

How to Globalize *Hansik*



In October, the members of the MBC TV reality show Infinite Challenge (known as “Muhandojŏn” in Korean) flew to New York with the mission of promoting bibimbap, a traditional Korean dish that consists of mixed vegetables and rice. While shooting some programs there on the globalization of Hansik (Korean food), the producers and cast noticed a major problem: a radical lack of positive images of Korea and Korean food. Sŏ Kyŏng-dŏk, a PR expert, noted: “Without actually visiting Korea, the only way for foreigners to understand Korea is by experiencing Korean cuisine.” The crew and cast took the decision to place a full-page advertisement in the New York Times under the heading, “How about Bibimbap for Lunch Today?” The advertisement

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showed a colorful picture of the dish and offered directions to the places where readers could experience the taste of bibimbap in Manhattan.

Bibimbap literally means “mixed rice.” Rice is a staple food in Korea; it is eaten at almost every meal. No one would deny that Korean identity can be defined to some extent by rice. For example, in the past, when Koreans wanted to estimate someone’s wealth, they calculated the amount of rice that person consumed. Rice was considered to represent one’s wealth and even one’s social rank. Instead of asking each other “Have you eaten yet?”, Koreans still ask each other, “Have you eaten rice today?” This shows how essential rice is in Korea. For these reasons, I think that Infinite Challenge made a good choice in focusing on bibimbap as a potentially global food item. The dish is ideal for the goal of broadening awareness of Korean cuisine and Korean culture internationally.



Bibimbap has great potential for becoming as internationally popular as sushi, dim sum, or pizza is because it is easy to make. First, you need to prepare a large platter

for your ingredients. Next, you add a variety of both cooked and raw vegetables. These may include toraji (bell flower roots), kosari (bracken), bean sprouts, spinach, chestnuts, jujubes, ginseng. If you wish, you can also add a small amount of seafood or meat on top of the rice. After this, you add a big scoop of koch'ujang (Korean red pepper paste) and sesame oil. You then place an egg cooked sunny-side up on the very top. Finally, you mix up the ingredients and voila!

Most of the ingredients used in cooking bibimbap are healthy and nutritionally balanced. Even Gwyneth Paltrow loves bibimbap! The Hollywood actress said that bibimbap is one of the great dishes of the world. Obviously, Paltrow has grasped its value: nutrition, quality, and a variety of exciting flavor combinations. Aesthetically perhaps, bibimbap might not compare well with the minimalist graphics of sushi and even “look weird”, as Paltrow suggests, but this may have more to do with the relative unfamiliarity of this first-class Korean dish.

Some might think that it might be complicated, uncomfortable, or even annoying for someone unfamiliar with chopsticks to use them for eating. Think of the risk involved in trying to lift sushi into your mouth without breaking it or the ordeal of struggling with a bowl of hot Chinese noodle soup using only a pair of chopsticks! When eating bibimbap, however, non-Koreans do not have exercise their fingers unduly, or pick up delicate food without breaking it, or cut dumplings gingerly in half, or try to deliver noodles to their mouths safely without dropping them. This is because bibimbap, like many Western dishes, is eaten with a spoon. We can therefore rest assured that no one is going to become intimidated or exhausted or simply put everything down and walk away from the table.

Although Korea has a long history, the nation remained relatively unknown to most other countries until only a few decades ago. Today, however, the world is more ready to acknowledge Korea as a strong power in the global community. This is due to Korea's focus on education, its rapid development of technology such as cars, social networking phones, electronics and other eye-popping digital gadgets. Nowadays, there is great interest in Korean television drama and entertainment programs. However, as Kim T'ae-ho, the producer of Infinite Challenge reports, "During the shooting of the episode in New York, we realized how little New Yorkers know about Korean food." Korean food is not yet as successful as Korean manufactured products. Now is the time to broaden the world's perception of Korea to include its excellent food culture.

Korea has not made much effort to introduce Hansik to a global audience. This is in spite of the fact that dishes such as kimchi, makgeolli (makkölli) (Korean rice wine), chapch'ae noodles, haemül p'ajön (seafood pancake), pokkumbap (fried rice) and kimchi jjigae (kimchi stew) are all very tasty. As the Infinite Challenge team has demonstrated, we need to create new ways to introduce non-Koreans to Korean food. We also need to develop modified recipes of famous Korean dishes to meet the needs of foreigners who might find ordinary Korean cuisine too spicy, for example. Analyzing the reasons why non-Koreans like or dislike certain dishes and flavors and finding new ways to make traditional Korean food more palatable to foreign tastes is vital in the campaign to make Korean food globally popular. One way to do this is to increase the number of shows that have food-related themes. In this way, international fans of the Korean Wave will slowly become interested in Korean food too. Another important task is to standardize the spelling of Korean dishes as they might appear on English restaurant menus. This can be done with the help of food and language

specialists. Non-Koreans can easily become confused by the variety of slightly different names used to translate the same Korean dishes in different Korean restaurants. We need a concerted effort to create strategies and implement programs to make Korean cuisine popular worldwide.

According to the Chinese Zodiac, 2010 is the Year of the Tiger. The Tiger is the symbol of courage. One way for Korea to show its courage this year is by being more forthright about its food culture. We need to spread the word more widely about the unique variety of dishes that go to make up Korea's dazzling culinary experience.