

Original article

Kimchi, seaweed, and seasoned carrot in the Soviet culinary culture: the spread of Korean food in the Soviet Union and Korean diaspora



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ABSTRACT

The half-million Soviet Koreans (or Koryö saram) in the former Soviet Union are the descendants of the ethnic Koreans who migrated to the Russian Far East in the late 19th and early 20th centuries from the northern parts of the Korean peninsula. Their settlements were established in the wide areas of the Russian Far East, including the urban areas around Vladivostok. They were, however, forced-migrated to Central Asia in late 1937 under Stalin's rule. From Central Asia, these Soviet Koreans were further dispersed to other parts of the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin era. These multiple dispersions of Soviet Koreans not only transformed their culinary habit, but also helped Korean food spread among the peoples of the Soviet Union. As a result, Korean food, such as kimchi, miyök (edible kelp), and others, were introduced and widely consumed throughout the Soviet Union. This paper explores this unusual spread and popularity of Korean food in the Soviet Union, focusing on the migration history of the Soviet Koreans and Soviet culinary culture. This work is based on the author's fieldwork in the Soviet Union in the early 1900s and again in mid-2000s. The unusual diffusion and popularity of the Korean food in the former Soviet Union provides us with important insights on migration and globalization of ethnic food.

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, Korean cuisine has gained some level of recognition and popularity among foreigners. In the past, except for a few items, such as *kimchi* (Korean fermented vegetables) [1,2] and *bulgoki* (marinated beef barbecue) [3] (Fig. 1), Korean cuisines were not very popular in the global culinary market. Today, however, it is not difficult to find Korean restaurants in upmarket restaurant streets in large Western cities, such as New York City, London, Paris, and Frankfurt. Even in many cities in other Asian countries, Korean restaurants have appeared. Ordinary urban people in the West would know Korean cuisines, such as *kimchi*, *bibimbap* (rice mixed with cooked vegetables and meat with spicy sauce) [2,4], *chapch'ae* (fried starch noodles with vegetables and beef), and even *ttökpokki* (rice cake sticks and vegetables in hot chili sauce; Fig. 1). The increasing popularity of Korean food in the world market is partly due to the economic rise of Korea and the recent phenomenon of *Hallyu*, the fever for Korean popular cultural products, including

popular music, TV dramas, and films. The systematic effort of the South Korean government to promote Korean culture and its general nation-brand in the global market is another factor behind this popularity of Korean food (cf. The Hansik Foundation <http://www.koreanfood.net/en/index.do>).

While Korean food enjoys unprecedented popularity on the global stage today, this was not true a decade ago. In fact, Korean cuisines, in comparison with those of other Asian countries, such as China, Japan, or Thailand, were not well known in the West until the early 21st century. This, however, was different in the Soviet Union, where some Korean food was already well known by the 1970s. Though rarely known to the outside world, in the Soviet Union during the 1970s some Korean food, such as *kimchi* and various *namul* (vegetables boiled and seasoned and consumed like salads; see Kim et al [5]), were already well-known throughout the country, from the Far East to the European part of Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asia. Travelers of the early 1990s saw Korean food consumed everywhere in the former Soviet Union [6]. Why, then, was Korean food so widely known and popular among the peoples of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and onward?

This paper explores the unusual phenomenon of the globalization and popularity of Korean food in the former Soviet Union. In so doing, I will look into the history of the Korean migration to the

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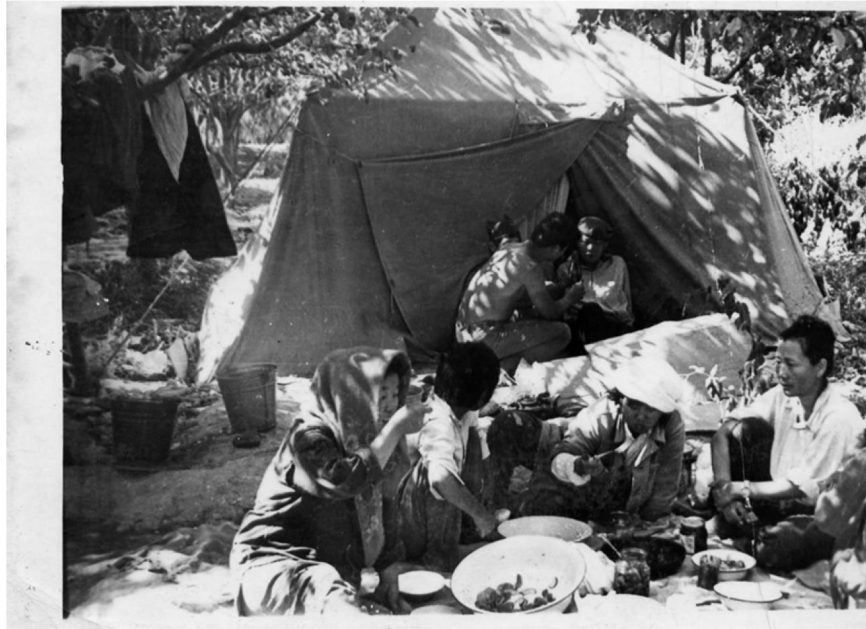


