive to devote a thirty-five page thesis to the historical analysis of a pickled vegetable native to a far-off Asian peninsular country. Nevertheless, I have my reasons, both personal and academic. Kimchi has graced the table of almost every meal I have eaten since my teeth grew out, lovingly supplied by my mother and grandmothers. Ultimately, kimchi holds a special place in my heart and it reminds me of my cultural roots as a Korean-American as well as the important female figures in my life. In an academic setting, I noticed that food was often overlooked as subject matter when historians studied the lived experiences of human beings. By studying food, I realized that I could also understand my fellow human beings from a different and unique perspective. Looking around for inspiration, I settled on the spicy vegetable nestled on the corner of my plate. Unobtrusive but charming, kimchi seemed to wait for me all this time.

From the 1970s to the 2010s, Korean cookbook writers used kimchi to sell Korean culture to an international audience. They used three strategies to accomplish their goal. First, they branded kimchi as a Korean dish by conflating kimchi with Korean tradition and highlighting its unique taste, claiming that it could only be made using a special process. Second, they advertised the dish by emphasizing and celebrating its healthy properties as a fermented dish, its convenient mode of production, and its versatility in the kitchen. Third, a smaller subsection of cookbook writers consecrated kimchi by imbuing it with memories of home, mother figures. They painted kimchi as an essential component of their cultural identity by referencing their personal encounters with kimchi. Ultimately, these strategies aimed to sell kimchi and therefore Korean culture, to an English-speaking audience. Their efforts contributed to popularizing Korean food overseas in the 2010s, a trend that continues to grow today.¹

Food History and Its Significance. Human beings are “animals that cook,” and have always cared about what they put in their mouths, spelling the difference between life and death.² Over time, the materials responsible for ensuring the continued biological survival of people groups came to acquire symbolic significance, eventually evolving into what historians define today as “food.” In *Food: The Key Concepts*, Warren Belasco explained that food choices are the result of identity, convenience and a sense of responsibility.³ In other words, food plays a crucial role in establishing our moral values, highlighting what is available and cost-effective to eat and imbuing a sense of awareness of how our habits of consumption affect our physical health.⁴ Korean cookbook writers unconsciously followed Belasco’s three tenets by emphasizing how

¹ “Kimchi: No Longer Solely Korea’s,” International Monetary Fund, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2014/06/picture.htm>.

² Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 1.

³ For further reading, see Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (New York: Berg, 2008), 8-10.

⁴ Charlotte Biltekoff, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 5-6.

important kimchi was to the Korean identity, its healthy properties, and its convenient mode of production.

Food conjures up associations with people, places and things and sometimes, these associations are intentionally constructed. For example, food is used to celebrate special occasions ranging from political functions to religious ceremonies. Food also facilitates the humblest of gatherings and acts as a social lubricant in meetings between friends and family. In his article, "The Nation before Taste," Andrew Haley discusses how food reflects not only times of prosperity or famine but also the social and psychological constructs behind the perceptions of certain foods. The strategies utilized by Korean cookbook writers to promote kimchi acted as scaffolding to project a certain image about kimchi to their audience, thus creating a social construct around the dish.⁵

Korean Food and History. Throughout history, Korean cuisine incorporated foreign influences while maintaining its basic culinary elements. The Korean peninsula is surrounded on three sides by water, more specifically by the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and the Sea of Japan. Korea's location made the country susceptible to constant invasion by larger neighbors like China, Japan and Mongolia. This invasion brought an influx of ingredients such as red peppers and bread. In *Korean Cuisine*, Michael Pettid noted that though culinary innovations occurred continuously, the fundamental elements of the Korean meal remained constant. Unlike Western cuisine, which serves courses one after another, the dishes in Korean meals are presented all at once. These include a bowl of rice, 3-4 vegetable side dishes, a meat or seafood dish and a soup/stew.⁶ The greater number of side dishes, the more luxurious a meal was perceived to be.

⁵ Andrew P. Haley, "The Nation before Taste: The Challenges of American Culinary History." *The Public Historian* 34, no. 2 (2012): 53-78. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2012.34.2.53>.

⁶ Michael J. Pettid, *Korean Cuisine: An Illustrated History* (London, Reaktion Books: 2008), 30.

Korean food experienced a series of significant changes in food production from the Joseon Dynasty in the 14th century to the Korean War in 1950. Historians consider “traditional” Korean food as cuisine originating from the Joseon Dynasty, a Korean dynastic kingdom that lasted from 1392 to 1910.⁷ In that era, society was split into nobles, commoners and slaves. The king, at the top, always had the most to eat. However, the kingdom collapsed in 1892, when the powerful and modern Japanese invaded to establish an era of colonial rule that lasted from 1910-1945.⁸ During this era, Japanese industrialization improved the efficiency of food production on the Korean peninsula, allowing for the industrialization of rice, sauce and paste production for Japanese troops. During the Korean War, South Korean wartime diets consisted of army rations provided by the U.S. Army, rice, and hand-made kimchi.⁹

Over the next fifty years, from the 1960s to the 2010s, South Korea underwent a remarkable period of rapid modernization and economic prosperity. The 1960s-1970s marked the beginning of economic recovery and military-style leaders like Park Chung-hee, who forcibly modernized Korea’s battered post-war economy. By the 1980s, the leaps and gains made from his reforms were evident to the world as Korea celebrated the 1988 Olympics in its capital city, Seoul. In the 1990s, continuous technological and economic growth in South Korea propelled the country to the echelon of the top GDP producing countries on the globe, dramatically different from its economic state forty years before.¹⁰ In the 2000s-2010s, the rise of “Hallyu,” or Korean

⁷ One of the oldest civilizations in the world, Korea did not start from the Joseon Dynasty. Rather, in terms of culinary history, the Joseon period oversaw some of Korea’s greatest culinary innovations and changes. Red pepper was introduced to Korea during the Japanese Invasion of 1592, thereby changing the taste of Korean cuisine and kimchi forever. For further reading, see: Sonia Ryang, *Eating Korean in America: Gastronomic Ethnography of Authenticity* (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), 12-13.

⁸ Ryang, *Eating Korean in America*, 12-13.

⁹ Scholarship on the Korean War and its impact on food production is extensive. Culinary creations like “budaejigae” (army stew consisting of sausages, kimchi, ramen noodles) show how different culinary cultures came together to form fusions. For further reading, see Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth-Century Korea* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 82-92.

¹⁰ Hong-sik Cho, "Food and Nationalism: Kimchi and Korean National Identity," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 5 (2006): 207-29. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://www.kjis.org/journal/view.html?spage=207&volume=4&number=1>.

entertainment, gained an international following among fans of K-pop and K-dramas. The period also oversaw the launching of a Korean food campaign by the South Korean government in 2008 called the “Global Hansik Initiative,” which aimed to spread international awareness of Korean cuisine.¹¹

Kimchi History and Culinary Disputes. The term “kimchi” has different meanings within Korean culture but has shifted to symbolize the spicy cabbage dish. Within South Korea, kimchi is an umbrella term that covers hundreds of pickled vegetables fermented over a long period of time. On the other hand, the name is synonymous with the spicy napa cabbage dish, made from Chinese cabbage, red pepper, garlic, salt, chives, and raw oysters. It is almost always served with rice and can even be used as an ingredient in soups or other dishes. For international audiences, kimchi is almost always the spicy cabbage variety due to extensive branding efforts by both the South Korean government and cookbook writers. Cookbook writers constantly associated kimchi with spicy taste and fermented cabbage while the South Korean government made sure to put kimchi front and center in their 2008 Hansik Initiative.¹²

Kimchi possessed a relatively obscure culinary profile until the twentieth century, quietly making its way to the Korean table. Korean locals viewed kimchi as an essential but unattractive and smelly side dish.¹³ However, the period of relative economic prosperity in the 1980s pushed South Korea to start considering how to distinguish itself from neighboring Asian countries like China and Japan.¹⁴ The 1988 Olympics presented an ideal opportunity for the South Korean government to promote the country’s culture. One way it did this was to designate kimchi as an official food of the Olympics and advertise it as a Korean dish. To the surprise of the locals, the

¹¹ Mary Jo A. Pham, “Food as Communication: A Case Study of South Korea’s Gastrodiplomacy,” *Journal of International Service* 22, no. 1 (2013), 7.

