Kimchi, Seaweed and Seasoned Carrot in the Soviet Culinary Culture: The Spread of Korean Food in the Soviet Union and Korean Diaspora

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Abstract:

The half-million “Soviet Koreans” (or Koryŏ saram) in the former Soviet Union are the descendants of the ethnic Koreans who migrated to the Russian Far East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century from the northern parts of the Korean peninsula. Their settlements had been established in the wide areas of the Russian Far East including the urban areas around Vladivostok. They were, however, forced-migrated to Central Asia in late 1937 under Stalin’s rule. From Central Asia these Soviet Koreans were further dispersed to other parts of the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin era. These multiple dispersions of the Soviet Koreans not only transformed their culinary habit, but also helped Korean food to spread among the peoples of the Soviet Union. As a result, Korean food such as kimchi, miyŏk (edible kelp), and others were introduced and widely consumed throughout the Soviet Union. This paper explores this unusual spread and popularity of Korean food in the Soviet Union, focusing on the migration history of the Soviet Koreans and the Soviet culinary culture. The unusual diffusion and popularity of the Korean food in the Soviet Union provides us with important insights on migration and globalization of ethnic food.

Keywords: Migration and food culture, Korean food in the Soviet Union, Soviet Koreans
1. Introduction

In the last two decades Korean cuisine has gained some level of recognition and popularity among foreigners. In the past, except for a few items such as *kimchi* (fermented oriental cabbage dish)\[1,2\] and *bulgogi* (marinated beef barbecue), Korean cuisines were not very popular in the global culinary market. Today, however, it is not difficult to find Korean restaurants in upmarket restaurant streets in large Western cities such as New York City, London, Paris, and Frankfurt. Even in many cities in other Asian countries Korean restaurants have appeared. Ordinary urban people in the West would know Korean cuisines such as kimchi, *bibimbap* (rice mixed with cooked vegetable and meat with spicy sauce)\[3,2\], *chapch’ae* (fried starch noodle with vegetables and beef) and even *ttŏkpokki* (rice cake sticks and vegetables in hot chili sauce). The increasing popularity of Korean food in the world market is partly due to Korea’s economic rise and the recent phenomenon of *Hallyu*, the fever for Korean popular cultural products including popular music, TV dramas, and films. The systematic efforts of South Korean government, which has promoted Korean culture for the country’s general nation-brand in the global market is another factor behind this popularity of Korean food (cf. The Hansik Foundation http://www.koreanfood.net/en/index.do).

While Korean food enjoys unprecedented popularity in the global stage today, this was not true a decade ago. In fact, Korean cuisines, in comparison with other those of other Asian countries such as China, Japan, or Thailand, were not well known in the West until the early twenty-first century. This, however, was different in the Soviet Union, where some Korean food was already well known by the 1970s. Though rarely known to outside world, in the 1970s Soviet Union some Korean food such as kimchi and various namul (vegetables boiled and seasoned and consumed like salads) were already well-known throughout the country, from the Far East to the European part of Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia. Travelers of the early 1990s saw Korean food consumed everywhere in the former Soviet Union \[4\]. Why in the world, then, Korean food was so widely known and popular among the peoples of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and onward?

This paper explores the unusual phenomenon of the ‘globalization’ and popularity of Korean food in the former Soviet Union. In so doing, I will look into the history of the Korean migration to the Russian Far East, which began in the late 19th century and continued through the early 20th century and the trajectory of their later dispersions within the Soviet Union both before and after the collapse of the ‘empire’ in the early 1990s. In addition, I will also pay heed to the general cultural trends of the Soviet Union, particularly its culinary culture, to which the food of the Soviet Koreans could merge and eventually gained popularity.
2. Migration and Culinary Culture

Our food and culinary culture have been always influenced, changed, and developed by migrations. People who migrate from one place to another place carry their own food and eating habits. Introduction of particular food that is peculiar to an ethnic group to another group occurs through cultural exchanges, and such cultural exchanges are facilitated by people exchanges. “Globalization” of an ethnic food – the phenomenon in which certain culinary culture of an ethnic group is introduced to other ethnic groups, consumed by the latter, mingled with the food and culture of the locals, developed into a new kind of food, and circulated widely – tends to be promoted normally by human migration. The migrants’ food culture also goes through transformation under the influence of the local climate, environment and culture. Transfer of food culture from one group to another group, certainly, is not carried out only by large scale migrations. It can be also achieved by a small number of traders and travelers.

