

Ode to 옹기:

An examination of culinary tradition, memory, and belonging in the Korean diaspora

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**Abstract**

옹기 are earthenware pots originating on the Korean peninsula; vessels that have sustained kitchens and designed palettes since before the common era. Home to fermented vegetables, cooking pastes, and alcoholic beverages, 옹기 are not so much culinary tools (though their practical benefits are innumerable) as they are symbols of nostalgia, artistry, and life. In turn, their fading regularity today provokes a greater discourse questioning the effects of modernity and the fluidity of tradition across generations of Korean diaspora. Beginning with 옹기, this paper analyzes the concept of authenticity as it appears in several diasporic negotiations of self, “home,” and belonging. Often when writing “ethnic” food, assumptions are liberally made, and the cuisine is homogenized—both intentionally and not, though this distinction matters little when the effect is the same. In light of this, terms like 고추장 are indexed as simply “spicy red pepper paste” rather than “Korean spicy red pepper paste”—a nuanced yet persistent attempt at asserting the narrative as told for and by the subjects it concerns, rather than in observation of them. While food is crucial to many diasporic relationships with “home,” for some the two are completely unrelated, a detail seldom acknowledged by Western perspectives on the culinary world. We are not defined by authenticity nor our proximity to it, and our experiences parallel one another to a far lesser extent than they are unique, such that any attempt to generalize them is futile. Instead, it is much more substantial to recognize—and rejoice in—the endless variety of our narratives, identities, and dinner tables.

## **Introduction**

My memories of 옹기 (onggi) go back to before I had even learned the term: when they were just the snow-covered jars in winter backyard photos texted from my 할아버지 in Korea, the dark, massive pots we would huddle behind during a game of hide and seek with our cousins, tucked in the corner of a kitchen or cellar. They were always cool to the touch, even on the hottest California summer days, but smelled too strongly of 김치 if we got too close. Their smaller, lighter counterparts (옹기 그릇) I would find in the cupboard next to the sink, when my mom told me to get out the “clay bowls” to fill with 반찬 for the dinner table, and which I would later learn to never, ever wash with soap.

옹기 is an artifact that transcends time and space, allowing its modern bearers to prepare and enjoy food in a way that emulates the culinary practices of their ancestors. When diasporic subjects use 옹기, they maintain ties to their heritage while widening the scope of the diaspora at large, reproducing notions of identity, home, and belonging far beyond the borders of the motherland. Yet 옹기 is also an art form, and as such, the methods used in its creation are subject to change and adaptation—both outside of and within Korea itself. In turn, these developments influence its usage and alter the role it plays in Korean cooking and food traditions. As 옹기 evolves, its bearers question, contest, and expand the meanings of culinary authenticity and Korean culture as they relate to themselves and the rest of the diaspora.

### **옹기, then and now**

옹기 are earthenware pots used for fermenting cooking pastes, vegetables, and alcoholic beverages which many Koreans consider to be essential in cooking Korean food. Their origins on the Korean peninsula date back to the prehistoric era, somewhere between 4,000–5,000 years

ago. It was not until the 18th century, however, that its modern form solidified and expanded in popularity, entering commercialization in the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> As my father recounts:

“Your great-grandfather (친할머니’s dad) had a commercial pottery factory. I assume his business started during the Japanese annexation. During the early 20th century, the world loved efficiency. Before plastic wares showed up, commercial ceramics were the king! 친할머니 talked about her prosperous youth and the fall of her father’s business after the Korean War. Anyhow, commercial ceramic wares were introduced in Korea during the Japanese annexation, and they must have replaced 옹기. Plastic wares replaced the commercial ceramic wares by the time I was born.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the short revival of 옹기 that followed 육이오 met its demise as urbanization, along with the popularity of the modern apartment, rapidly accelerated. Most no longer had room in their homes for 옹기, let alone time to ferment their own 김치, 된장, and 고추장.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, 옹기 persisted. My father says, “My 친할머니 (your 친할아버지’s mother) still lived with 옹기. That was her choice of vessels when it came to making any fermented foods. So, if you ask me about my memories, I would say they are connected with my grandmother. She was always surrounded by 옹기. She used plastics with much doubt.”<sup>4</sup> 옹기 and other earthenware differ from Korean ceramics, such as 청자, 분청사기, and 백자, in that they use “sandy” clay, as opposed to the powder-like, fine textures of alternative clays. This enables the walls to “breathe” while retaining moisture, a characteristic which has proved scientifically beneficial to fermentation in comparison to containers made from stainless steel, plastic, or