¹² Cho, “Food and Nationalism,” 215-216.

¹³ Laurel Kendall et. al, *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity: Commodification, Tourism, and Performance* (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press: 2010), 12-13.

¹⁴ Han, “Some Foods Are Good To Think,” 61.

international public immediately lauded the pickled dish and demand for kimchi grew throughout the 1990s, especially in neighboring countries like China and Japan.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, increasing scientific research on kimchi and a culinary dispute with Japan accelerated Korea's plans to claim kimchi as its own. The South Korean government funded a number of scientific institutions to produce articles that highlighted kimchi's health properties, resulting in a drastic increase of kimchi-related articles in the 1990s. In addition to this, the government also encouraged food conglomerates to mass-produce kimchi.¹⁵ For the first time in Korean history, industrial kimchi production overtook home production. In 1996, however, South Korea retaliated against Japanese attempts to capitalize on the popularity of kimchi by creating a similar product named "kimuchi."¹⁶ A combination of fear over declining profits and historical animosity between the two countries fueled ownership spats over kimchi. In direct response to Japan's claims over "kimuchi," South Korea filed a proposal claiming kimchi as an exclusive Korean product with the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) in 2001.¹⁷ In 2004, this proposal was accepted by the CAC, officially copyrighting kimchi as a Korean product.

The 2005 culinary war between Korea and China motivated South Korea to obtain international recognition for kimchi through UNESCO.¹⁸ By 2005, China had become the biggest

¹⁵ Cho, "Food and Nationalism," 218-219.

¹⁶ Kyung-Koo Han, "The Kimchi Wars," in *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity: Commodification, Tourism, and Performance*, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press: 2010), 161-62.

¹⁷ The Codex Alimentarius Commission is a sub-organization within the World Health Organization and Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations that regulates international food standards. The standard requires kimchi to have specific properties like a "spicy, tangy taste" and Chinese cabbage leaves.

Reference: Codex Alimentarius: International Food Standards. *Standard for Kimchi*. 2001.

¹⁸ The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a sub-agency of the United Nations aiming to promote international cooperation. *Kimjang* is the seasonal tradition of making kimchi in November, where women from the village gather to make hundreds, if not thousands of heads of kimchi.

Reference: "UNESCO in brief- Mission and Mandate," UNESCO, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>.

importer of kimchi to South Korea, exceeding domestic Korean production.¹⁹ A Korean politician raised reports of parasitic eggs in Chinese kimchi, causing a dramatic decrease in Chinese kimchi consumption and an increase in Korean kimchi sales.²⁰ China retaliated shortly after by cutting down kimchi production and boycotting Korean goods, to which Korea promptly gave in. During this time, numerous Korean cookbooks authored by non-Koreans and Korean Americans proliferated, seeking to re-claim kimchi as an exclusive Korean product. In 2013, the South Korean government successfully lobbied to register *kimjang* as a UNESCO Intangible Heritage item.²¹ Through this, they pushed to legitimize kimchi as a product of Korean culture and sell Korean culture to non-Koreans.

Branding Kimchi: Ancient Origins, Tradition and Taste. From the 1970s to the 2010s, writers of English-language Korean cookbooks needed a dish that could serve as an introduction to the world of Korean cuisine. Looking around for an ideal dish that could help represent Korean culture, they settled on kimchi. Bright red, fiery, spicy, and pungent, kimchi became the dish that encapsulated Korean tradition and identity. To establish kimchi as a Korean product, the writers featured several aspects of the dish. First, the writers highlighted kimchi's history as a dish of ancient origins, claiming its continuous presence in the Korean peninsula. Second, they underscored certain traditional customs like *kimjang* ("kimchi-making") and kimchi's ubiquitous presence in Korean meals. Finally, they advertised kimchi's unique taste as a fermented food, crowning it king among other pickled foods in Korean cuisine.

Cookbooks emphasized kimchi's ancient origins to affirm its status in Korean culture as a 'national dish.' Ancient origins implied a tried and true reputation, signaling to readers that the

¹⁹ Han, "The Kimchi Wars," 160.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Kimjang, making and sharing kimchi in the Republic of Korea," UNESCO, accessed September 30, 2021, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kimjang-making-and-sharing-kimchi-in-the-republic-of-korea-00881>.

dish itself as a tradition had survived the ravages of time by being relevant to the dinner table.²² Furthermore, writers reasoned that if they could demonstrate that kimchi originated and evolved in Korea, critics could not dispute that it was exclusively Korean. To support their historical claims, they listed mentions of kimchi in written records that sometimes extended to the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE to 668 CE) in the Korean past.²³ Ancient origins helped establish authenticity, or the idea that something belongs solely to the tradition of a certain people group.²⁴ It acted as a cultural marker to project the cultural presence of Korean food and therefore Korean culture. Kimchi was a perfect example of one such cultural marker.

Cookbooks before the 1988 Seoul Olympics did not mention ancient origins because the writers had no pressing need to defend the dish as Korean. For example, *Practical Korean Recipes* was written by two native Koreans, Yi-Soon Choi and Ki-Yeol Lee in 1976, twelve years before the Olympics. Before diving into their recipes, they established that Korean food is “highly seasoned” and that most Korean cooks have a tendency to add strong spices like red pepper, garlic and green onions.²⁵ In the kimchi section, however, the authors did not mention its extensive history nor focus on its ancient origins.²⁶ In hindsight, the authors may have had no particular reason in establishing kimchi as a Korean product. They took it for granted that just by including kimchi in their cookbook, readers would assume that kimchi had to be Korean.

On the other hand, language emphasizing kimchi’s ancient origins started to appear in Korean cookbooks during and after 1988, when the South Korean government moved to establish kimchi as an official food of the Seoul Olympics. In 1988, two Korean sisters, Florence

²² Sam Chapple-Sokol, “Culinary Diplomacy: Breaking Bread to Win Hearts and Minds,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 8, no. 1 (2012): 170.

²³ Florence Chae-yeol Lee and Helen Chae-un Lee, *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym Corporation, 1988), 54.

²⁴ Young Rae Oum, “Authenticity and representation: cuisines and identities in Korean-American diaspora,” *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 109-125.

²⁵ Yi-Soon Choi and Ki-Yeol Lee, *Practical Korean Recipes* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1976), 15.

²⁶ Choi, *Practical Korean Recipes*, 65-70.

and Helen Lee, published *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food*. They praised the fact that more people were being exposed to Korean food and in particular, “a very special Korean vegetable dish, kimchi.”²⁷ Boasting about its “2,000 year old history,”²⁸ the sisters traced the history of kimchi while claiming that kimchi originated during the period of the Three Kingdoms (37 BCE to 7 CE).²⁹ Their gross estimate of 2,000 years implied kimchi’s deep-rooted presence in Korea, lending legitimacy to its status as a traditional Korean food. To the authors, however, kimchi was not only a food that remained frozen in the Korean past. Rather, it evolved into its present day form within the regions of Korea, when preserving cabbages with red chili peppers became common-place.³⁰ By emphasizing kimchi’s age and presence in Korean history, the Lee sisters took one step in affirming kimchi’s legitimacy as a representative dish of Korean cuisine.

Language touting ancient origins grew prominent in Korean cookbooks after South Korea copyrighted spicy cabbage kimchi by filing a claim with the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) in 2001. This occurred as a result of Korea’s 1996 dispute with Japan over kimuchi.³¹ The CAC established kimchi as a culinary property of Korea and enforced it on the international scale, bringing Japanese and Chinese production of kimchi in line with Korea’s culinary standards.³² Having emerged victorious from this dispute, Korean cookbook writers like Sook-ja Yoon placed greater emphasis on touting kimchi as the national dish by highlighting its long presence in Korean culture. In her cookbook, *Good Morning Kimchi!* Yoon declared that “kimchi is the best known fermented Korean food,” and proceeded to trace its first written records back to the Goryeo Dynasty (935-1392). Compared to other writers, Yoon unearthed the earliest written reference to kimchi by citing a thirteenth century poem called “Kapo Yukyong [Six

²⁷ Lee, *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food*, 5.