There are numerous historical and anthropological studies on the human migration and food. Diamond [5] is one of the many famous historians on the spread of civilization and he explored how technology and culture including food and food technologies spread through the Eurasian continent from ancient civilization of Mesopotamia to the rest of the continent. Mintz [6], a prominent scholar on migration and food, shows how global political economy has promoted migrations (and forced migration) for sugarcane industry, which also resulted in mixing of different cultures including food. Therefore, the food what we eat and the way how we prepare our food have been very much affected by the geography, culture, and particularly the history of human migrations.

For example, many food items that Koreans enjoy old days were brought from China by migrants, soldiers, travelers, and Buddhist monks. For example, soybean and other based food such as soy sauce (kanjang), soybean paste (toenjang)[7] and tofu were probably spread out to other Asian countries including Korea and Japan by Chinese migrants, merchants and Buddhist monks [8,9]. More recently, Chinese laborers and traders who followed the Chinese troops to Korea in the early 1880s brought the Chinese cuisines, particularly from Shandong Province where the great majority of them came. One of them was black soybean sauce noodle and they later developed it into a new noodle dish cha'jangmyŏn, which became highly among Koreans. There thousands of, if not more, similar examples in modern history.

This is exactly how Korean food such as kimchi, miyŏk much’im (seasoned seaweed), and various namul or ch’ae (steamed vegetables lightly seasoned with salt or soy sauce, roasted sesames and vegetable oil) dishes were spread out in the Soviet Union. In the case of Soviet Koreans and the diffusion of their food among the peoples of the Soviet Union, the unusual migration experience of the former made it possible.
The first Korean settlers of the “Russian Far East”, which used to be called “Maritime Province” of Qing, were impoverished peasants who migrated from the north-eastern parts of the Korean peninsula in search of cultivable land. They ran away from the poverty-stricken homeland where political turmoil and droughts devastated their life in the mid- and late-19th century. The Maritime Province, which used to be a part of the sacred homeland of the powerful Manchus, was extremely sparsely inhabited. This was due to the Manchu policy that kept their homeland form Chinese and Koreans. Regardless of the illegality of crossing the border and entering into the Maritime Province, some Korean peasants from the northern Hamgyŏng Province started settling in the land just across the shallow river, Tuman, which marked the border between Korea and Qing. Then in 1860 Russians gained the land from Qing through the Treaty of Beijing.

After gaining the new territories from Qing, the Czarist Russia promoted settlements of Russians and other Europeans such as Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews. Koreans also continued to migrate to the land. Both for Koreans and Russian settlers it was a new land and they had to readjust themselves to the new environment. This included changes in their culinary life as some of the products they used to have in their homelands were not available there. Russians brought their own food sources such as potato, wheat, cabbage, beetroot, tomatoes, and others which they could continue to grow in the new climate of the Far East. Koreans, meanwhile, brought eggplants, radish and other vegetables from their homeland.

As Koreans and Russians settled closely to each other, there were exchanges of food between them. Koreans learned bread, cabbage, and other food items from Russians and incorporated them into their diet. Early Korean settlers offered bread, instead of rice cakes, to their deceased ancestors in their ancestral worship rituals. Russians learned the customs of eating miyŏk (kelp), which was abundant in the seas of the Far East, and rice from Korean settlers. Sea weeds such as kelp was not something that Russians and other Europeans used to eat, but in the Russian Far East they began to consume it as a salad, giving miyŏk an interesting name of “marskoi kapusta” (which means “marine cabbage”). This was the first phase of the culinary exchange between Russians and Koreans in the Russian Far East.