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<sup>1</sup> Hayan Surl, “Onggi Through the Ages,” *Ceramics Monthly*, January 2022, <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/ceramics-monthly/ceramics-monthly-article/onggi-through-the-ages#>.

<sup>2</sup> Sunook Park, email to author, November 23, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Surl, “Onggi Through the Ages.”

<sup>4</sup> Sunook Park, email to author, November 23, 2022.

glass.<sup>5</sup> Its makers were well aware of this benefit before scientists could confirm it, given its widespread, sustained usage in households throughout much of Korea's history. The functionality of 옹기 is just one of many reasons for its continued presence in kitchens today.

The usage of 옹기 is not limited to the fermentation and storage that takes place in larger jars. My mom says, "I like the feel of 옹기 그릇: not smooth, not even. Also the color is very humble—I mean it doesn't require any fanciness. We do own quite a few dishes at home; a small 뚜껑배기 그릇 for 찌개 and other dishes for serving 반찬 and 김치. I love how they look with foods in them, not only Korean foods."<sup>6</sup> My dad shared a similar sentiment towards 옹기's humble appearance, explaining that while "finer" Korean ceramics are known and recognized on a global scale, 옹기, often considered less an art than a lifestyle essential, is easy to overlook.

My parents were born in the mid-late 1960s in Seoul, South Korea, and lived there until around 1980. They met at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, not far from where my three sisters and I grew up. They now reside in a Lincoln Heights studio they have lived in for longer than I have been alive, not far from the Arts District of Los Angeles. My mom works as an artist, and my father is a professor of Graphic Design at California State University, Long Beach. His freelancing, through which he works to preserve and share the art of traditional Korean winemaking with the world, takes him back to South Korea frequently. Naturally, 옹기, as well as other forms of Korean ceramic art, play a significant role in his life and study. He has even made several vessels and wares of his own and under the guidance of master 옹기장 artisans.

Nowadays, 옹기장—the skill and art of making 옹기—is number 96 on South Korea's

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<sup>5</sup> Ji-Kang Jeong et al., "Increased quality and functionality of kimchi when fermented in Korean earthenware (onggi)," *International Journal of Food Science & Technology* 46, no.10 (August 2, 2011): 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2621.2011.02710.x>.

<sup>6</sup> Soojung Park, text message to author, November 24, 2022.

National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, with several artisans such as Lee Mu-Nam, Lee Hak-Soo, and Bang Chun-Woong designated as Living National Treasures, carrying on the meticulous craft for generations to come. “Currently, the tradition of Onggi lives on thanks to a few Onggi makers and collectors,” says Hayan Surl, an Assistant Professor in Ceramics at Angelo State University in Texas.<sup>7</sup> Surl first studied interior design at Hansung University and apprenticed under master potter Hwang In-Sung in South Korea, later earning his master’s degree in ceramics at Ohio University. Through his artistic practice, he synthesizes history, personal experience, and skill, exploring the dynamic nature of traditional Korean craftsmanship in modern times. As 옹기’s popularity has spread throughout the global artistic community, contemporary ceramicists of non-Korean heritage have incorporated and adapted 옹기 techniques to serve various purposes in their creative processes. As a result, “there is a debate within the Korean art community about Onggi’s definition. While some argue that it is disappearing, others claim that it is actually expanding.”<sup>8</sup>

옹기 is essential to “traditional” Korean cooking, as well as Korean culture, in many ways, on individual, national, and transnational scales. Furthermore, the impact of its usage on diasporic subjects, such as myself and my family, is not exactly quantifiable. Therefore, discussions on the changing state of 옹기, in both a literal and symbolic sense, are increasingly present, relevant, and necessary. What is the meaning of authenticity in cultural cooking processes and cuisines, and what is its importance in produced and reproduced notions of identity, home, and belonging across the diaspora? What does “authentic” Korean food imply?