²⁸ Ibid, 54.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Han, "Some Foods Are Good To Think," 64-65.

³² Codex Alimentarius: International Food Standards. *Standard for Kimchi*. 2001.

Songs on the Backyard Vegetable Plot],” which briefly mentioned the ways of preserving kimchi during the seasons.³³ Yoon also mentioned the recent developments in kimchi’s history with the introduction of the red pepper in the seventeenth century. This addition brought about the modern form of cabbage kimchi, which acted as an indispensable part of Korean meals “from earlier times.”³⁴ By listing these references to kimchi, Yoon hoped to impress on her readers that kimchi originated in Korea and hence make it difficult for nations other than Korea to claim kimchi on historical grounds.

Government publications in the 2010s followed suit in providing evidence for kimchi’s ancient origins. The uptick in references to kimchi’s past followed the roll-out of the 2008 “Hansik” campaign.³⁵ To celebrate Korea’s culinary offerings, the government published *Great Foods, Great Stories* in 2012, four years after the start of its “Hansik campaign.” Although the book acted more a food guide than a cookbook, it gave clear descriptions of foods that reflected Korean tradition. Labeled as the “Traditional Dish with 1,500 Years of History,” the authors grouped kimchi in with the pickled vegetables.³⁶ Following this section heading, the authors claimed that kimchi was created prior to the Three Kingdoms Period and continued as a dish until the present day. In addition, they took great pains to delineate kimchi as “uniquely Korean,” repeating the phrase three times in the introduction.³⁷ Following this, they argued that “in the old days of Korea,” kimchi provided an important source of vitamins during winter months, when fresh vegetables were unavailable.³⁸ Repetition of kimchi and the passing of time reinforced the

³³ Sook-ja Yoon, *Good Morning, Kimchi! Forty Different Kinds of Traditional & Fusion Kimchi Recipes* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International, 2005), 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

³⁵ This campaign aimed to increase Korea’s soft power by exporting its culture, mainly through its culinary delicacies. Korea’s very own spicy condiment, kimchi, headed the list of culinary items. For further reading: Mary Jo A. Pham, “Food as Communication: A Case Study of South Korea’s Gastrodiplomacy,” *Journal of International Service* 22, no. 1 (2013), 7.

³⁶ *Great Food, Great Stories from Korea*. (Seoul: Korean Food Foundation, 2012), 203.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 205.

idea that kimchi had a continuous presence in Korean history. These strategies mirrored that of Korean writers, who utilized historical references to prove kimchi's ancient origins.

Korean cookbook writers then turned to tradition to strengthen their argument. Tradition explained why kimchi was so important to Koreans over the centuries and why it deserved to be the exclusive cultural property of South Korea.³⁹ With tradition, Korean cookbook writers were able to lend further legitimacy to the claim that kimchi was a Korean creation.⁴⁰ They did this in two ways. First, they constantly referenced the autumnal kimchi-making event in November, *kimjang*, as a vital part of Korean culture. *Kimjang* represented concrete evidence that kimchi had started in Korea and continued to be practiced to the present day. Second, cookbook writers emphasized the universality of kimchi, underscoring kimchi as an integral part of the Korean meal. At every turn, they pointed out its ubiquitous presence, indirectly showing readers the deep-seated attachment to the dish by everyday Koreans.

Cookbooks in the 1970s made veiled references to *kimjang* but referenced traditional customs to brand kimchi as Korean. In *The Korean Cookbook* (1970), Judy Hyun rated kimchi as one of the most important, calling it “the national vegetable dish.”⁴¹ She commented on kimchi's ubiquity throughout Korean culinary culture, describing how kimchi “accompanies every Korean meal- including breakfast.”⁴² Hyun's comments helped readers to imagine how widespread kimchi was in Korea, thus indirectly associating Korean culture with the distinct, spicy condiment. When it came to *kimjang*, Hyun pointed out that in November, the “entire female population” of Korea is seen busy making kimchi.⁴³ Though she clearly exaggerated, Hyun's observations implied that Koreans regarded kimchi production important enough to transform

³⁹ Kendall, *Consuming Korean Tradition*, 4.

⁴⁰ Han, “The Kimchi Wars,” 154.

⁴¹ Judy Hyun, *The Korean Cookbook*. (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1970), 25.

⁴² *Ibid*, 25-26.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

the practice into a national custom. In addition to written records, *kimjang* acted as a physical reminder that demonstrated how significantly kimchi factored into Korean life.

Korean women also affirmed the importance of *kimjang* and kimchi in their cookbooks in the 1980s. In 1985, Chin-wha No published *Traditional Korean Cooking*, a cookbook along the likes of Hyun's *The Korean Cookbook* and she sought to educate a primarily non-Korean audience on making the most representative Korean dish. She echoed Hyun by stating that kimchi is a food that "accompanies every Korean meal," and that it is easily made from seasonal vegetables in various regions of Korea.⁴⁴ She provided more details on kimchi and its regional variations, comparing how one family would use salted shrimp juice while another would not. Nonetheless, a common respect and love for kimchi as the "integral part of the Korean diet" united the culinary differences between both families.⁴⁵ From No's perspective, kimchi acted as a great unifier between Koreans and helped showcase Korean cuisine. Moreover, No directly named *kimjang*, the autumnal kimchi making event practiced by many women in Korea.⁴⁶ For No, *kimjang* acted as a cultural marker that led readers to assume that kimchi was made only in Korea and nowhere else.

Similarly, during the 1950s-1960s, female Korean immigrants in America claimed kimchi as their own and paved the way to bring Korean food to those who never knew that Korea even existed. One such figure was Hi-Soo Shin Hepinstall, who reflected on her experiences and published *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen* in 2001. Not surprisingly, Hepinstall devoted an entire section to kimchi and described its status within Korean society as a laborious, communal task that unites neighbors, friends and relatives.⁴⁷ In addition, she provided in-depth descriptions

⁴⁴ Chin-hwa No, *Traditional Korean Cooking: Snacks and Basic Side Dishes* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International, 1985), 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 7-8.

⁴⁷ Hi-Soo Shin Hepinstall, *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen: A Cookbook* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001), 93.

of *kimjang*, calling it a “serious national concern” and maintaining that *kimjang* kimchi sustains a family through three long months of harsh Korean winter.⁴⁸ Her emphasis on *kimjang* tradition went beyond the practical. She dwelled on traditional methods of packing kimchi and conjured up vivid imagery of enormous earthenware crocks that have stored them in the past.⁴⁹ She betrayed her attachment to the dish when she remarked that “we Koreans love it [kimchi] so much that, from breakfast to supper, a meal without kimchi is unthinkable.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Hepinstall’s language indicated how Korean cookbook writers brought tradition to claim the dish as part and parcel of Korean culture.

Korean-American cookbook writers joined the fray starting from the 2000s, when Korean food was beginning to attract considerable attention in the culinary world. In 2007, a Korean-American named Emily Kim started her own Youtube cooking channel under the name “Maangchi” (Korean for “hammer”). She focused on teaching traditional Korean recipes to English-speaking audiences through her videos, publishing her cookbook just a year later. In *Eating Korean with Maangchi* (2008), Kim introduced traditional napa kimchi as the first recipe in her cookbook. She firmly stated that “kimchi is a staple of Korean life,” strongly implying that kimchi is and has always been a part of Korean food culture.⁵¹ Kim also hammered home the ubiquity of kimchi, by stating that “many people include it in their meals three times a day.”⁵² Ubiquity allowed readers to imagine how important kimchi was in the everyday lives of Koreans and how thoroughly ingrained kimchi was in Korean culture. Therefore, consuming kimchi meant more than just taking part in Korean tradition. It brought authenticity into the picture by reminding readers that the end product would always be Korean, no matter where readers chose

⁴⁸ Hepinstall, *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen*, 93.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 95.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 94.

⁵¹ Emily Kim, *Cooking Korean Food with Maangchi* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2008), 12.

⁵² *Ibid*, 12-13.

to make it outside of Korea. All in all, tradition helped authors like Kim to extend their claims of authenticity on kimchi throughout time and space, marking kimchi as a Korean product.