The second phase of the spread of the Korean food to the other regions of the Soviet Union occurred after the late 1930s and this happened in a slower phase in the beginning. The forced deportation of the Koreans from the Far East to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan occurred in 1937. This was done with a false accusation that Koreans were one of the “enemy nations” of the Soviet Union. [10,11] Such forced migration was not unusual under Stalin’s rule and already Ingrin Finns, Germans and Poles had been relocated from Europeans parts of the Soviet Union to Central Asia while nomadic Kazakhs were relocated to Mongolia and other regions [11]. Koreans, though they lost many lives during this forced migration and also faced serious problems in Central Asia due to lack of housing and food, quickly adapted to the new environment. In fact, the warm climate of Central Asia gave Korean farmers opportunities to grow more crops including rice, watermelon, and other vegetables, which y
were not easy to grow in the cold climate of the Far East. In Central Asia Korean collective farms quickly gained fame with their agricultural success and prosperity.[10].

It was in Central Asia where the culinary culture of Soviet Koreans transformed again as they mingled with other peoples of Central Asia as well as those many nationalities who had been deported there from Europe and southern Central Asia (i.e., Armenians and Crimean Tartars). In particular, the Koreans learned food culture of local Kazakhs and Uzbeks. For example, plov (pilaf), one of the national dishes of Uzbeks, was adopted by Koreans and this rice dish is frequently served at Koreans homes in Uzbekistan when they have special events or guests. Uzbeks and other ethnic groups in Central Asia frequently consume kimchi and various vegetable dishes of Koreans (namul). In addition, dog meat, Korean-brought culinary product, is also consumed by locals and there is a dog-meat restaurant in Tashkent [12].

The third phase, in which Korean food was even more widely spread throughout the Soviet Union, occurred from the 1960s. This overlapped with further dispersion of the Soviet Koreans to other parts of the Soviet Union, particularly to the European parts of the country. After the death of Stalin in 1953, the rise of Khrushchev to power, and consequently the de-Stalinization brought some freedom of movement to the ethnic Koreans, who had been confined to Central Asia. Now, they were allowed to move to other places of the Soviet Union for study and work. Many Korean students went to big cities of the Soviet Union such as Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa, Kazan, and Minsk both for study and work. Later, many of them stayed there. Many Korean families also utilized this new freedom and engaged in seasonal market gardening (or “truck-farming”), which they called kobongjil [10,13,14]. This resulted in further dispersion of the ethnic Koreans of the Soviet Union. This, of course, also promoted the wider diffusion of Korean food in the Soviet Union, and this time to more corners of the country, where Korean food had never been known.

Then, just what kinds of Korean food have been popular among and consumed by the peoples of the Soviet Union?

[Figure 1 here]

3. The Popular Korean Food Consumed in the Soviet Union

The author’s observations in various regions of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s (before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the end of 1991) revealed that Korean food such as kimchi and various seasoned vegetable salads were widely spread throughout the country. From Vladivostok to Leningrad and from Novosibirsk (in Siberia) to Tashkent (in Central Asia) these Korean foods were
sold in most of large open air markets. Some of these “Korean” foods looked so exotic and they were not something that one can find in contemporary South Korea. This is due to two reasons. First of all, most of the Soviet Koreans originated from Northern Hamgyŏng Province, which covers the northeastern tip of the Korean peninsula. With its mountainous terrains and cold climate, the culinary culture of Hamgyŏng Province is quite distinguished. Secondly, it would be safe to assume that the “Korean” food culture that the first Korean settlers developed in the Russian Far East would have been influenced by that of the Russian settlers of the region.

In any regards, the most well-known and popular “Korean food” in the former Soviet Union included kimchi, kelp salad (miyŏk much’im or edible kelp seasoned with vegetable oil, garlic and other spices), eggplant salad (half-boiled and cubed eggplants seasoned with vegetable oil, onion and chili power), carrot salad (shredded carrot seasoned with vinegar, vegetable oil and salt).

3.1 Kimchi (or “kimcha”)

Kimchi is produced and sold in all regions in the former Soviet Union even in the regions where there are no ethnic Koreans. Some Russians make and sell kimchi, but, usually it is ethnic Koreans who deal with it. Soviet Korean kimchi contains less chili powder compared to that of contemporary South Korea and, therefore, they are less spicy. The basic method of making kimchi in the former Soviet Union, however, was not different from the method used in contemporary Korea. Cabbages are soaked in salty water first, and excess water is removed. Then, the spice made of radish, ginger, spring onion, onion, garlic, chili powder and fermented fish sauce is added before the fermentation process. The same ingredients including fish sauce are used in Uzbekistan. On my train trip from Vladivostok to Tashkent in 1990, I met a group of Soviet Koreans who were carrying fermented salty shrimp. This would be used for kimchi making, they said. They bought the product in Vladivostok, and they would sell it in Tashkent.