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<sup>7</sup> Surl, “Onggi through the Ages.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

### **A national cuisine, and the problem with “authenticity”**

Resistance to a static definition of authenticity and tradition as it pertains to 옹기 is a recurring issue among Koreans and the Korean diaspora. Not only is it a discussion in the artistic sense, but also in terms of what those earthenware pots, bowls, and dishes contain. In fact, “ethnic foods restaurants and cookbooks tend to proclaim authenticity as though ‘authentic’ is synonymous with ‘good.’”<sup>9</sup> With the decreasing usage of 옹기 in the “homeland” and elsewhere, so too dwindles the abundance of 옹기-fermented foods and beverages. This has led to heavily contested discourse about the significance of utilizing traditional wares in “authentic” ethnic cuisine. Moreover, the issue of authenticity in general is exacerbated by nations urgently seeking to increase their global presence, marked by efforts such as a “clamor to have their riches enter the pantheon of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—what belongs, at least theoretically, to all of us.”<sup>10</sup> Yet authenticity is fundamentally subjective, reliant on the idea of an exotic “other” to ascribe itself to.

What, then, would a ‘traditional’ Korean table look like? If a national food were to be identified, I agree with Professor Young Rae Oum—who focuses largely on gendered, familial, and cultural constructions of identity by Korean and Korean diasporic subjects—in that it would be 밥, or rice. Yet despite the endless variety in its preparation across countries and continents, rice is not easily seen as “unique to Korea,” nor to any one nation for that matter. According to Oum, 밥, 국, 찌개, 김치, and 장 are givens at mealtime, and the amount of 반찬 present at the table determines the elaborateness of a meal. Thus, 반찬 are not so much “sides” as the “star.” Rice and soup are distributed in individual portions, and it is common to share dishes of 반찬

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<sup>9</sup> Young Rae Oum, “Authenticity and representation: cuisines and identities in Korean-American diaspora,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no.1 (2005): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790500134380>.

<sup>10</sup> Ligaya Mishan, “When a Country’s Cuisine Becomes a Cultural Export,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/12/t-magazine/korean-food-national-royal-cuisine>.

without separate serving utensils—though this too is a relatively recent development—and diners take care to touch only the morsels of food they intend to eat. It is also routine to eat the “same” banchan meal after meal, until it comes time to prepare new ones (though they are preserved foods, which change and are meant to be consumed over time, and so are not truly the same day-to-day). In terms of table etiquette, lifting or holding bowls, and drinking directly from the soup bowl, are “banned,”<sup>11</sup> and everything is served at once, as opposed to in sequential courses. These and other conventions are common knowledge for the average Korean raised in Korea as “principles of meal preparation and table etiquettes are found in school textbooks at all levels.”<sup>12</sup>

I detail this image of the “traditional” Korean table for a few reasons. First, to share the outline of Korean dining with which I am most familiar, and which holds great meaning and nostalgia in my own relationship with Korean heritage. But also to ask why a national cuisine is so important, and why many—including the Korean government—are so concerned with promoting it, more or less unchanged, for current and future generations. For one, a national cuisine helps maintain a sense of identity, community, and home across physical and temporal borders, creating in one of many senses “a tangible point of return” for diasporic subjects.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, alignment with a cultural food or cuisine can be used as a verification of, or means of discrediting, one’s claim to a community or nation.<sup>14</sup> As Oum observes of the gastronomic Korean diasporic experience, “rejection of Korean foods and kimchi often means rejecting Korean culture or race as a whole.”<sup>15</sup> A standard cuisine, as with other essentials of