The South Korean government also advertised kimchi by associating the dish with Korean tradition. In 2014, sponsored by government funding, the Korean Food Foundation released *K-Food*, authored by Jin-ah Yun.⁵³ Rather than cover a comprehensive list of traditional Korean foods, Yun chose to highlight the most popular Korean foods. In particular, language utilized when describing kimchi revealed that Yun, like many Koreans, was willing to cast kimchi as the representative Korean food. Yun emphasized ubiquity by claiming that kimchi is the primary fermented item that Koreans eat “regularly.”⁵⁴ Eating kimchi was also touted by the author as a simple way to participate in a “distinctively Korean” way of life. By tagging kimchi as distinctly Korean, Yun joined the long line of writers, who tied in kimchi and authenticity together to make a cogent historical argument, establishing kimchi as an excellent example of Korean culinary tradition.

Finally, cookbook and food guide writers sought to highlight kimchi’s taste. Taste was an important element to highlight because it fulfilled three functions in enhancing kimchi as a Korean dish. First, taste led readers to assume that kimchi was an authentic Korean dish. By describing taste, cookbook writers guided readers to make assumptions that kimchi’s taste could only be manufactured the ‘Korean way.’ Second, it helped differentiate kimchi from other pickled foods present in the world like sauerkraut and dills. The reasoning was that once readers started to see the differences between kimchi and these other foods, it would become easier for them to distinguish Korea from surrounding countries.⁵⁵ Third, writers specified kimchi’s

⁵³ Jin-ah Yun, *K-Food: Combining Flavor, Health and Nature* (Seoul: Korean Cultural Service, 2013), 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁵ Hong-sik Cho, "Food and Nationalism: Kimchi and Korean National Identity," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 5 (2006): 212.

culinary function in relation to staples like rice. They claimed that as a complement to rice, kimchi played an integral role in every Korean meal.

Cookbooks like *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food* (1988) demonstrated how writers highlighted kimchi's spicy taste to establish the dish as a Korean product. The Lee sisters first promised that "once you acquire a taste for it [kimchi], your dinner table will never be complete without it."⁵⁶ From there, the authors acclaimed the "unique taste" of kimchi, attempting to separate it from other pickled vegetables even within Korean cuisine by repeatedly asserting its "spicy" and "sour" qualities. These qualities helped anchor readers by reminding them of the tastes they were already familiar with. This helped familiarize the experience of making a dish foreign to their eyes and nose. Although they hinted at kimchi's potent taste by calling it "exquisite" and "powerful," the authors did not describe the specific ingredients that contributed to the formation of this special taste.⁵⁷ Cookbook writers probably relied on general descriptors like "spicy," "sour" in order to avoid overwhelming their readers with detailed culinary terminology.

Nevertheless, starting from the late 1990s, writers shifted from using general descriptors to specific culinary terms. They drew from a greater repertoire of vocabulary, specifically honing in on points that separated kimchi's taste from other pickled foods. For example, in *The Kimchee Cookbook* (1999), Kim described kimchi as "fiery" and "pungent," citing that the flavors of kimchi had long dominated the Korean cultural landscape.⁵⁸ Kimchi, among other foods, contained this spicy and pungent combination, distinguishing it from other pickled foods like the Sichuan *pao cai*.⁵⁹ In addition to this, Kim briefly mentioned that certain ingredients like garlic,

⁵⁶ Lee, *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food*, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 62-63.

⁵⁸ Kim et al, *The Kimchee Cookbook*, 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 16.

ginger and pickled shrimp contribute to the sweet, fermented taste.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Kim mentioned how well the spicy and sour taste of kimchi complemented the “bland neutrality of rice.”⁶¹ Given rice’s ubiquity in Korean cuisine, this observation helped readers to understand that kimchi was just as important as rice. However, Kim’s explanation fell short of fully describing kimchi’s taste, presumably allowing adventurous eaters to try kimchi for themselves.

While native Koreans settled on making general claims about its “exquisite” and “complementary taste,” Korean-Americans in the 2010s drew comparisons to Western foods to help readers understand the taste of kimchi. In her *Kimchi Chronicles* (2011), Marja Vongerichten remarked how kimchi has “undeniable flavor and punch,” with firm emphasis on the aging part of fermentation to produce the sour taste.⁶² The author asserted that adding kimchi to any meal is a way to get “tremendous flavor in a short period of time.”⁶³ Furthermore, Vongerichten added how kimchi had the potential to provide “that extra hit of acid and salt everywhere it goes” and drew comparisons of kimchi’s taste to “a squeeze of lime in a cocktail, a bit of hot pepper vinegar.”⁶⁴ Interestingly, rather than seeking to accentuate the differences between kimchi and other foods, Vongerichten made comparable analogies to other foods like sauerkraut and pickles to help readers understand kimchi’s unique qualities. Comparisons to certain flavors in the Western world helped to provide familiar territory for the reader while inviting them to spice up their meals in a very Korean way.

The South Korean government also played a major role in defining kimchi’s taste. In 2013, *kimjang* was registered as an intangible UNESCO cultural item, recognized as a purely

⁶⁰ Kim et al, *The Kimchee Cookbook*, 10.

⁶¹ Ibid, 20-21.

⁶² Vongerichten, *The Kimchi Chronicles*, 100.

⁶³ Ibid, 92.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 91-92.

Korean tradition.⁶⁵ Flush from its victory, the government produced a number of food guides that brought out its unique taste properties. In *K-Food* (2014), Yun promised that kimchi possessed a “spicy” flavor as well as a “sparkly, tart texture” that would complement “almost any Korean dish,” especially rice.⁶⁶ In addition, she invited non-Koreans to explore kimchi by using it to “spice up Western cuisine,” claiming that the flavor of kimchi reduced the aftertaste of heavily buttered foods and fit well with tomato sauce. Her language revealed her intent to invite readers to taste the dish in addition to the foods they were already familiar with. Like Vongerichten, Yun attempted to use comparative analogies to help her readers understand kimchi’s taste and its complementary function in relation to other dishes.

Finally, in the 2010s, non-Korean cookbook writers joined in the fray in tackling the task of describing kimchi’s taste to the rest of the world. In 2015, English chef Jordan Burke described kimchi as a “good place to start” in his cookbook *Our Korean Kitchen*. Like Chun, Burke called kimchi the “national dish of Korea” but chose to define it as a “pickle.”⁶⁷ In the same vein as Vongerichten, Burke utilized colorful language to express kimchi’s smell and taste to draw readers in. Although he noted how kimchi’s smell “assaults the senses,” Burke praised the taste, describing how kimchi is “far less explosive, with an incredibly complex mix of spice, hits of garlic and a sour undertone.”⁶⁸ He recognized that kimchi’s smell could sometimes be off-putting but his energetic description implied a taste unlike anything readers had tried before. Burke tied in this taste to Korean culture, making it clear that kimchi belonged to Korea.

⁶⁵ The South Korean government submitted a proposal in 2013, explaining the cultural context behind kimjang and underscoring its importance in Korean society. The proposal was accepted. For further reading, see “Kimjang, making and sharing kimchi in the Republic of Korea,” UNESCO, accessed September 30, 2021, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kimjang-making-and-sharing-kimchi-in-the-republic-of-korea-00881>.
Reference: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Nomination file no. 00881 for inscription in 2013 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. Kim, Chan and Yena Lee. 2013.

⁶⁶ Yun, *K-Food*, 65.

⁶⁷ Jordan Burke and Rejina Pyo, *Our Korean Kitchen* (London: Weldon Owen, 2015), 176.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 172.

Advertising Kimchi: Health, Convenience and Versatility. After establishing kimchi as a Korean product, cookbook writers showcased kimchi to the broader world. First, they advertised kimchi as a health food created from ‘natural processes’ of fermentation, repeating in various ways that kimchi provides vitamins, minerals and “beneficial bacteria.” Some writers went as far as to claim that kimchi prevented cancer or even the onset of deadly viral diseases like SARS-Cov-1, often with scant evidence. These claims appealed to the “responsibility” component of Belasco’s three facets of food, pushing readers to accept that kimchi was not only safe but healthy to eat.⁶⁹ Second, some writers underscored the convenience of making kimchi when including their recipes. Convenience removed another potential barrier and made it more likely for non-Korean readers to prepare a dish they were not familiar with. Finally, cookbook writers highlighted kimchi’s versatility in Korean cuisine. Kimchi was not a dish but it could also be used as an ingredient, greatly expanding its culinary value. Because of this virtue, kimchi could be incorporated as part of the reader’s culinary identity, whether they were Korean or not.

