

Food in the Making of Modern Korea

Cherl-Ho Lee

Food in the Making of Modern Korea

A Handbook

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Preface

Human beings have existed alongside their food sources since they began to walk the earth, thus the history of food culture may be seen as the history of a people. Watershed moments in the lives of mankind, including migrations, development of tools and technology, wars, and political upheavals, have occurred in the name of securing food. Revealing the history of native Korean foodways can serve as an important link to restoring Korea's forgotten ancient history, which has been skewed by kowtowing to China as a vassal state for a thousand years, then suffering 36 years of colonization by Japan. To help restore national pride by rewriting Korean history, I wrote *Korean Food and Foodways* (2022, Springer). The book revealed how Korea's nearly 10,000-year-old dietary history, which began in the Primitive Pottery era, developed over time and anticipated how Korean food culture will contribute to global society in the twenty-first century.

Recently, amazing miracles have occurred. US President Joe Biden came to South Korea, a small country in Far East Asia, to meet the chairman of semiconductor company Samsung. Through K-Pop, young people from all over the world sing Korean songs and are enthusiastic about learning the Korean language to know about Korean culture. What on earth could have caused such miracles on the Korean Peninsula? This question motivated me to write this book. The conclusion I reached at the end of my writing was simple. A hermit country that had slept for a thousand years, leaning on China on the peninsula *Geumsugangsan* where the climate and water were excellent, has suffered from extreme poverty and hunger, oppression and extortion by Japanese imperialists, and the ensuing Korean War over the last century. The Korean people, who once flourished as an ancient civilization, became an advanced nation in Northeast Asia and ruled neighboring countries with the national policy *Hongik Ingan Ewha Sege* (Humanitarianism for Global Wellbeing), had an opportunity for spiritual awakening and regained courage amid extreme hunger and oppression from foreign powers

Thanks to recent archaeological excavations and research on Korea's ancient history, I dug up the roots of Korean food and the Korean people, which had been trapped in 5000 years of history. I explored up to 10,000 years of history starting with primitive pottery culture. Korean history was driven by China's arrogance and

prejudice and recognized that the Northeast Asian state formation period (around 3000 BCE) resembled their history as the starting point. However, the primitive earthenware culture located along the coast of the Korea Strait led the transition from a roasting culture to the advanced boiling culture during the Neolithic period, which was 5000 years earlier than the state formation era. Since the West has remained in the roasting culture of nomads for a long time it solidified into a meat-eating culture. By contrast, Northeast Asians, also known as *Dongyi* (Eastern archers), adopted a vegetarian culture of soaking hard grains and root vegetables in water to make boiled stews (*jjigae*) using pottery and fermented food before the start of agriculture. The *Dongyi* people are believed to have grown into an advanced nation (Gojoseon) during the state formation era of Northeast Asia as their physique and intelligence improved and the population increased because of the consistent food supply and improvement of food hygiene due to primitive pottery culture. The introduction of this book, Chapter 1, summarizes the Korean people's 10,000-year history of food and its significance in human history.

During my 1994 research year at the Smithsonian Institution in the United States (US), I collected data on how the influx of foreign cultures during the late Joseon dynasty affected Korean food culture. Together with Dr. Terry Sharrer, curator of the Museum of American History, I searched for about 40 English records (e.g., books and travelogues) of Western people who visited the Korean Peninsula during the period of the Korean Empire and Japanese colonial rule, made copies of food related materials, and took them home with me. While I was a professor of Food Engineering at Korea University, I stored these materials in a corner of my home study room. After ten years of retirement, I found time to look at these materials again. Chapter 2, "The Food Situation in the Social Changes of the Late Period of Joseon," and Chap. 3, "Japanese Extortion and the Korean Food and Nutritional Status During Japanese Occupation of Korea" were written based on these materials.

In fact, records of Korean food history dating from the end of the late period of the Joseon dynasty to the end of the Korean War (1850-1960) are extremely rare and unreliable. Records of the Japanese Government-General in Joseon, which are the only data available from this period, are particularly unreliable and were purposely manipulated. Western scholars question their reliability because these records were for external propaganda to justify Japanese occupation in Korea. Acknowledging this perspective, this book quotes as many materials left by Westerners as possible.

Data on the food situation of Koreans during the Korean War are described in Chapter 4, "The Establishment of Republic of Korea and the Food Situation During the Korean War." The chapter investigates data obtained from the US National Archives when I was in Washington, D.C. in 1994. The role of Founding President Syngman Rhee in establishing the South Korean government, which hung by a thread after the Korean War, is reexamined. US and Korean governmental efforts to overcome the food crisis brought about by the Korean War are described and reevaluated. The role of Dr. Woo Jang-chun, a breeder who laid the foundation for the Korean seed industry, is also mentioned.

