

**Book Review**

**Jaehyeon Jeong (2020). *Korean Food Television and the Korean Nation*, Lexington Books**

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Jaehyeon Jeong's excellent study of Korean food relative to television and the nation stirred up a number of thoughts and revelations. First, how recent the phenomenon of food globalization is. Just in this reviewer's academic career, he has lived in college towns and small cities that had at most, a couple of European restaurants (usually Italian), a pizza joint or two, and possibly a Chinese restaurant. As recent as forty or so years ago, it was necessary to drive hundreds of miles to major metropolises to dine in a Korean restaurant or buy Asian supplies for cooking. Second, how relatively new food as a scholarly topic is. Popular culture, the umbrella under which food studies locate, itself is just more than fifty years old.

In a superbly-arranged format, Jeong tells us that globalization of Korean food tied in with the twenty-first century hallyu campaign that promoted Korean popular culture (*K-pop*), particularly, movies, music, soap operas, gaming, and to a certain degree, comic (*manhwa*) and animation. Though he did not make the claim, it is likely these global-reach movements began in 1994 when the government realized that animation, and to a lesser extent, *manhwa* were valuable exports and pumped huge sums of money into their development and promotion. Government branches devoted to comic art were set up in different ministries, centers and museums were established, festivals and competitions held, exhibitions mounted, and comic art programs were established in more than 150 universities/colleges.

Jeong tells us that similar recognition and promotion of Korean food began after 2008 when the government saw food as a possible enhancer of soft power, improver of the national image, and accelerator of the national economy. At the time, one government official pledged to make Korean food one of the world's best five cuisines. Thus, began the "Korean Food Globalization" projects with tentacles of organizations (e.g., Korean Food Foundation), campaigns (e.g., Han-Style, to "discover

and foster cultural contents that have both Korean uniqueness and global universality”), and promotional events. The latter were implemented by the Korean Food Globalization Committee (AFGC), the Korean Agro-Fisheries and Food Trade Corporation (aT), and the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MFAFF). In 2009, these three organizations held Korean food products fairs in Japan, Russia, India, and China, set up a get-acquainted with Korean food event for U.S. politicians in Washington D. C., appointed a famous hallyu star as honorary ambassador for Korean food globalization, and sponsored a get-together of global celebrity chefs to discuss how to globalize Korean food. At other times, kimchi and bibimbap events were held to familiarize the world with these dishes.

*Korean Food Television and the Korean Nation* strives to cover all aspects of the topic, discussing how the influx of migrant workers and Korean men’s foreign brides (mostly from Southeast Asia) has changed Korean food, the need to discover and restore forgotten Korean foods, or the pursuit of vicarious pleasure through food.

These and other topics are parts of the discourse on Korean food and television. Jeong provides a lucid and succinct history of Korean television, simultaneously, explaining how television covers food through a variety of formats, including, restaurant reviews, cooking lessons, soft documentaries, variety talk shows, food travel programs, and infotainment, discussing food for health or prominent restaurants. As he argues in the chapter on the explosion of Korean food TV, Jeong attributes this drive to Korean TV’s structural changes, a “shift in household structure and the rise of the *sampo* generation,” and “the rise of gourmet culture and a shift in the cultural legitimacy of food” (p. 33). The analysis of the *sampo* generation is intriguing, but also alarming. *Sampo* means three and giving up, the term accounting for the young generation’s willingness to give up relationships, marriage, and childbirth. Later, it was expanded to 5 *po*

and then, 7 *po*, including, human relations, home ownership, dreams, and hope. A renowned food critic explained to Jeong, the connection between the unmarried *sampo* (or 7 *po*) generation and food, saying, if one does not have “someone to eat together with or share food with” (p. 47), they will seek vicarious or fake pleasures through food television.

The representation of Korean food by television, according to the author and his sources, focused on the food’s cultural heritage “passed down by blood-given ancestors” and “its uniqueness, diversity, and superiority... , which, in turn accounted for its versatility and global competitiveness” (p. 112). Jeong concluded that television’s playing up of what of food culture had disappeared and what needed to be resurrected, “reinforced the notion of *danil minjok* (unitary nation), whose relationship is constructed through bloodlines” (p. 112).

The book does not deal much with the presentation/display of food, a topic seemingly important in East Asia, for example, in Japan. Nor does it contain any images, which could illustrate such food displays. This is a minor shortcoming and probably is attributable to the publisher, not the author.

*Korean Food Television and the Korean Nation* adds a wealth of information to the burgeoning field of food studies. In four chapters, Jeong informs about Korean food culture, government campaigns to globalize Korean food, and the history and production practices of Korean food television. He carefully and logically conceptualizes his project, being sure to interpret his analyses contextually, while looking at Korea’s socio-cultural and economic situation. The research is exhaustive and meticulously carried out, using textual analyses of three televised food programs and in-depth interviews with twenty-three important food television producers, government officials, and professionals in the food industry. However, Jeong fails to tell us why he granted all of them anonymity. The work is

adequately documented with detailed analyses of secondary sources, extensive explanatory notes, and a full bibliography, and the overall presentation is very readable and easy to follow, containing a number of interview excerpts and numbered lists throughout, from which to launch discussion.