Language focusing on kimchi’s healthy properties remained understated between 1970 and 1988. Similar to *the Korean Cookbook*, *Practical Korean Recipes* (1976) contained succinct descriptions of kimchi’s known nutritional properties. Choi and Lee mentioned that “kimchi”i [sic] is a good source of vitamins,” while claiming that the amount of vitamin C is at its highest in the cabbage when the kimchi is well fermented.⁷⁰ Another cookbook authored by a Korean woman, *Traditional Korean Food* (1985), made similar claims about kimchi. Before introducing her kimchi recipe, No claimed that “kimchi contains good amounts of Vitamin C and stimulates the appetite.”⁷¹ However, unlike Choi and Lee, No sought to explain the Korean fascination with fermented foods by generalizing the Korean diet, asserting that kimchi is moderate in calories

⁶⁹ Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts*, 9.

⁷⁰ Choi and Lee, *Practical Korean Recipes*, 65.

⁷¹ No, *Traditional Korean Cooking*, 7.

and low in fat and sugar. In No's eyes, kimchi's addition to rice and other side dishes reflected "a very healthy, well balanced diet."⁷² Although emphasizing the healthy and well balanced component of kimchi enhanced its reputation, cookbook writers had no pressing need to devote pages of writing to kimchi's healthy properties just as they did not write about kimchi's ancient origins. They let the recipes speak for themselves.

After Korea decided on kimchi as an official food during the 1988 Seoul Olympics, language affirming kimchi's heritage and favorable health properties grew prominent. The Lee sisters' *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food* (1988), encapsulated this clear shift in rhetoric by specifying which ingredients in kimchi contributed to its health profile. The title of the book itself presaged how the authors presented kimchi in the cookbook, clearly centering on kimchi's natural properties. Proclaiming it as a "natural health food," the authors constructed kimchi as an organic food, unhurried in production and not processed.⁷³ The authors also claimed that "kimchi is rich in vitamins, proteins and other essential nutrients," building on the health arguments of pre-1988 Korean cookbooks.⁷⁴ However, where the cookbooks ended there, the Lee sisters chose to dedicate an entire section to detailing specific natural phenomena in kimchi production like "lactic acid fermentation."⁷⁵ In this section, they claimed that lactic fermentation prevents vitamins from breaking down, resulting in a higher concentration of Vitamin B and C.⁷⁶ They also listed ingredients such as cabbage, radish, green onions, red pepper and Korean watercress, believing that each healthy ingredient contributed to the health profile of kimchi as a whole.⁷⁷

Kimchi: A Natural Health Food relied on elaborate and somewhat questionable health claims to

⁷² No, *Traditional Korean Cooking*, 8.

⁷³ Lee, *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food*, 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 54.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷⁷ From their point of view, cabbage contained protein, Vitamin C and minerals. Radish proved rich in vitamins and diastase, Vitamin C, calcium and carotenes.

For further reading, see: Lee, *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food*, 55.

enhance kimchi's reputation. Compared to pre-1988 Korean cookbooks, they greatly expanded on the minutiae of the fermentation process to bolster their arguments and usher readers to make and consume kimchi for its healthiness. By expounding on these details, the authors justified eating kimchi by appealing to the readers' values of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

In the 1990s, the rise of kimchi-related scientific articles and the 1996 "kimuchi" dispute with Japan propelled an increase in health-related language in English-language Korean cookbooks.⁷⁸ Three years after the "kimuchi" dispute, *The Kimchee Cookbook* (1999) devoted an entire section, titling it "Science of Making Kimchi," in order to infuse the author's claims of kimchi with a scientific tone.⁷⁹ The author specifically named acids like lactic acid, succinic acid, manganese butyrate and propionic acid present within kimchi during its fermentation process, claiming that these were responsible for the "growth of beneficial microorganisms." Kim implied that these acids possess crucial roles in contributing to the overall health profile of kimchi. Additionally, Kim claimed that the natural taste of kimchi could never be replicated, insisting there were no chemical substitutes for fermented foods like kimchi. He concluded that manufacturers are not capable of fully replicating kimchi's "unique fermented taste."⁸⁰ The author linked natural taste with healthiness to reinforce images of kimchi as a traditional, hand-made food without any chemical additives. An absence of artificial chemicals and the inclusion of natural processes like "fermentation" served to cement kimchi as a food that could provide health benefits to the eater.

Following the wake of the 2004 kimchi import dispute with China, *Good Morning Kimchi!* (2005) exhibited the boldest claims about kimchi's healthy properties. Yoon presented kimchi as a healthy alternative to "fast, greasy and otherwise unhealthy foods," arguing that

⁷⁸ Han, "The Kimchi Wars," 158-160.

⁷⁹ Kim, *The Kimchee Cookbook*, 34-35.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

kimchi can even prevent certain types of the SARS virus. Yoon touted kimchi's health properties in various ways. She claimed that eating kimchi provided vitamins and asserted that the dish proved very effective in "preventing colon cancer, obesity and high blood pressure," by stimulating the secretion of pepsin in the stomach and maintaining a "balance of microbes."⁸¹ She included a graph containing questionable scientific data, titled "Disease-Prevention Effects of Kimchi on Mouse [sic]," from a study by the Kimchi Research Institute.⁸² The graph revealed that mice fed with a high fat diet and kimchi had lower body weight while possessing a higher active degree of cell immunity. Yoon utilized this information in an attempt to legitimize kimchi's reputation as a healthy food and strengthen her argument that kimchi could be used to combat deadly diseases. Not only could kimchi be safely consumed, but eating the dish could act as a defense boost to common threats looming large in the public imagination. This provided an extra layer of assurance to readers who braved consuming a foreign and unfamiliar dish.

Yeong-hee Kim published *Korean Cooking Made Easy* in 2006, one year after *Good Morning Kimchi!*. Unlike Yoon, who directly stated health claims, Kim pursued a different strategy. She sought to first establish the relationship between food and medicine in Korean culture, stating that Koreans have always believed food is medicine and therefore, possess the tendency to consume clean and healthy vegetable dishes.⁸³ The language she utilized to emphasize the health qualities of kimchi (one such dish) included words like "slow," "fermented," and "vegetarian."⁸⁴ These words implied that the principles of fermentation and "slow cooking," played a direct role in establishing Korean cuisine. Slowness signaled to readers

⁸¹ Yoon, *Good Morning Kimchi!*, 12-13.

⁸² Now known as the World Institute of Kimchi. It is an initiative founded in 2010, sponsored by the Korean government to produce kimchi-related research and "develop the kimchi industry that will boost the national growth."

Reference: "Mission and Function," World Institute of Kimchi, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://www.wikim.re.kr/menu.es?mid=a20201000000>.

⁸³ Yeong-hee Kim et. al, *Korean Cooking Made Easy* (Seoul: Discovery Media, 2006), 4-5.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

that natural processes were at work to produce a healthy and delicious dish. Kim seemed to contrast this to Western “fast” foods, which bore an unhealthy and notorious reputation.

Korean-Americans were also quick to laud kimchi as a healthy food but they exercised caution when it came to linking kimchi with certain desirable health benefits like cancer prevention. In *The Kimchi Cookbook* (2012), Lauryn Chun claimed that the acidity produced by “natural fermentation due to lactic acid is more natural for our own body’s digestive pH.”⁸⁵ She coupled the word “natural” with repeated descriptions of a “gradual, slower process of salt absorption” during kimchi fermentation.⁸⁶ Furthermore, Chun chose to highlight that the yeast is “naturally occurring,” and activated by the already present lactobacillus, the “beneficial bacteria.”⁸⁷ Warning the reader not to interrupt the fermentation for fear of ruining the taste, Chun emphasized the slowness of the process, allowing the lactic acid to kill off the “harmful bacteria.”⁸⁸ Unlike *Good Morning Kimchi!* and *The Kimchee Cookbook*, Chun did not make any outlandish health claims. Instead, she settled on featuring the natural and slow aspects of kimchi fermentation, letting the audience decide if the healthy aspects of kimchi warranted exploration.

