



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Ethnic Foods

journal homepage: <http://journalofethnicfoods.net>

Original article

Korean diet: Characteristics and historical background



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 January 2016

Received in revised form

23 January 2016

Accepted 2 February 2016

Available online 15 March 2016

Keywords:

bapsang

fermentation

K-diet

K-food

namul

ABSTRACT

Background: Korea has developed a unique food culture connected to its long agricultural history. Recently, interest in Korean food, especially regarding its health benefits, has greatly increased. However, there are insufficient resources and research available on the characteristics and definitions of Korean cuisine.

Methods: Researchers and professors of the food and nutritional sciences in Korea began working together in April 2015 in order to establish cohesive definitions and concepts to be used in dialogue related to the Korean diet (K-diet). The 100 most representative Korean dishes (K-food) were selected by evaluating their role in tradition, culture, and health promotion.

Results: Although the K-diet has been widely discussed in regard to raw ingredients, traditional cooking methods and technology, fundamental principles, and knowledge, it would be valuable to preserve the traditional methods and knowledge of Korean foods rather than focus on the raw materials themselves. Korean meals have historically been served with *bap* (cooked rice), *kuk* (dishes with broth), *kimchi*, and *banchan* (side dishes) to be consumed at the same time. As traditionally baking or frying were not common cooking methods, Koreans tended to use fermenting, boiling, blanching, seasoning, and pickling. Among these methods, the most characteristic method is fermentation. The process of fermentation enriches food flavors and preserves foods.

Conclusion: The K-diet is composed of *bap* (cooked-rice) and *kuk*, and various *banchan* with one serving called *bapsang*. *Kimchi* is always served at every meal. The principal aspects of the K-diet include proportionally high consumption of vegetables, moderate to high consumption of legumes and fish, and low consumption of red meat. *Banchan* is mostly seasoned with various *jang* (fermented soy products), medicinal herbs, and sesame or perilla oil.

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1. Introduction

Korea, located in Northeast Asia, has an agricultural history that has continued for > 5,000 years despite its close proximity to China.

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The Han Chinese (漢族), who founded the Three Kingdoms (三國), Qin dynasty (秦), Tang dynasty (唐), Song dynasty (宋), and Ming dynasty (明), developed its own language and controlled China until the Qing (清) dynasty emerged. The history of Korea from Kochosun (古朝鮮) and the period of the Three States, including Kokuryo (高句麗), Baekje (百濟), Silla (新羅), to Koryo (高麗) and Chosun (朝鮮), maintained independence from China and developed a unique culture and language. Linguistically, Korean belongs to the Altaic language group along with Japonic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Hungarian, and Finnish languages. Moreover, the

Mongolian spot that is prevalent among Koreans suggests biological differences between Koreans and Chinese. Likewise, Korean food culture has also developed distinctly from Chinese cuisine.

As mentioned above [1], the development of food technology was prompted by the desire to preserve food resources. For example, in China, frying and pickling were the prevalent methods in reducing water content (a_w) to protect against microbial spoilage of food. By contrast, the limited production of cooking oils in Korea led to the development of the fermentation process for food preservation, which utilizes effective microorganisms against microbial spoilage. Although milk was the main ingredient in fermented products, such as cheese and yogurt, in countries with strong livestock industries, the main ingredients in Korean fermented foods were grains and vegetables. This was due to their settled lifestyle and focus on agriculture. Korean food has developed from the necessity of preserving foods during the hot summer and long harsh winter in the Korean peninsula characterized by rocky ocean fronts on the east, south, and west, and by rugged mountains on the north. This geographical isolation from neighboring countries and distinct weather allowed the early Korean people to develop most enduring cultural legacies of the Korean diet (K-diet). In this environment, salted beans, fish, and vegetables were preserved by fermentation. Historically, Koreans have made various *jang* (fermented soy products) [2], including *kanjang* (soy sauce), *doenjang* (soybean paste) and *gochujang* (red pepper paste), and diverse types of *kimchi* [3] with vegetables. These unique fermentation techniques are examples of authentic Korean food [4].

2. Materials and methods

Korea has developed unique foods, as well as a food culture that is fundamentally distinct from Chinese or Japanese food cultures. Food is one of the key elements of culture and presents possibilities for promulgation of various cultural contents. However, this effect has been diminished by a lack of cohesive definitions and concepts in Korean food culture. Therefore, it is necessary to establish consistent definitions and concepts to be used in relation to the K-diet.