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<sup>11</sup> Oum, “Authenticity and representation,” 116.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Siti N. Ahmad and Wan N. M. Ramlan, “In Search of ‘Home’ in the Transnational Imaginary,” *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture* 12, no. 2 (June 2019): 107, [https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.201906\\_12\(2\).0005](https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.201906_12(2).0005).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Oum, “Authenticity and representation,” 107.

cultural fare, offers a means for diasporic subjects to both preserve and challenge authenticity in their food practices. Furthermore, the simple nature of cooking embodies hope—the ability to prepare one’s recipe in any country is the possibility of (re)creating home in a different place.

My dad tells me that the four pillars of Korean food are 주 (alcohol), 초 (vinegar), 장 (soy sauce), and 해 (fermented foods).<sup>16</sup> In essence, Korean food begins and ends with fermentation—a quality not unique to Korean cooking, but undoubtedly essential to it. Fermentation offers much more than just preservative and digestive benefits; it lends a complexity of flavor that varies across time as well as space, particularly when the vessel used is 옹기. As mentioned above, the breathable walls of 옹기 act as a permeable barrier between its contents and surrounding environment; resultantly, one household’s 김치, 막걸리, and 된장 are sure to taste entirely different from their neighbor’s, even if they use the same recipes. Thus, by nature of 옹기, no singular definition or rule is capable of determining how “authentic” Korean food does and should taste.

In fact, Korean food that is common today is not technically “traditional.” Peppers, cabbage, and industrially-brewed soy sauce are all imported ingredients in widespread Korean cuisine that did not make their way to the Korean peninsula until recent history. For instance, the type of cabbage used in what is perhaps the most recognizable variety of 김치 arrived in Korea only 100 years ago.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, 김치 is not so much a “dish” as it is a “condiment,” though it is often referred to now as the “quintessential Korean food” with a “very long history.”<sup>18</sup> As Oum explains, “The current status of kimchi as a national food owes its fame to the continuous efforts of the Korean government.” Children are explicitly taught about “Korean foods” in class,

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<sup>16</sup> Sunook Park, email to author, November 23, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Oum, “Authenticity and Representation,” 110.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

and implicitly introduced to the dishes at lunch time.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Korean cuisine that prevails in global popularity tends to conjure images of charcoal-grilled meats, bright-red kimchi (as opposed to its countless other variations), spicy rice cakes, and banchan, which many are quick to translate as “side dishes” or “appetizers” (which 반찬 most certainly are not). Evidently, it is difficult to put a label on what should and should not be considered authentic, traditional Korean food.

It follows that the definition of Korean food in the 21st century is changing and expanding, depending on who is speaking, cooking, and eating. Up until the late Chosun period (~1637–1910),<sup>20</sup> “each of the nine provinces had been known for special items and methods of cooking. Individual families, in addition, tend to have their own unique recipes that have been passed down for generations.”<sup>21</sup> These days, South Korean cuisine is largely standardized and homogenized. Food ethnographer Chu Young-ha maintains that in recent decades, Chollado (Southwest) cuisine became the most dominant among all regional cuisines in the South, with “spicy seasoning” and “elaborate presentation of copious dishes” becoming commonplace.<sup>22</sup> Ligaya Mishan, food critic and columnist for *The New York Times Magazine*, follows the cultural commodification of Korean cuisine, particularly in terms of the South Korean government’s persistent efforts to promote it internationally. Perhaps unsurprisingly, UNESCO was more willing to accept “the famously, triumphantly pungent kimchi, whose preparation method was, as of 2013, inscribed on the Representative List of the intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,”<sup>23</sup> than South Korea’s previous culinary nomination of Korean royal cuisine to the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Joseon Dynasty,” Ministry of Culture, Sports, Tourism, Korean Culture and Information Service, Korea.net, accessed March 5, 2023, <https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Joseon>.