In the fall of 1991, at an open-air market in central area of Novosibirsk in Siberia I saw a middle-aged Russian lady selling kimchi, and a few people were queuing in front of her stall to buy it. Russians would consume kimchi like salad and normally eat it with bread. Sometimes kimchi is known as “kimcha” among Russian speakers. While the exact reason for this is unknown, it might be due to the fact that Russian plurals are designated by an –i suffix, while singular female words are designated by an –a suffix, and therefore the word “kimchi” might have been perceived as a plural form of a noun, “kimcha” [4].

There was also a “Korean” restaurant in the city, and it was run by a Korean man from the island of Sakhalin. Like other Korean restaurants in Russia, the restaurant served Korean cuisines that are rather Russianized. There was no rice, and instead of rice they served ordinary Russian wheat bread with various kinds of namul, kimchi, and Russian meat dishes.

[Figure 2 here]
3.2 Hongdangmu ch’ae (Koreiskaya markovy; seasoned shredded carrot)

Hongdangmu ch’ae or shredded carrot seasoned with vinegar and other spices including chili powder is called “Koreiskaya markovy” (which means “Korean carrot”) by Russians. It is the most popular Korean food among Russians and other peoples of the Soviet Union. It is readily available almost everywhere in the country and most of Russians know this food and consume it regularly. They make it even at home. It is prepared with thinly shredded carrot, which is then added with a little bit of cooking oil, vinegar, fresh garlic, chili pepper powder, and black pepper powder. The name of this carrot salad, Koreiskaya markovy, itself clearly indicates from whom this food originated. Not seen in South Korea, this food is possibly a variation of mu ch’ae (seasoned shredded radish), which Koreans eat frequently. When asked for the origin of this food, Soviet Koreans could not answer. Other experts believe that this was a mutation of kimchi in the Soviet Union where Chinese cabbage was not available [15].

In the year 2000, in L’viv, Western Ukraine, Soviet Koreans were selling Korean food including the “Korean carrots” in the three main markets of the city. These Soviet Koreans were from Kherson and Mykolaiebski of southern Ukraine, where climate is warm. Many Soviet Korean families grow various crops such as onion, watermelon, cucumber, eggplants, chili pepper and so in these regions of southern Ukraine during summer season. They, then, send their produce to large urban areas such as Kiev, Odessa, Kahrkiv and L’viv, where their relatives would process them into various salads and other dishes and sell them in the markets of the cities. Considering the low income level of Ukrainians in 2000, the Korean food sold at the markets was not cheap, but there were selling well.

3.3 Kelp Salad (Morskaya kapusta; miyŏk much’im)

Another Korean food that is very popular among the Soviets is kelp salad (Morskaya kapusta – which literally means “marine cabbage” in Russian). As mentioned above, Russian settlers in the Far East learned the habit of consuming kelp from the Korean settlers there. Later, when Koreans were forced to migrate to Central Asia they spread this food further to other parts of the Soviet Union. This food is very similar to saeng miyŏk much’im (seasoned fresh kelp) in Korea. Fresh (or thawed if it had been frozen) kelp is cut into biteable pieces, and it is seasoned with vinegar, salt, garlic, spring onion and other spices and made into salad. I saw this food in Ukraine in 2000. In fact, I saw a truck delivering large boxes of frozen kelp to a local supermarket in Kiev. The supermarket manager told me that the kelp would be used to make “marine cabbage” salad (morskaya kapusta salad). Most of my informants in Ukraine and Russia knew that this was from Soviet Koreans. I did not encounter with this food in Central Asia in the early 1990s, however. This probably is because Central Asia is too far from the Russian Far East, from where most of kelp in the former Soviet Union is imported.