Government publications in the 2010s increased their rhetoric regarding kimchi’s fermentation properties and its nutritional value. In *K-Food* (2014), Yun included an entire section on kimchi, reiterating that it is “low in calories and high in dietary fiber.”⁸⁹ Additionally, she claimed that kimchi is a rich source of vitamins like vitamin C and beta-carotene, stating that B vitamins are also made during the fermentation process. Lactic acid bacteria was mentioned to bolster the claim that kimchi “helps fight diabetes, heart disease, obesity and stomach cancer.”⁹⁰

Government publications chose to deliberately include health claims along the likes of *Good*

⁸⁵ Chun, *The Kimchi Cookbook*, 31.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 46-48.

⁸⁹ Yun, *K-Food*, 39.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 84.

Morning Kimchi! and *Kimchi: A Natural Health Food* to advertise kimchi as a healthy food and increase its culinary attractiveness in the eyes of the world.

Korean cookbook writers also advertised kimchi by underscoring its convenient production. Many cookbooks claimed that kimchi could be made in less than a few hours, proclaiming that only ingredients needed were spices, cabbage and patience. As an alternative, the authors suggested buying kimchi from local stores if making it from scratch proved too difficult. Interestingly, English-language Korean cookbooks before 2000 did not necessarily advertise kimchi as a ‘convenient food,’ because kimchi normally relied on hard physical labor and the passing of time to fully ferment. The language of convenience started to become more prominent after the CAC ratified kimchi as an exclusive Korean product in 2001. Convenience assured readers that not only was kimchi safe and healthy to eat but it required minimal time and effort to make the dish. They claimed this even though industrial kimchi production had overtaken home production in the 1990s, leading the majority of urban Koreans to buy kimchi rather than make it for themselves.⁹¹ Korean cookbook writers framed homemade kimchi as a convenient product to compete with the modern means of production that already dominated kimchi production in the 21st century.

Cooking the Korean Way (2003) and *Quick and Easy Korean Cooking* (2007) were some of the first examples that utilized the language of convenience when presenting kimchi recipes. In *Cooking the Korean Way*, Chung stated that “it is fun to make kimchi yourself...” but offered an alternative solution if readers felt that making kimchi was too difficult.⁹² She suggested that “you can buy it [kimchi] by the jar at large supermarkets and Asian food stores.”⁹³ Nevertheless, for those who chose to make kimchi, Chung ultimately claimed that kimchi would last for a long

⁹¹ Jae-jun Jo, “History of kimchi industry,” *Korean Journal of Food Science and Industry* 49, no. 2 (2016): 78.

⁹² Chung, *Cooking the Korean Way*, 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

time and that it would be most convenient to make it in large batches.⁹⁴ Chung invited readers to make kimchi while indirectly acknowledging that such an experience could be too arduous for some. Even though she offered a solution that ran counter to her goal as a cookbook writer, the author made sure to provide readers with opportunities to interact with kimchi, home-made or store-bought.

Similar to *Cooking the Korean Way*, Lee promised that making homemade kimchi could be a fun and rewarding experience. She asserted that “kimchi making doesn’t have to be such a labor-intensive affair” in *Quick and Easy Korean Cooking* (2007).⁹⁵ However, unlike Chung, Lee painted kimchi making as an easy endeavor and chose not to mention the option of buying kimchi at a local Asian store. The very first kimchi recipe she introduced was “quick kimchi,” the kimchi that can be consumed right away without needing to ferment the mixture. Most tellingly, Lee insisted that when following this recipe, “you can have your very own homemade kimchi with minimal effort.”⁹⁶ Using words like “minimal” and “quick” primed readers to anticipate how easy making kimchi would be and removed another potential obstacle to trying out an unfamiliar dish. Lee’s message also assured readers with kimchi tasting experience that the quality of homemade kimchi was superior to store-bought kimchi and could be made in the same amount of time it took to get to the store and back.

The Korean Table (2008) also highlighted the convenience and facility of making kimchi recipes, which were grouped in with salads. In the chapter heading, Samuels offered “simple recipes for turning vegetables into kimchi, almost overnight.” ‘Almost overnight’ certainly contrasted with descriptions of kimchi making being a laborious and ‘slow’ process by Korean cookbooks prior to *The Korean Table*. Moreover, in line with *The Korean Way*, Samuels offered

⁹⁴ Chung, *Cooking the Korean Way*, 33-35.

⁹⁵ Lee, *Quick and Easy Korean Cooking*, 105.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 107.

the alternative of purchasing “ready-made Chinese (Napa) cabbage kimchi at most grocery stores.”⁹⁷ Like Chung, Samuels did not hesitate to simplify the kimchi-making process so that it is easily accessible to all readers. Samuels continued her commentary when her co-author presented her recipes, emphasizing that in the process of salting, soaking and draining the kimchi, “once that is done, making kimchi is easy.”⁹⁸ Cookbooks like *The Korean Table* reflect how writers pushed to change the perception that kimchi was a laborious and impossible culinary product to make. They emphasized kimchi’s facility while suggesting alternative solutions like buying it at a local grocery store to help readers experience Korea’s national dish.

Cookbooks after 2013 became increasingly cautious about readily recommending the grocery store option to readers, instead seeking how convenient it was to make homemade kimchi. By this time, the South Korean government managed to successfully register *kimjang* as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Item in 2013. Registering *kimjang* legitimized kimchi on an international level and brought a new level of scrutiny to kimchi recipes and modes of production.⁹⁹ In *Maangchi’s Real Korean Cooking* (2015), Emily Kim mentioned how readers are able to “purchase good quality at any Korean grocery store” but guaranteed that “there is nothing like the flavor and satisfaction you will get from homemade kimchi.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Kim sprinkled in encouragement when presenting her kimchi recipes, repeatedly assuring her readers by phrases like “it’s not difficult to...” followed by “all you have to do is...”¹⁰¹ Kim amplified the arguments utilized by prior cookbook writers by praising the quality of homemade kimchi. Her

⁹⁷ Samuels, *The Korean Table*, 57.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 67.

⁹⁹ Jinsoo Hwang et al, “Exploration of the successful glocalization of ethnic food: a case of Korean food,” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 30, no. 12 (2018), 3659.

¹⁰⁰ Emily Kim, *Maangchi’s Real Korean Cooking: Authentic Dishes for the Home Cook* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2015), 378.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 378-379.

promises of an easy reward for a seemingly difficult task served to ease readers and push them to make kimchi for themselves.

Korean cookbook writers also highlighted kimchi's culinary versatility by pointing out its several uses as an ingredient in other Korean dishes, like kimchi jigae (kimchi stew). This property greatly expanded what kimchi could do in the kitchen and increased its culinary value. Korean cookbook writers did not expressly highlight kimchi's versatility until after the South Korean government kick-started its 2008 Global "Hansik Campaign." It was only the 2010s that direct references to kimchi's versatility surfaced in order to highlight its place among the other food items in Korean cuisine. By featuring versatility, cookbook writers sought to convince readers to incorporate kimchi into their daily lives and make it a part of their identities. Kimchi's status as both a stand alone dish and ingredient allowed itself to be adapted by readers' culinary preferences, who could use the dish in whatever way they pleased.

In her cookbook, *The Kimchi Chronicles* (2011), Vongerichten referenced kimchi's versatility by addressing how all parts of kimchi could be used to serve other culinary functions. For example, she mentioned that "liquid from kimchi is used as an important seasoning ingredient."¹⁰² Furthermore, Vongerichten clearly acknowledged that "while kimchi is often eaten as is alongside other foods, it's also often employed in many cooked dishes such as kimchi jjigae."¹⁰³ The author did this while displaying a host of different kimchi recipes, placing great importance on how kimchi is essential in the Korean kitchen because of its ability to shift between condiment and ingredient. Vongerichten's arguments persuaded readers that they could use kimchi in whatever ways they wished, even to create kimchi-based fusion dishes that bore no resemblance to traditional Korean food. If traditional Korean food included more than one

¹⁰² Vongerichten, *The Kimchi Chronicles*, 95.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

kimchi-based dish, it was safe to assume that kimchi could be used in any way the reader desired.