<sup>21</sup> Oum, “Authenticity and representation,” 111.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Mishan, “When a Country’s Cuisine Becomes a Cultural Export.”

heritage list in 2009. UNESCO claimed the proposal had lacked evidence on how, and to what extent, recreations of this style of cuisine supported a sense of “continuity” in historical and cultural identity for modern Koreans. In reality, royal cuisine—despite its lofty title—more accurately reflects “traditional” Korean cuisine, emphasizing individual ingredients, freshness, and “clean, pure” flavors that are hallmarks of Korean cooking, according to many members of the older generations.<sup>24</sup> But, as Mishan emphasizes, this sought-after “continuity” is irrelevant in discourse on cultural identities, which are continuously evolving, emerging, and being redefined.

Indeed, as Oum argues, “Perhaps there is no such thing as the Korean cuisine nor one singular type of food that is and always has been Korean and only Korean, timeless and universal and unique.”<sup>25</sup> As with any culture in the world, Korea’s history is so long, and its subjects’ experiences so vast, that any attempt to define detailed culinary guidelines is ineffective. It follows, as Mishan asserts, that “Culture is not once and for all.”<sup>26</sup> “Nation branding” does not provide ample legroom for ever-changing and evolving cultures—this is the danger of glorifying campaigns like UNESCO Heritage that can perpetuate cultural commodification. By becoming bound to these titles, emphasis is placed on the creations of one culture or another rather than the people themselves. Simply highlighting certain ingredients or emulating certain cooking methods and eating practices does not render a meal “authentic.”

These ongoing contestations contribute to the dynamism of the diaspora. Oum claims that “the very fact that authenticity is a central issue reflects a key characteristic of a diaspora—a constant search for identity in relation with the homeland.”<sup>27</sup> As diasporic individuals grapple with authenticity, just one of many elements influencing their identities, they embark on a quest

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Oum, “Authenticity and representation,” 109.

<sup>26</sup> Mishan, “When a Country’s Cuisine Becomes a Cultural Export.”

<sup>27</sup> Oum, “Authenticity and representation,” 114.

to define yet another relationship to the home and homeland through food.

### **The Korean diaspora on Korean food, and the dangers of mindless consumption**

The parlance of culinary journalism is often inclined towards exoticizing terms like “pungent” and “funky” when referring to Korean food and other non-Western cuisine. This exoticization of non-Western cuisines becomes even more painful to negotiate when its perpetrators are diasporic subjects themselves. “Korean American authors frequently describe Korean food and cuisine in a language of lack, deficiency, and deviance,” simultaneously distancing themselves from the cuisine while attempting to impart their knowledge on it without first situating themselves as “knowers with a Western bias.”<sup>28</sup> Oum observes that in general, Korean American literature leans towards the perspective of either a “native informant,” a tokenized individual of Korean descent, who is granted credibility in the eyes of non-Korean readers, or a “Westernized self,” who writes at a distance from one’s heritage and culture.<sup>29</sup> Both cater to the Western gaze at the expense of their own narratives. Not only is this reflected in their diction, but also in presentation; sections of Korean cookbooks are written in English for the Western reader are divided into appetizers, main dishes, and desserts, while explanations of ingredients or materials usually emphasize where to find them in local supermarkets, how to clean and prepare them, or even their flavor. While this context is important to the unknowing reader, it is arguably irrelevant, for such information can easily be found on the internet as well as by referencing other, more reliable resources. Meanwhile, Korean cookbooks “written for Koreans” classify recipes based on the season, and any subscript for a dish and its ingredients likely points to other foods recommended to accompany it and/or the physical condition of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 121.

person for whom the food is being prepared.<sup>30</sup> This is in natural alignment with standard cooking and dining practices in Korea, which prioritize seasonal and local freshness as well as the medicinal qualities of food. So the issue is not solely attributable to what is lost in translation; English-language Korean cookbooks contain little, if any, reference to the essential characteristics of Korean recipes or Korean-language cookbooks.