3.4 Eggplant Salad (Baklazhan salat; kajimuch’im)
Eggplant salad (baklazhan salat) is also a widely spread and loved food in the former Soviet Union. Eggplant and eggplant salads are widely used in Turkish world, but the Soviet Korean eggplant salad is unique in its use of Korean seasoning and also the thin, long, and lighter-colored “Asian” eggplants instead of the round, big, and darker-colored western eggplants. Soviet Koreans grow these eggplants and other vegetables in southern Ukraine (and also in southern Russia and Central Asia). The thin, long, and lighter colored eggplants are half boiled, and then cut into bitable cubes or sticks before they are seasoned with garlic, spring onion, roasted sesame seeds, chili pepper powder and so on. This is also consumed as a salad. In summer Soviet Koreans eat this salad with rice or bread on daily basis. All Korean shops at market sell this salad in summer in the former Soviet Union.

As seen above, Soviet Korean foods that are popular in the Soviet Union often contain garlic, onion, and spring onions. It might have taken longer time for Westerners to get used to such food, which contain a good amount of fresh garlic. Russians and some other Slavic people, nevertheless, consume garlic on daily basis [16]. Onions are also frequently used uncooked in salads in Russia, and when spring onions are available in early summer Russians use them for their salad. Some even eat raw spring onion especially in the Russian Far East. They would eat spring onions, sometimes with bread, when they drink vodka. Because Russians (and other Slavic peoples) are familiar with garlic and spring onions, they could more easily appreciate the Korean cuisines mentioned above.

[Figure 3 here]

3.5 Rice (ris)

Rice is not only for Asians and Europeans also consume this grain. For example, Spaniards make paella with rice while Italians make risotto with the same grain. In Uzbekistan plov (pilaf) is a national rice dish. Uzbeks use oil, yellow turmeric power, garlic and lamb meat. Plov is similar to nasi goreng of Indonesia and Malay world. Never the less, rice was not a typical grain used in Russia, and this was true for those Russians living in the Far East and the Sakhalin Island. However, with the influence of the Koreans there, they often eat Korean style rice at home. In fact, in a few occasions I had dinners at Russian families in Sakhalin (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk), and sometimes cooked rice was served together with Russian bread, borscht (beetroot soup) and salads. Rice is not grown in the Russian Far East (even though Koreans used to grow rice there before the forced deportation of 1937) or in Sakhalin, but the rice I had was imported from Uzbekistan. Possibly due to the transportation problems and inadequate storage conditions, the quality of the rice was not good even though locals seemed to have no complaint.

The Island of Sakhalin is geographically isolated from the continent, and the Russian settlers there have lived together with Koreans since the World War II, when the island was captured from the Japanese Empire. Naturally the two peoples exchanged their culinary cultures and the ethnic Koreans
there adopted much of Russian culinary habit. For example, the Sakhalin Koreans would eat bread, salo (cured and salted port fat), ikra (salted roe of salmon) and fish liver pate on almost daily basis. Russians there also eat Korean food such as kimchi, rice, carrot salad, and kelp salad. One intriguing thing in the culinary culture of the Sakhalin Koreans was the strong legacies of Japanese tradition. They would use Japanese terms for many food-related items. For instance, they would call kelp as wakame, which is a Japanese word for kelp while its Korean name is moyŏk. Similarly, they also use the term kombu for another kind of edible kelp that Koreans call tashima. They even called chopstick (chŏtkarak in Korean) as hashi as Japanese do. This is the result of their having lived with Japanese on the island for many decades during the colonial period. By the way, very few Koreans there actually use chopstick (Russians call it palochiki, which literally means “small sticks”) and instead they used fork. The increasing contacts with South Koreans after the 1990s have brought some of the Korean culinary traditions to these Sakhalin Koreans.

[Figure 4 here]

4. The Simple and Limited Culinary Culture of the Soviet Union and the Popularity of Korean Food

So far my main argument has been that the wide spread and popularity of the Korean food in the former Soviet Union was very much the result of the particular migration history of the Soviet Koreans within the Soviet Union. There is, however, another reason for this unusual “globalization” of the Korean food in the Soviet Union, and that is related to the culinary culture of the Soviet Union.

