



Original article

Understanding Korean food culture from Korean paintings

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ABSTRACT

Background: In Korea, there are many traditional foods that have developed along with the country's rich history. In addition, various food cultures have developed through agricultural traditions, ritual ceremonies, and the sharing of affection. Paintings, works of calligraphy, and music demonstrate some of these cultural characteristics of Korean foods. Further research and analysis of Korean food culture using these data sources is currently underway.

Methods: This paper focuses on the cultural characteristics of Korean food revealed in paintings from the Chosun dynasty. The 10 most renowned paintings, including the work of Kim Hong-Doh, a representative artist in the Chosun dynasty, will be discussed in relation to the cultural characteristics of Korean food.

Results: The results of our analysis of the genre paintings show that the characteristics of Korean food are well portrayed in these paintings in the same manner as Pansori. For example, genre paintings show that food is a symbol of power, which can be used to control people. Food has also been regarded as health supplements and medicine, and people have shared their feelings and affections through food culture. In addition, food contains people's wishes and is used as a medium to communicate with Gods.

Conclusion: Beyond the basic value of food in maximizing nutrients and energy, Korean food culture has developed distinctive cultural characteristics through more than 5,000 years of agricultural history. Although the genre paintings analyzed in this paper are limited to a certain era, this paper will serve as a milestone in providing direction for future studies.

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1. Introduction

The food industry and food culture have developed along with the history of agriculture. In ancient times, the main purpose of farming was to survive, and thus, it would be difficult to understand food culture separate from agricultural history. While agriculture has evolved to maximize the amount of crops produced, the development of scientific food culture started with the preservation of harvested foods [1]. For example, storerooms were built to avoid animal attacks and various ways of preserving foods to avoid microbial attacks were created, such as drying, frying, and pickling. In other words, the heart of modern food culture was maximizing nutrients and energy from resources. This food culture that views foods as mere sources of energy continued until the Industrial Age, but this has recently started to change.

The dawning of a new era began with cultural growth and economic expansion. In the 21st century, each country assures its national identity and excellent and unique cultural value through its focus on the cultural education to suggest a new prospect for the future. In this trend, the food culture is becoming more important, which defines a new code of identity for various ethnicities and countries of the world. The new food culture in the post-Industrial Age focuses on health, quality of life, traditions, and other cultural aspects [1]. Although the importance of research on food culture has greatly increased over time, the amount of available materials and data is rather limited. Studying literature reviews is one of the most important ways to study Korean food culture [2–6]. Many researchers have attempted to understand the origin of traditional Korean foods such as *gochujang*, *bibimbap*, and *kimchi* by analyzing old literary sources [7], but direct references to food culture in literature are scarce. Although anthropological approaches and other such direct modes of observation and analysis can be used, these are costly and take significant amounts of time. Therefore, it is helpful to study Korean food culture through other sources, such as novels, paintings, and music.

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Many researchers have studied food culture through novels, paintings, and music to understand traditional views and to promote its historical and cultural value [7–13]. Chung [8] discussed the definition and characteristics of Korean foods. Beyond the common definition of Korean food, that is, “food made with traditional Korean ingredients or agricultural products,” the new definition of Korean food introduced in the paper was “foods made with ingredients or agricultural products that have been traditionally used in Korea, or with similar ingredients or agricultural products, use authentic or other similar cooking methods, have historical and cultural characteristics, and have developed and passed on through people’s lives” [8]. The meaning contained in Korean foods has been interpreted as blending, patience, consideration, beauty, and appreciation for arts [8,9]: *bibimbap* shares the philosophy of blending with others [5]; *jang* refers to a fermented sauce in Korea, and refers to the art of patience [2,3]; *kkakdugi* and *tarakjuk* point to consideration for seniors; *minari ganghoe* and cherries share their beauty and colors; and lastly, *bulgogi* and *makgeolli* show an appreciation for the arts and seasons [8,9]. The Korean Food Foundation [10] has studied the meaning of Korean foods by analyzing paintings. Although some may argue that the methods used in these analyses are not scientific, it is desirable to discuss and learn about food culture through various sources other than just written references.