As leading healthy lifestyles has become an important global trend, renowned healthy diets, such as the Mediterranean [5] and Nordic [6] diets, have been studied and promoted globally. Moreover, studies on the French diet have reported an interesting epidemiological observation called the French paradox [7], referencing that French people have low incidence of cardiovascular disease (CVD) despite high consumption of saturated fats in their diet. It is presumed that the French lifestyle and consumption of red wine and resveratrol lowers their incidence rates of CVD [8].

Research has suggested the health benefits of Korean food are due to the diversity of ingredients and cooking methods used in Korean cuisine [9]. The average life expectancy in Korea is > 80 years despite the popularity of high salt dishes such as *kuk*, *tang*, and *kimchi*. Excessive salt consumption is a risk factor for CVD. This phenomenon has been referred to as the Korean paradox [10] and some researchers have claimed that the paradox can be explained by the regular consumption of vegetables and the types of salt used in Korean cuisine. Historically, Koreans have used unrefined, baked, or fermented salts, which may have different health effects compared with refined salt in relation to CVD. Research has shown that consumption of fermented foods such as *kimchi* is not associated with high blood pressure [11]. Moreover, high potassium intake assists in discharging salt out of the body and, as a result, reduces the risk of CVD [10].

As problems of overnutrition have become prevalent, the K-diet [12], characterized by the high consumption of *namul* (seasoned vegetable dishes) and fermented foods, can bring about positive impacts worldwide. Although the health benefits of the K-diet have

been supported by research, resources are needed to further understand the elements of balanced meals in the K-diet. Although there are some definitions and characteristics of individual Korean dishes available, there is not a holistic approach to categorizing the data in order to explain the health benefits of Korean food.

The establishment of consistent definitions and concepts in Korean food should be based on systematic and scientific research in order to promote the health benefits of Korean food globally. Therefore, scholars of the food and nutritional sciences have collaborated and announced the “Seoul Declaration on K-diet: Korean Heritage and Healthiness” [13]. In the postindustrial age, culture is one of the key elements of a country's competitiveness in the global market. Therefore, this paper will discuss definitions, characteristics, representative Korean foods (K-food) that have been introduced in the Seoul declaration, and embody fundamental aspects of Korean meal table [12].

3. Results

3.1. The Definition of K-diet

K-diet and K-food are two separate concepts. Although the concept of K-diet is used to represent traditional Korean food culture, cooking methods, and dietary habits and patterns, K-food are the food constituents of K-diet. K-food and K-diet are often described as Korean cuisine, Korean diet, or traditional Korean food. A few elements of defining food culture have been put forward, such as frequently consumed foods, raw ingredients or materials, technology or cooking methods, and the fundamental principles found in the country's dietary patterns. These views put differing emphasis on food and diet.

The first aspect introduced above, which views K-food as frequently consumed foods, would allow popular foods among youth, such as *jajangmyeon*, pizza, or fried chicken, to be considered K-food. Therefore, a standard time period criteria for Korean food would be needed but introduces unnecessary complexity. The second idea, which has often been cited by the Korean Ministry of Agriculture, suggests that K-food should be made with ingredients (agricultural products) produced only in Korea [14]. According to this view, *kimchi* made from imported cabbage would not be considered as K-food. The third view proposes the use of traditional cooking technology as the key element of K-food in attempt to overcome this issue. Although it is important to preserve traditional Korean cooking methods, this point of view focuses only on the physical and materialistic aspects of methods. As this view overlooks technological advances, *doenjang* fermented in jars other than *hangari* (Korean earthenware crock) would not qualify as K-food.

Therefore, when discussing K-food and K-diet, one should focus on whether certain dishes are made with traditionally used ingredients regardless of the origin of produce, follow traditional cooking methods and principles, and lastly, preserve the spirit behind traditional Korean food practices. The definition of traditional Korean food by Chung [14,15] reflects these ideas: “Food made with raw materials or ingredients that have been traditionally used in Korea, or with the similar ingredients, use authentic or other similar cooking methods, have historical and cultural characteristics, and have developed and been passed on through people's lives.” This meaning in relation to Korean food has been interpreted as consistency, patience, consideration, beauty, and appreciation for art. In the Seoul Declaration, the definition of K-diet represents the interpretation as below: “K-diet is composed of Bab (cooked-rice) and Kuk, and various Banchan with one serving called bapsang. Kimchi is always served at every meal. The principal aspects of K-diet include proportionally high consumption of fresh or cooked vegetables (Namul), moderate to high consumption of

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