Janet W. Lee's article "How to start cooking Korean American food" features Eric Kim, a recipe developer and columnist at *The New York Times*. Kim is the author of *Korean American: Food That Tastes Like Home*, which he co-wrote with his mother, who immigrated from South Korea to the States before the birth of her two sons. Like Kim, Lee began learning how to cook her childhood Korean favorites during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>31</sup> From just the title and subheadings, such as "Find ways to incorporate Korean flavors into your everyday cooking," an air of self-Orientalization is apparent: Lee and Kim essentially assume roles as "native informants" in order to make the article more digestible for a Western audience. Kim writes, "Build your Korean pantry. Just start there and everything else can be substituted."<sup>32</sup> While the article goes on to discuss being mindful in said substitutions, the initial inclusion of such a phrase is powerfully misleading. Frying *과전* in olive oil does not make it Italian, so why does adding gochujang to anything (and sometimes, everything) make it automatically Korean? As Oum proclaims, "A meal, let alone a cuisine, is much more than a combination of a few foods."<sup>33</sup> When "gochujang" is defined and introduced in this subsection, Lee warns, "Careful—gochu isn't exactly a mild spice, and gochujang is not recommended for the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 115-116.

<sup>31</sup> Janet W. Lee and Clare M. Schneider, "How to start cooking Korean American food," *NPR*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089175288/authentic-cooking-korean-american-food>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Oum, "Authenticity and representation: cuisines and identities in Korean-American diaspora," 113.

faint-of-tongue.”<sup>34</sup> Such caution need not be taken, at the very least, by the writers themselves, who recounted growing up fondly with dishes featuring these same ingredients. So it is unclear for which reader they are more concerned: Korean Americans with no knowledge on Korean cooking save for their own nostalgia, or non-Koreans (with little to no spice tolerance) completely unfamiliar with the cuisine to begin with? Hardly ever do French, Italian, or New American cookbooks come with such disclaimers, despite the inclusion of strong cheeses, fragrant herbs, and unique root vegetables, all of which are foreign ingredients to many.

I have struggled to put into words the discomfort that comes with witnessing others—namely food enthusiasts, writers, and creators with no notable relation besides varying degrees of interest in the culture from which a cuisine originates—staking claim to a certain dish or ingredient of their current fancy. After all, is it not only appropriate in our increasingly cross-cultural world to embrace the flavors and traditions of each others’ homelands? However, as Mark Padoongpatt, author of *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America*, notes, “Even if you ate all the world’s cuisine, it wouldn’t solve racism in America ... Consuming isn’t going to get us out of this.”<sup>35</sup> Many, including myself, delight in the smile that spreads across the face of someone when they taste a bite of a dish that is unfamiliar to them, but akin to home for us. Yet Padoongpatt raises a crucial point: a reminder that mere consumption is closer to toleration than it is to the deeper principles of acceptance, understanding, and respect.<sup>36</sup> As author and activist bell hooks says, “It is by eating the Other ... that one asserts power and privilege.”<sup>37</sup> Consumption can be more dangerous than unawareness or indifference—so when

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<sup>34</sup> Lee and Schneider, “How to start cooking Korean American food.”

<sup>35</sup> Raegen Pietrucha, “Thai Food, Constructed and Deconstructed,” University of Nevada, Las Vegas, *News Center: Arts and Culture*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/thai-food-constructed-and-deconstructed>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 378.