Understanding Korea's modern and contemporary history is difficult due to conflicts between conservative and progressive camps in Korea. Depending on the

author, controversies and distortions have been found in relation to some critical historical facts. In this study a textbook used by the Korean Military Academy, *Korean Modern and Contemporary History as Facts*, is often referenced and cited. Chapter 5, “Korea’s Food Situation in Relation to the May 16 Military Coup and Economic Development,” addresses the role of President Chung-hee Park, often denigrated for his military coup and subsequent long-term power, in South Korea’s national development and the historical event of achieving self-sufficiency of rice during a chronic food shortage.

Chapter 6, “The Korean Economy and Food Security in the Process of Trade Liberalization,” describes the pressure on South Korea to open its agricultural markets and make changes in domestic food supply and demand conditions until establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the 1980s and mid-1990s. Chapter 7, “Food Issues and Safety Management in the Age of Globalization,” describes the vortex for securing food safety, from the story of the domestic seed industry that was sold during the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in the late 1990s to the 2008 mad cow frenzy.

Korea’s food situation developed rapidly along with its economic growth for half a century after liberation, increasing dependence on foreign food, while the people’s nutritional status improved to that of advanced countries. However, the North Korean food situation deteriorated to an extreme, and the Arduous March continues. Chapter 8, “Changes in Food Situation in North and South Korea in the 75 Years of Division,” sheds light on the history and reality of North Korea’s economic situation and food shortage. It also presents a food and nutrition optimization model for Koreans to solve problems of both excess and deficiency of food of the two Koreas.

Chapter 9, “The Food Crisis in the New Cold War Era and Korea’s Response,” discusses the world crisis that led to the 2007/2008 global grain crisis, the global financial crisis, the decrease in food production due to extreme weather in 2010-13, the prevalence of livestock infectious diseases, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 war in Ukraine. The influence of the world food crisis on the Korean food situation was analyzed and the Korea’s countermeasures (such as establishment of the Korea Food Security Research Foundation, or KFSRF) are discussed.

Chapter 10, “Global Vision of the Korean Food Industry” discusses Korea’s potential for improving the world’s food situation, which is getting worse now that the era of global trade liberalization has ended and country-first trade protection is returning. The current status of Korea’s food industry’s overseas expansion is introduced. The status and developmental potential of Korean food and food companies in the global food market are examined. The roles of the Korean government and food companies in international efforts to alleviate the global food crisis is emphasized.

I have included an appendix called “Food and Policy: Korean Rice Policy” at the end of this book. Since rice is the most important staple food of Koreans, Korea’s food policy can be said to be rice policy. This article was written for the 2023 Korea Food Security Research Foundation research project, ‘Plans to Expand Crop Use for Food Security’. By reviewing the changes in Korea’s rice policy, it was intended to

suggest the changing aspects of the Korean food problem and the direction of future development.

Arthur M. Schlesinger (1888-1965), an American historian, wrote a chapter titled “Food in the Making of America” in his book *Paths to the Present*. He wrote the following at the beginning of his chapter:

“And, notwithstanding their diligence, these historical detectives, oddly enough, have neglected one clue to the past that is the most basic of all. Men must have food if they are to think and act. Here is a want which precedes and conditions all other hopes, aims and achievements. How has this need affected the history of the American people? The very discovery of the New World was the by-product of a dietary quest.” (Schlesinger, 1949)

The author wrote this book, *Food in the Making of Modern Korea*, to shed light on the historical impact of food and diet, which has been missing from the 150 years of Korean modern and contemporary history. What I feel at the end of my writing is the question of what it would mean if the history of food was omitted from our history over the past 150 years.

If fifteenth century Europeans landed in the New World to obtain food, what the Korean people discovered in the nineteenth century through hunger and foreign oppression was national awareness, great awakenings, and an effort to recover the lost millennium dream by shouting “*Jalsalabose!*[Let’s achieve a better life!]” I believe the manifestation of this new thinking made the Republic of Korea what it is today. Therefore, changes in Korea’s food situation indicate the direction and momentum of the development of Korean society. The direction of food industry development can inform the developmental direction and potential of Korean society. From this point of view, my book aims to illuminate the history of Korea’s development through food and to forecast its future development.

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Solgae Village in Gwangneung Forest
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Cherl-Ho Lee

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About the Author



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