Fig. 1. A Soviet Korean family engaged in seasonal market gardening is having lunch in the early 1970s in southern Uzbekistan. A big bowl of salad is seen in front.

Russian Far East, which began in the late 19th century and continued through the early 20th century, and the trajectory of their later dispersions within the Soviet Union both before and after the collapse of the 'empire' in the early 1990s. Additionally, I will pay heed to the general cultural trends of the Soviet Union, particularly its culinary culture, with which the food of the Soviet Koreans (*Koryŏ saram*) could merge and eventually gain popularity [6].

2. Migration and culinary culture

Our food and culinary culture have always been influenced, changed, and developed by migration. People who migrate from one place to another place carry their own food and eating habits. Introduction of a particular food that is peculiar to an ethnic group into another group occurs through cultural exchanges, with such cultural exchanges are facilitated by people exchanges. Globalization of an ethnic food—the phenomenon by which certain culinary culture of an ethnic group is introduced to other ethnic groups, consumed by the latter, mingled with the food and culture of the locals, developed into a new kind of food, and circulated widely—tends to be promoted normally by human migration. Migrant food culture also goes through transformations under the influence of the local climate, environment, and culture. Transfer of food culture from one group to another group is certainly not carried out only by large-scale migrations. It can also be achieved by a small number of traders and travelers.

There are numerous historical and anthropological studies on human migration and food. Diamond [7] explored how technology and culture, including food and food technologies, spread through the Eurasian continent, from the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia to the rest of the continent. Mintz [8] showed how the global political economy promoted migrations (and forced migration) for the sugar cane industry, which also resulted in the mixing of different cultures, including food. Therefore, the food that we eat and how we prepare it has been greatly affected by the geography, culture, and particularly the history of human migrations.

Many food items that Koreans enjoy originated by Koreans themselves. However, some foods were brought from other

countries by migrants, soldiers, travelers, and Buddhist monks. For example, soybeans and other foods, such as soy sauce (*kanjang*), soybean paste (*toenjang* or *doenjang*) [9], and tofu were probably spread out from Kokuryo (ancient Korea) to other Asian countries, such as China and Japan, by migrants, merchants, and Buddhist monks [10]. Recently, Chinese laborers and traders that followed Chinese troops into Korea in the early 1880s brought Chinese cuisines, particularly from Shandong Province, where the great majority of them originated. One was the noodle with black soybean sauce, which was later developed into a new noodle dish (*chajangmyŏn*) highly popular among Koreans. Many similar examples exist throughout modern history.

This is exactly how Korean food, such as *kimchi*, *miyŏk much'im* (seasoned seaweed; Fig. 1), and various *namul* or *ch'ae* (steamed vegetables lightly seasoned with salt or soy sauce, roasted sesames and vegetable oil) dishes, were spread out in the Soviet Union. In the case of Soviet Koreans and the diffusion of their food among the peoples of the Soviet Union, the unusual migration experience of the former made it possible.

The first Korean settlers of the Russian Far East, which used to be called the Maritime Province of Qing, were impoverished peasants who migrated from the northeastern parts of the Korean peninsula in search of cultivable land. They escaped from the poverty-stricken homeland, where political turmoil and droughts devastated their life in the mid- and late-19th century. The Maritime Province, which used to be a part of the sacred homeland of the powerful Manchus, was sparsely inhabited due to the Manchu policy that kept their homeland from Chinese and Koreans. Regardless of the illegality of crossing the border and entering into the Maritime Province, some Korean peasants from the northern Hamkyŏng Province started settling in the land just across the shallow river Tuman, which marked the border between Korea and Qing. In the 1860, Russians gained the land from Qing through the Treaty of Beijing.

After gaining the new territories from Qing, Czarist Russia promoted settlements of Russians and other Europeans, such as Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews. Koreans also continued to migrate to the land. For both Korean and Russian settlers, it was a new land requiring readjust to the new environment, which

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