food writers become “native informants” or “Westernized selves,” they invite the West to participate in a culture that they value more for the “worldliness” it grants them than the people it originates from. This calls to mind the 1990s wave of “Indo-chic,” or late capitalist orientalism described by Sunaina Maira as the construction of the “spiritual east” as “atonement” for the increasingly materialistic West.<sup>38</sup> Maira critiques the West’s consumption of henna and other popular, commodified markers of Indo-chic, which made “visible an exoticized India while simultaneously repressing the social histories and material relations connecting India and the U.S.”<sup>39</sup> As Maira’s article illustrates, consumption of Asian cultures as a means of serving Western agendas and perpetuating foreignness has existed for decades, feigning innocence through a guise of cultural appreciation. Professors Siti N. Ahmad and Wan N. M. Ramlan further this critique as it applies to the popularity of Asian food in the West: “[The] desire to embrace difference through consuming ethnic minorities’ food has also resulted in the homogenization of Asian cuisine, and thereby Asian identity, in the West.”<sup>40</sup> For the West, consumption of ethnic commodities seems to serve, consciously or not, both as a means of reassuring oneself of one’s morality and of further othering the cultures they take from.

For a long time, I had dismissed this feeling of discomfort as little more than an unreasonable bitterness. Now, I propose that the issue actually lies in the definitive mobility granted to outsiders—those not personally identifying with a certain culture or ethnicity—entering ethnic spaces for the purposes of curiosity, entertainment, or enjoyment. For instance, a long-time patron at the local family-owned Korean grocery store will never quite be tied to it in the same way that a daughter working the cash register might be, regardless of their

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<sup>38</sup> Sunaina Maira, “Temporary Tattoos: Indo-Chic Fantasies and Late Capitalist Orientalism,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 3, no. 1 (2002): 138, <http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/3/1/134/580418/134maira.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ahmad and Ramlan, “In Search of ‘Home’ in the Transnational Imaginary,” 107.

respective interests in the products themselves. This difference becomes especially relevant when national or global happenings threaten the public safety of these marginalized groups; in other words, when it is no longer desirable, beneficial, or even acceptable to be affiliated with that which is “foreign.” In the epilogue of “Temporary Tattoos,” Maira reflects on the new meanings taken on by Indo-chic following the attacks of September 11, 2001: “Indo-chic is no longer simply a sign of ethnic authenticity or racial difference to be safely consumed as commodity, but a symbol of foreignness that has, at least temporarily, been transformed for some into a threat to the nation.”<sup>41</sup> The sharp turn of the West’s attitude towards Indo-chic was paralleled nearly 20 years later in the wake of COVID-19. False news and political diction featuring phrases such as “the China virus” resulted in a surge of violent, hate-driven incidents targeting “Asian-looking” individuals, which left many members of the Asian American community fearing for their and their loved ones’ safety.<sup>42</sup> Evidently, the homogenization of myriad Asian ethnicities that accompanies consumption—mistakenly viewed as positive and beneficial—is far from harmless, and must be consequently interrogated and contested.

It should be noted, however, that several remarks in Lee’s article resist the self-Orientalization that otherwise permeates it. They write, “Our experiences as Korean Americans are so multiple and so vast that any attempt to define it is going to dilute it,” and “the heart of Korean American cooking is reframing what you think of basic pantry ingredients, and letting the flavors you bring in start to feel at home.”<sup>43</sup> These comments serve to partially justify the other definitions, ambiguous explanations, and textbook culinary jargon, to declare theirs as just one of countless interpretations of the foundations of Korean cooking and the Korean

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<sup>41</sup> Maira, “Temporary Tattoos,” 154.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Findling et al., “COVID-19 Has Driven Racism And Violence Against Asian Americans,” *Health Affairs Forefront* (April 12, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1377/forefront.20220411.655787>.

<sup>43</sup> Lee and Schneider, “How to start cooking Korean American food.”

American experience with food at large. As Oum says, “it is possible to distinguish partial truths from false reports.”<sup>44</sup> It is harmful to dismiss the article as a whole, which is ultimately a reflection of the authors’ genuine and distinctive experiences, as well as their personal efforts to maintain ties with home and homeland.

