

Original article

Historical and biological aspects of *bibimbap*, a Korean ethnic foodKyung Rhan Chung^a, Hye-Jeong Yang^b, Dai-Ja Jang^b, Dae Young Kwon^{b, *}^a The Academy of Korea Studies, Songnam, South Korea^b Korea Food Research Institute, Songnam, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Bibimbap*, a Korean rice dish with mixed vegetables, is very popular around the world. The origin, its unique structure, and the health benefits of *bibimbap* have attracted interest. Although there are many hypotheses about the origin and development of *bibimbap*, most of them lack strong scientific evidence.

Methods: To investigate the biological and historical aspects of *bibimbap*, Korean old literatures and scientific papers on *bibimbap* were analyzed.

Results: The existence of various theories about the origin of *bibimbap* suggests that none of these theories have strong support. Therefore, it is crucial to take a scientific approach in analyzing each hypothesis. This article will discuss the origin of *bibimbap* on the basis of the structure of the Korean traditional meal table. Furthermore, it will analyze its development based on historical references to *bibimbap*.

Conclusion: Some have made false arguments that the first written record of *bibimbap* is from the *Suijonseo* (是議全書), and that the name “*bibimbap*” came from *koldongban* (骨董飯). We should, however, firmly exclude unsupported claims which can hinder further understanding of *bibimbap* in the global market. Moreover, this article will focus on Jeonju *bibimbap* and the health benefits of *bibimbap* based on previous research.

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1. Introduction

A traditional Korean meal is characterized by a setting of rice, *guk* (Korean-style soup), *banchan* (side dishes), and *Jang* on a table, which are all eaten at the same time. This is in contrast to a western-style meal where the meal consists of one main dish [1]. As mentioned in previous articles, *bapsang*, the traditional Korean meal table, has developed over the past thousand years. The birth of *tang*, *bibimbap*, and *chigae* was inevitable when considering the basic structure of the Korean meal table. This unique dietary culture could only come from Korea with its *bapsang* structure. In other words, *bibimbap* is a unique ethnic food of Korea, which would not exist if rice, *kimchi*, and *gochujang* (red pepper paste), or *jang* [2] were not available.

Guk is often translated to “soup,” and this term has been used in previous articles. Strictly speaking, however, *guk* is not the same as western-style soups, which is served before the main dish. *Guk*

assists with swallowing and digestion when eating rice, and serves the role of a drink when having burgers. Likewise, it is preferable to use *chigae* and *jang* in their original terms rather than to translate them to “stew” and “sauce” [1,2].

On the Korean meal table, various types of *kimchi* were essential. Fish and *namul* (blanched and seasoned vegetables), were often consumed as *banchan* [3]. People enjoyed fresh uncooked vegetables as salad or *ssam*. Given the large amounts of vegetables such as *namul* that were available, people may have wondered about a better way to consume vegetables. We assume that *bibimbap*, a dish with rice, *namul*, and *jang* mixed with *gochujang*, was naturally created in this way (Fig. 1). Of course, *tang* and *chigae* originated in the same manner. *Bibimbap*, originated and evolved over the past 1,000 years, and has now become a well-known ethnic food in Korea and a popular dish around the world. Westerners tend to have single dishes for a meal and *bibimbap* fits this model. For this reason, *bibimbap* has attracted a lot of interest from Westerners compared with other Korean dishes. A few investigations of food preferences have been conducted in order to promote *bibimbap* in western countries [4]. However, there is a lack of in depth research on *bibimbap*, and some have made false arguments about the origin

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Fig. 1. A famous Korean traditional meal, Jeonju bibimbap. It is a rice dish topped with a variety of colored vegetables and mixed with gochujang [1].

of bibimbap on various platforms, including the internet, television, and books, without any clear evidence. Therefore, it is necessary to correct these misunderstandings.

In this article, the origins, types, and evolution of bibimbap are introduced and the health benefits from the various colors of namuls are discussed, based on previous literature and Yin-Yang and the Five Elements Theory (陰陽五行說).