The general culture of the Soviet Union was characterized as collectivistic, proletariat-centered. It was also oppressive in general even though the intensity of the oppressiveness varied depending on the internal and external political situations of the times. During the Stalin’s reign (1927-1953), which also included the war time of the World War II the atmosphere was more repressive than earlier era under Lenin’s leadership. Nevertheless, it was the time when the Soviet culture developed rapidly as the country and peoples were more integrated through forced migrations, collectivization, and rapid industrialization [17].

Culinary culture of the Soviet Union was also influenced by the general cultural and political atmosphere of the times. First of all, the mix of various peoples, promoted by the forced migrations, gave a unique international and intercultural aspect to the Soviet culinary culture. With the collectivization of agriculture and other industries, Soviets developed canteen food culture and collective eating. This made Soviet food simple and limited. One of the distinctive features of the Russian and Soviet culinary culture is the importance of soups, especially those with cabbage and
other vegetables [18]. Home cooking was also characterized with limited ingredients and simplification of traditional dishes [19]. Certain food that was readily available in the West in the mid-Twentieth century, i.e., bananas, citrus juices, and pasta, were not available or unknown in much of the Soviet Union until the end of the 1980s. All these factors made the Soviet culinary culture rather unique, which rapidly changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union [20].

Another important aspect of the Soviet culinary life was the visible lack of Chinese restaurant even in the large cities at least until the early 1990s. According to the official demographic data of the Soviet Union, there were about 100,000 Chinese living in the country in 1926, which shrank to 10,000 after the forced repatriation to China, and then again they were forced to migrate to various places of the Soviet Union [21]. Unlike in the most of Western countries where there were Chinese minorities, thus, Chinese restaurants never developed in the Soviet Union. Though there were some “Chinese” restaurants in large cities, decorated with red lanterns, these were not Chinese at all and the food they served there was mostly Slavic or European food. In the early 1990s I saw a few such restaurants that are Chinese only in name in the early 1990s. The only exception was in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok where there were a few genuine Chinese restaurants run by Chinese. These restaurants, however, were opened mostly after the 1990s when there were influxes of Chinese traders and businessmen to the country. Today, there certainly are numerous Chinese restaurants in big cities such as Moscow, but most Russians are still not familiar with Chinese food [22].

The integration of various cultures of the various Soviet people, highly simple and limited culinary culture, and the unavailability of foreign food such as Chinese cuisine all helped to promote the popularity of Korean food in the Soviet Union. The Korean food items mentioned above were tasty, exotic, and readily available for the ordinary Soviets who were leading a rather simple and limited culinary life.
5. Conclusion

People bring their ethnic food to the countries where they migrate, and the different climate and culture of the host countries cause changes of the culinary cultures of both hosts and migrants. This is what happened to the Korean settlers in the Russian Far East in the late 19th and early 20th century. The Russian and Korean settlers of the region exchanged their food culture and items in the new environment. As Koreans were forced to migrate to Central Asia their food was introduced to the various peoples in Central Asia. Then, again the further dispersion the Soviet Koreans to various parts of the Soviet Union after the 1960s, spread their food even more widely. The simple and limited culinary habits of the Soviets, which developed under the Communist rule, created a culinary environment in which exotic, tasty, and readily available “Korean” food could take a popular position. All these contributed to the rather unusual “globalization” of the Korean food in the former Soviet Union in the 1970s and onward.

Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest (with the editorial board?)

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Figure Legend

**Figure 1**: A Soviet Korean family engaged in seasonal market gardening is having lunch in the early 1970s in southern Uzbekistan. A big bowl of salad is seen in front. *(please refer to Figure 1 in text)*.

**Figure 2**: An ethnic Korean lady is selling chili peppers *(goch’u)* at the Koyluk Bazar of Tashkent in the early 1990s.

**Figure 3**: A Soviet Korean girl is selling kimchi, kelp salad, and “Korean carrot” salad at a market in L’viv, Western Ukraine (April 2000).

**Figure 4**: A dinner banquet at a Korean home Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (June 1990), where kimchi, various kinds of namul, and steamed pork were served. On the table were chopsticks specially served for guests from Japan and South Korea. Otherwise, chopsticks were rarely used by ethnic Koreans of Sakhalin in those days.
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