In contrast to Vongerichten, however, government publications limited the exploration of kimchi's versatility within the bounds of traditional Korean cuisine, in concordance with their attempts to fiercely defend kimchi as a Korean dish. *Great Foods, Great Stories* (2012) mentioned that while kimchi is “delicious in itself, it also serves as an ingredient for various dishes.”¹⁰⁴ The cookbook then described the ways it can be used, illustrating how kimchi pot stew can be made with “mugeun-kimchi (kimchi aged for over a year).” Other uses for kimchi include stir-fried rice and the fact that “kimchi liquid can be used as a sauce to mix with noodles or rice.”¹⁰⁵ In *K-Food* (2014), Yun stated that alongside kimchi jjigae (stew) or kimchi fried rice, kimchi is used to make mandu (dumplings), prepared with minced meat and chopped kimchi with vegetables. For meat lovers, kimchi could be steamed with short ribs or other cuts of meat to create kimchi jjim (braised meat with kimchi). Finally, Yun asserted that readers could make “kimchi jeon” (kimchi pancake) by frying a mixture of flour, kimchi and zucchini in an oiled pan.¹⁰⁶ Government publications did not hesitate to laud kimchi's versatility and thus, increased its culinary value in the eyes of readers. However, they did this by introducing traditional kimchi-based dishes instead of kimchi-fusion food prevalent in the 2010s.

In *Seoul Food* (2015), Naomi Yun advertised kimchi by directly stating that it is “almost magical in its versatility” and that there are “hundreds of different kinds of these pickled foods.”¹⁰⁷ Yun repeatedly mentioned how kimchi is “essential” as both an ingredient and condiment. She referenced how it could contribute to not only traditional food items like soups,

¹⁰⁴ *Great Food, Great Stories*, 203.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Yun, *K-Food*, 84.

¹⁰⁷ Yun, *Seoul Food*, 103.

stews, noodles and fried rice but also in new and upcoming fusion foods like kimchi tacos and sandwiches.¹⁰⁸ For example, kimchi-based fusion recipes included “kimchi and bacon pancake,” “kimchi hot dogs,” “kimchi fries with Sriracha mayo,” and “kimchi bulgogi nachos.”¹⁰⁹ With these recipes, she demonstrated that kimchi could ‘spice up’ any food, even that of Western foods like hotdogs and tacos. Yun taught readers to fuse kimchi with foods that they were accustomed to, making it a tangible part of their lives.

Consecrating Kimchi: Home, Identity and Mother Figures. Unlike non-Korean writers, Korean immigrants and Korean-Americans went beyond emphasizing the traditional and the practical aspects of making kimchi. They sought to imbue kimchi with emotional elements, often recalling fond memories of home, childhood and mother figures in the act of eating or making the dish. In *We are What We Eat*, Gabaccia stated that human beings cling tenaciously to familiar foods because such foods become associated with every dimension of one’s home culture.¹¹⁰ Such personal references to kimchi reflected this desire to preserve elements of one’s homeland and emphasize the importance of food in one’s identity.¹¹¹

Kimchi represented three things for many Korean expat and Korean American cookbook writers. First, kimchi reminded them of home. Kimchi served as the physical link to the Korean homeland for immigrants. For early immigrants who arrived to find a lack of Korean food in America, kimchi helped them reconnect to the tastes of home and memories of their idealized childhood. Second, kimchi acted as a pivotal marker to help maintain their Korean identity. For many children of Korean immigrants, kimchi often carried a negative association with foreignness and shame. As they grew older, however, kimchi became a symbol of their identity

¹⁰⁸ Yun, *Seoul Food*, 104.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 15-16.

¹¹⁰ Donna R. Gabaccia, *We are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

¹¹¹ Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts*, 8.

and strengthened ties within family members. Third, kimchi evoked memories of mother figures associated with kimchi production. As the only ones making kimchi, grandmothers and mothers figured heavily into such memories. Some cookbook authors even ventured to share their mothers' kimchi recipes, indicating that such kimchi recipes were reminders of maternal love. *Kimjang* (the production of kimchi) was also associated with motherhood and formative childhood memories. In this way, Korean immigrant or Korean-American cookbook writers imbued this dish with emotional elements.

This language started to appear with the publication of *A Korean Mother's Cooking Notes* in 1997. Compared to previous cookbooks, Sun-young Chang incorporated her voice as a mother worried for her daughters in law and mixed in personal advice, achieving the desired effect of being present with the reader. However, it was actually one of Chang's daughters in law, Yi Chong-mun, who imbued kimchi with emotional memories. Yi described "mother's kimchi" as always having a fresh and tasty quality as if "it came out of a new jar of winter kimchi."¹¹² Yi made it clear that the taste of kimchi always reminds her of her mother in law and her generous, warm heart. Well-made kimchi also reminded Yi of Chang's "delicious, scientifically kimchi," and of how they were "packed into every kimchi container," eventually becoming the main staple of their household. This kimchi proved to be popular and eventually attracted a long list of friends who were "eagerly looking forward to her kimchi's gift."¹¹³ Yi's afterword provided a good first example of how kimchi helped writers recall memories of the important female figures in their lives.

Hi-Soo Shin Hepinstall connected kimchi with memories of childhood and home in *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen* (2001). She reminisced about how "kimchi made up virtually

¹¹² Sun-young Chang, *A Korean Mother's Cooking Notes* (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 1997), 203.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

half of the daily diet... in the days of my childhood.”¹¹⁴ Kimchi took on a special quality for Hepinstall, who fondly remembered memories of going through kimchi-selling neighborhood markets and witnessing how the women in her family prepared large batches of the pickled vegetable for winters. The author also included photos of her mother participating in *kimjang* as well as photos of kimchi markets in her old neighborhood.¹¹⁵ For Hepinstall, kimchi brought back an important part of her childhood before marrying an American man and moving out of her home country. It acted as the gateway for her to recall eating other delicious Korean dishes, becoming a physical reminder of her country and childhood. It also helped recall her mother’s love, although this was only implied by showing photos of her mother making kimchi in traditional Korean dress. As a Korean expat, Hepinstall held onto kimchi as a symbol of home.

Taking a few cues from *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen*, other cookbooks started to incorporate their descriptions of kimchi with autobiographical details. In *Good Morning Kimchi!* (2005), Yoon stressed how important kimchi was to her, calling the dish “an integral part of my diet.”¹¹⁶ In addition, kimchi helped the author remember how difficult it was to obtain fresh food as a young child during the Korean War. Despite massive starvation and constant danger from crossfire, she had survived thanks to a daily diet of rice and kimchi.¹¹⁷ After the war, Yoon came to make kimchi itself, reminding her of her means of survival and home. In other parts of her cookbook, she described the process of making kimchi during *kimjang* season, presumably drawing from her own memories. Although she wrote her descriptions in a sparse manner, Yoon hinted that making kimchi reminded her of her childhood during the Korean War and how the dish saved her life.

¹¹⁴ Hepinstall, *Growing up in a Korean Kitchen*, 94.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93-95.

¹¹⁶ Yoon, *Good Morning Kimchi!*, 1.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Cecilia Hae-jin Lee, a Korean-American, also possessed fond memories of kimchi, albeit of a very different nature. Instead of reminding her of sustenance, it brought back memories of home and the important female figures in her life. In *Quick and Easy Korean Cooking* (2009), Lee mentioned how kimchi reminded her childhood in Korea before moving to America. It reminded her of how “it seemed everyone came to our house to make kimchi.”¹¹⁸ She mentioned how her mother and her friends came to their house to make kimchi, eventually taking home a jar for her labor. In the meantime, however, Lee described how “it was a time for loud talking, gossiping and laughing... while our hands were covered with the garlicky red stuff that makes kimchi taste good.”¹¹⁹ Lee’s language made it easy to assume that she herself participated in such pastimes and how clearly kimchi allowed her to recall significant details of her life back in Korea. For Lee, kimchi continued to act as a physical reminder of her cultural homeland and a memory in and of itself.