Music is indispensable in Korean agricultural traditions. Each region had its own folk music (Nongak) to accompany agricultural labor, which made working together in groups easier and more enjoyable. Reading stories to melody was also a popular way of enjoying music and art. It is possible to get a glimpse of the history and culture of Korean foods through music. Pansori is a unique genre of musical storytelling with sori (sound) performed by a nobleman or professional singer and a drummer. Some Pansori performances were created based on popular novels of the times. For example, *Simcheongjeon* (沈淸傳) [14], *Chunhyangjeon* (春香傳) [15], *Heungbojeon* (興夫傳) [16], and *Tokkijeon* are known as the original stories of *Shimcheongka* (沈淸歌), *Chunhyangka* (春香歌), *Heungboka* (興夫歌), and *Sukungka* (水宮歌) [17]. *Simcheongjeon* (沈淸傳) is one of the most well-known Pansori-based fictions in Hangeul (Korean alphabet) from the Chosun dynasty. However, its date of composition and author are unknown. *Simcheongjeon* is about the sacrifice *Simcheong* made to help her blind father regain his eyesight. The main theme of the story is filial piety. *Chunhyangjeon* (春香傳) is also one of the most well-known Pansori-based fictions in Hangeul from the Chosun dynasty. It is a love story between *Chunhyang*, a courtesan’s daughter, and *Lee Mong-Yong*, a government official’s son, and notes the struggles due to the differences between their social standing. *Chunhyangjeon* is full of satire and humor, and reflects the life of common people in the late Chosun dynasty; however, its date of composition and author are unknown. *Heungbojeon* (興夫傳) is a Pansori-based fiction written in Hangeul during the reign of the Chosun dynasty; however, its date of composition and author are unknown. *Heungbojeon* is a humorous and satirical story about two brothers: *Nolbu*, the older who was greedy, and *Heungbo*, the younger who was kind but very poor. *Tokkijeon* (rabbit story) is a satirical fable about the palace of the dragon king. It reflects upon and criticizes the officials, kings, and political circumstances of the Chosun dynasty. Along with *Jeokbyokka* (赤壁歌) [18], these five sori comprise the five episodes of Pansori and serve as important references in understanding Korean food. *Jeokbyokka* (赤壁歌) is a Pansori performance based on the story of *Jeokbyeokdaejeon* (赤壁大戰) from the Chinese novel *Samkukjiyeonui* (三國志演義). The story starts when *Liu Bei*, *Guan Yu*, and *Zhang Fei* pledge brotherhood in a peach garden. It ends with a scene where the three brothers and *Zhuge Liang* won the battle of Red Cliffs against *Cao Cao*, and after *Guan Yu* released *Cao Cao*. *Jeokbyokka* is one of the 12

episodes of Pansori. Ingredients or agricultural products and their characteristics revealed in these Pansori were analyzed to understand the features of the food culture [8,9,11]. The results of our analysis indicate four attributes of Korean food culture: (1) food as a symbol of power; (2) food as a medicine and treatment; (3) food as a medium to share feelings and affection; and (4) food as an expression of hopes and wishes [8,9]. These four attributes of Korean food shown in Pansori are also portrayed in genre paintings from the late Chosun dynasty in the same manner. Exploring paintings from the Chosun dynasty in regard to the attributes presented in Pansori will enrich our understanding of Korean food culture.

There were many renowned painters from the Chosun dynasty, the last kingdom of Korea, including *Kim Hong-Doh* (金弘道, 1745–1806, a representative genre painter of the late Chosun dynasty whose pen name was *Donwon*, 檀園); *Shin Yun-Bok* (1758–?, an official and painter of the Chosun dynasty whose pen name was *Hyewon*; 蕙園), who created many genre paintings of the upper classes; and *Kim Deuk-Shin* (金得臣, 1754–1822, a painter of the late Chosun dynasty whose pen name was *Geungjae*; 競齋), who was highly influenced by the artwork of *Kim Hong-Doh*. In this paper, the cultural characteristics of Korean food revealed in genre paintings of the Chosun dynasty (朝鮮王朝) are discussed in terms of food culture by analyzing the Korean food appearing in these paintings from a cultural aspect as a symbolic code to infer the thoughts of the Korean people in the past.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Korean genre painting

This paper primarily focuses on the analysis of genre paintings from the late Chosun dynasty [9,19] in the same way that Pansori is analyzed [8,9]. The late Chosun era was a transitional period between feudal society and modern times when the foundations of a new society, economy, and culture were being laid [20]. Moreover, the Korean food culture was established during this period through the use of authentic cooking methods and ingredients or agricultural products [21]. The authors analyze the characteristics portrayed in genre paintings by *Kim Hong-Doh*, *Shin Yun-Bok*, and *Kim Deuk-Sin* in regard to Korean food culture [12].

The paintings that will be discussed in this section include *Byeotajak* (Rice threshing) and *Pyeongsaengdo* (Picture of the life of *Modang Hong Yisang*, 平生圖) by *Kim Hong-Doh* (金弘道) from the collection at the National Museum of Korea; *Jusakeobae* (Scenery of drinker, 酒肆舉盃) and *Munyosinmu* (Shaman’s dance, 巫女神舞) by *Shin Yun-Bok* (申潤福) from the collection at the Gansong Art Museum; *Yanyon* (野宴, Banquet on a field), *Jeomsim* (Lunch), and *Kangsanghoeum* (Feasts on the riverside, 江上會飲) by *Kim Deuk-Sin* from the collection at the Hoam Art Hall; *Chaeaedo* (Picking up mugworts, 採艾圖) by *Yun Du-Seo* (尹斗緒) from the collection of *Nokudang* (錄雨堂) in *Haenam-gun*; and *Kiroseyeonkyedo* (Banquet for mutual financial association of elderly people, 耆老世聯禱圖) by *Kim Hong-Doh* from a private collection. Permission to publish this artwork as part of this article has been granted by the organizations involved.

2.2. Analytical methods

Because most of the paintings used in the analysis are classified as genre paintings, only factual aspects observed in the paintings were considered. We examined whether the attributes of Korean food culture (food as power, a medicine and treatment, an act of sharing affection, and an expression of hopes and wishes) shown in Pansori also appear in genre paintings. We then compared the characteristics of these paintings with those of the Pansori [8,9].

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