1.1. The birth and development of bibimbap

As previously mentioned, bibimbap is a very unique food, and its presence on the Korean meal table was inevitable. The origin of

bibimbap can be explained from two approaches. Firstly, people may have tried to find a way to make a delicious food by consuming namul and other kinds of vegetables beyond the traditional meal style and created a dish that had vegetables, rice, meat (if available), mixed with gochujang in a bowl. Secondly, it may have been created when there was not enough time and space to have a traditional classical meal. Two historical references support this idea. Firstly, the “People’s Unofficial Story of Jeonju” (全州野史) written by Lee [6] mentions that Jeonju bibimbap was used to treat government officials in provincial offices, the head of Nongak samulnori (a genre of traditional percussion folk music), and important guests at a party. It suggests that bibimbap was a popular dish among the rich and high ranking officials. Secondly, Choi et al [7] writes in “Lannokgi” (蘭綠記) that bibimbap was created by the wives of farmers who did not have enough time to have a traditional Korean meal served with rice and side dishes. Bibimbap is a great and distinctive Korean dish and goes well with a kimchi or soy bean sprout guk. In addition, sesame or perilla oil complement the taste of bibimbap. Thus, it would be safe to assume that the development and wide usage of sesame or perilla oil in Korean cooking is partially owed to the consumption of bibimbap.

The creation of bibimbap was inevitable in a country like Korea, a country that has a long-standing agricultural history. Although not

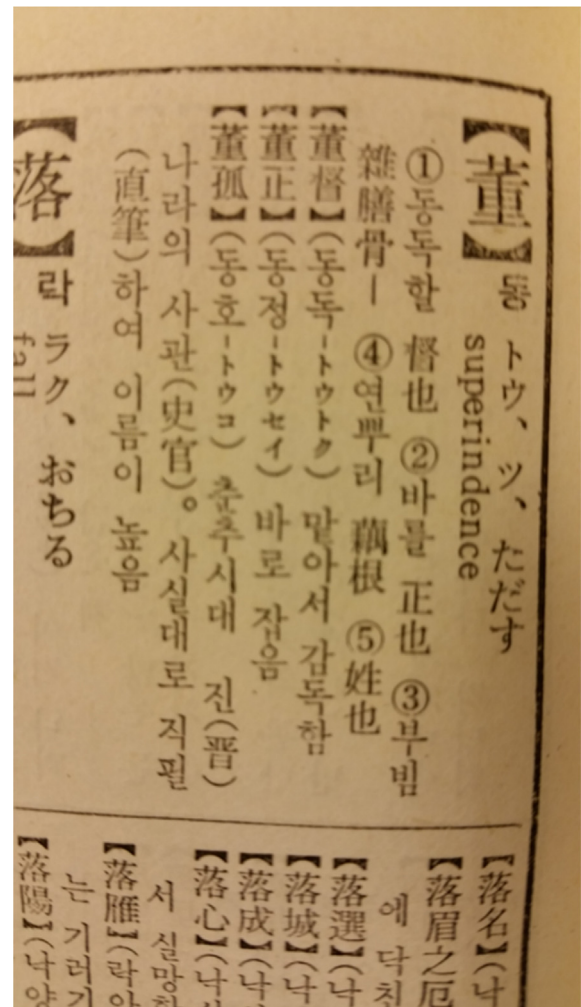


Fig. 3. The Chinese character dictionary shows that the character ‘dong (董)’ means ‘to mix’. This character was used in koldongban in order to transcribe bibimbap into Chinese.

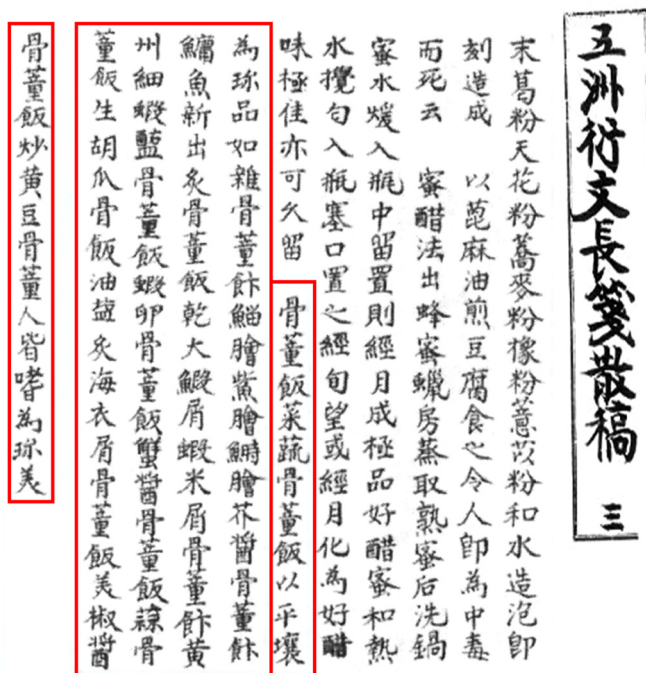


Fig. 2. The Sanjujami-pyunjeungsol [10] of Ojuyeonmun-jangjeonsanko written by Lee [12] in 1810 mentions different types of bibimbap.

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