In *The Kimchi Chronicles* (2011), Marja Vongerichten made clear connections to kimchi as a mixed-race Korean American. In the introduction, she detailed the ambiguity which marked her identity as the daughter of an African American father and a Korean mother. After moving to America with her adopted parents at a young age, she described how she rediscovered Korean food at the age of 14. When grocery shopping for her family at a local supermarket, she spotted a jar of kimchi and “snuck it into the shopping cart, eager for some kind of connection to the place where I was born and raised.”¹²⁰ For the author, kimchi represented the home that she never knew. However, she noted that trying kimchi and being excited about Korean food “would feel like a betrayal to my parents.” Nevertheless, she went home and secretly opened the jar of kimchi, taking a bite. Tasting the spicy condiment “seemed to speak directly to a part of me that I

¹¹⁸ Lee, *Quick and Easy Korean Cooking*, 105.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Vongerichten, *The Kimchi Chronicles*, 21.

felt, but couldn't quite articulate."¹²¹ For Vongerichten, kimchi allowed her to reconnect with her Korean roots in a tangible way.

Kimchi reminded Vongerichten of her home in Korea and led her to meet her birth mother for the first time in Brooklyn, New York. In preparation for their meeting, She described how her birth mother “made bulgogi with chonggak kimchi, a kimchi made with Korean ponytail radishes.”¹²² Kimchi presided over the emotional reunion, allowing the author to connect with her mother after having been separated for so long. Interestingly, Vongerichten described how despite not having eaten Korean food in two decades, “the meal was strangely familiar; the food I had eaten for the first 3 years of my life had taken root... reawakening those sensory memories helped me feel connected to my mother.”¹²³ Vongerichten used kimchi as a jumping off point to mention how kimchi and Korean food acted as a bridge between “my Korean identity and my life in America,” ultimately allowing her to find who she was. Kimchi acted not only to help her recall her birth mother but also the home she never knew she had.

Unlike Vongerichten, who only discovered kimchi until much later, Lauryn Chun was born and raised in Korea, until she moved to America as an older child. In *The Kimchi Cookbook* (2012), she started her introduction by stating that “I have been eating kimchi all my life.”¹²⁴ However, it was only until three years before the publishing of her cookbook that she truly smelled it, “when I was making kimchi alone for the first time.”¹²⁵ It was in that moment that kimchi brought back the aromas of her childhood in Seoul, her mother and grandmother as well as the earliest memories of consuming food. As a six year old, she watched how her grandmother made kimchi with the neighborhood women during *kimjang* season in November. She detailed

¹²¹ Vongerichten, *The Kimchi Chronicles*, 21-22.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Chun, *The Kimchi Cookbook*, 20.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

how she would “run up to my grandmother, and she’d give me small pieces of the inner cabbage leaf with the rolled up stuffing in them... a bond of love between us and a preview of the kimchi we would be eating all winter.”¹²⁶ Kimchi brought back the comforting memories of her childhood in Korea.

Kimchi also indicated foreignness when Chun came to the U.S. as an eight year old. She recalled her family taking extensive grocery trips, recreating Korean food from American ingredients. In a desire to fit in her new country, Chun recalled how she couldn’t see a bridge between the two cultures... [because] Korean food was so different, especially kimchi.”¹²⁷ Sometimes, kimchi’s stink and sour taste even became a source of shame, with her mother cautioning her to be careful in how she handled kimchi outside their home, as it was the “one Korean tradition that would offend people.”¹²⁸ Additionally, Chun recalled how she struggled to reconcile food, culture and language between her Korean and American worlds. Kimchi lay at the focal point of this struggle and her thoughts continued to change as she ate kimchi at home, at her mother’s restaurant and when she returned to Korea many years later.¹²⁹ Finally, after a long journey of exploring different non-Korean cuisines, Chun stated that “I had come full circle from my Korean roots, through Western traditions, culminating in rediscovering kimchi.”¹³⁰ For Chun, kimchi acted as an anchor to her Korean identity and helped her to acknowledge how important her Koreanness was in her life.

Like Chun, Roy Choi, the founder of the food truck chain Kogi, had similar experiences with kimchi as a Korean American. In *L.A. Son* (2013), Choi explicitly stated that just as “a car needs gas; as a kid, I needed kimchi.”¹³¹ For most of his childhood, the visits to the La Brea Tar

¹²⁶ Chun, *The Kimchi Cookbook*, 21.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 24.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 25-26.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 22.

¹³¹ Roy Choi, *L.A. Son: My Life, My City, My Food* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 43.

Pits in Los Angeles reminded him of the “jars of fermenting kimchi that filled our refrigerators,” constantly fermenting. For Choi, kimchi remained inseparable from his childhood and helped him remember how his parents used to feed him “raw kimchi from stained Rubbermaid gloves” along with other foods.¹³² Although kimchi played an important role in his identity (“everything I am comes from kimchi”), it also formed part of the ambiguity surrounding his Korean-American identity.¹³³ He was someone who struggled to fully assimilate into American society all the while still eating “kimchi and porridge.”¹³⁴ At the same time, Choi did not know how to fully embrace his Korean identity because he was forbidden to speak Korean at home. Again, despite this ambiguity, kimchi acted as a physical link to his Korean roots.

For Emily Kim (“Maangchi”), kimchi brought back memories of her grandmother and the traditional *kimjang* activities of her childhood. In *Maangchi’s Real Korean Cooking* (2015), Kim mentioned her grandmother and how as a child she saw her grandmother spending “a lot of effort trying to slow down the fermentation process” when making kimchi.¹³⁵ Kim remembered how her grandmother’s kimchi was “super sour” and how she made smaller batches during the summer. In addition to reminding the author of her grandmother, kimchi helped connect Kim with figures from the past, maintaining Korean tradition while living in a different country. Kim implied that her kimchi recipes are based on her grandmother’s way of making kimchi, with slight modifications. In this way, kimchi awakened memories of mother figures for Korean-Americans like Emily Kim.

Conclusion. Whether the authors were native Korean, Korean-American or non-Korean, Korean cookbook writers utilized several strategies to sell kimchi and Korean culture to foreign

¹³² Choi, *L.A. Son*, 29.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 37.

¹³⁵ Kim, *Maangchi’s Real Korean Cooking*, 382-383.

audiences. These writers knew that kimchi acted as an effective vehicle for introducing Korean cuisine and Korean culture to non-Koreans. Before advertising the fermented vegetable, they established kimchi as a Korean dish by utilizing history, tradition, and claims of its unique “Korean taste.” They mentioned kimchi’s ancient origins and highlighted its importance in Korean cuisine by kimchi’s ubiquitous presence in Korean meals. They discussed the making of kimchi in the winter months, although such practices had largely diminished in the modern era. Korean cookbook writers then proceeded to advertise kimchi by highlighting its health properties. Some writers made dubious health claims supported by scant evidence, arguing that eating kimchi provided vitamins, minerals and even anti-cancer benefits. Other writers instead chose to emphasize kimchi’s fermentation process, calling it a “slow food” and contrasting it with manufactured foods. In addition to these claims, Korean expats and their children took their presentation of kimchi to a personal level by imbuing their descriptions of kimchi with sentimental memories, reminding readers that kimchi was part of their identity.

Kimchi is a case study of how crucial food is to the human experience. Food makes life worth living and enriches the mundane aspect of everyday life. It gives us pathways to explore new cultures but it also strengthens our cultural roots. Our food choices not only reinforce our identity but they also provide new ways to interact meaningfully with different cultures and people groups. From a political perspective, food can be used to shape peoples’ perceptions about a certain country. World governments are realizing that advertising food is a cost-effective way of increasing a nation’s soft power abroad. Ultimately, kimchi may be specific to Korea, but studying the history of this fermented vegetable shows us that we cannot take food for granted, even if it is only used to silence our hunger pangs. By studying the culinary dimension of human identity, perhaps we, as human beings, can come to understand ourselves more deeply.

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