### **Home as food, food as home**

Food is a medium for diasporic subjects to find (and return) home, and to find and contest a sense of self. As Oum claims, “In Korean American diaspora, Korean food is variously an object of nostalgia, longing, and desire; or a symbol of national identity and spirit; or a source of conflict, alienation, and embarrassment.”<sup>45</sup> It takes on a number of meanings, which are unique to each and every individual. When asked about the importance of Korean food at home, and of passing down Korean recipes, my mom responded, “Feeding and eating Korean foods to the kids and family is not because we are Koreans. [It’s] more because we grew up eating Korean food, and it’s more about sharing our tastes and flavors that we are familiar with.”<sup>46</sup> She expresses an openness towards “modern K-cuisine,” from fine dining to fast-casual establishments, despite the distances they may stray from ‘original’ or ‘traditional’ standards: “It’s all about how they share the experiences.”<sup>47</sup> This brings to mind her response about 옹기, when she noted a fondness for serving all kinds of food, not just Korean food, in 옹기 그릇 at the dinner table. The food itself, and the experiences intertwined with it, speak volumes against the reductive label *Korean food*.

In *Tastes Like War*, Grace M. Cho reflects on reckoning with her mother’s schizophrenia

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<sup>44</sup> Oum, “Authenticity and representation: cuisines and identities in Korean-American diaspora,” 121.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Soojung Park, text message to author, November 23, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

and traumatic memories from 육이오, and recounts her own efforts to reconnect through cooking for and with her. Cho admits that it was a struggle at first: “She did not accept my cooking.”<sup>48</sup> Eventually, though, her mother let her in, and through the process Cho discovered much more than just comfort recipes and culinary skills. She recalls their shared meals evoking the mother of her childhood, who was fiercely passionate about cooking, foraging, feeding others, and of course, eating. “If I cooked the right meal, then that mother would come out. It was some of these Korean meals, but it was also whenever I cooked cheeseburgers for her because that was her favorite food.”<sup>49</sup> Food grows in importance, to varying extents, throughout our lives, sprouting from the roots of bare necessity. Meals are often shared, and even if they are not, the transmittance of recipes, methods, and ingredients requires a certain degree of closeness between people, the absence of which would likely result in these practices being lost forever. Food preparation, like the eating that follows it, is an all-encompassing act, stimulating all five of our senses. As such, they invoke memories in us long after we leave our childhood homes—through the scent of blooming garlic at dinnertime, the numbing feeling of rubbing leaf after leaf of cabbage with coarse sea salt, crushing sesame seeds onto a warm bowl of egg rice, and the sight of our mother in the kitchen. In Cho’s process of preparing meals for her mother, she recalls memories of her own as well as her mother’s, and in turn, their shared presence over food creates new memories.

Food is also capable of facilitating new ways of belonging, whilst interrogating inclusion and exclusion, and of helping us cultivate a sense of home within the ever-changing meanings of the word. As Ahmad writes, “Childhood and adolescent memories of preparing meals and eating

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<sup>48</sup> Dave Davies, “In ‘Tastes Like War,’ a daughter reckons with her mother’s schizophrenia,” *NPR*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/14/1064031896/tastes-like-war-grace-m-cho-schizophrenia>.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

them together as a family are believed to have the power to bring back this ‘home.’”<sup>50</sup> Here, the physicality of home is replaced by somewhat of a “homing desire,” which transcends both time and place. This desire motivates and enables members of the diaspora to emulate those culinary practices which evoke feelings of home, whether that be the home of one’s childhood, a physical homeland, or something new entirely, which can then function as a comforting point of return. My mom expresses, “I like side dishes that are prepared with minimal spices (not smothered with 참기름 and/or 고춧가루) and with hands (손맛). It makes authentic when grandmother prepares them with her own recipes, with no proper measurements.” Just as a sense of “home” is specific to the individual, authenticity is not as simple nor tangible as many make it out to be.

We are all moving, fluid beings—diasporic subjects particularly so—and as a result, we contribute to the multi-placement of home as a concept through our words and actions. Put differently, “home” can and should be wherever we bring and build it. Finally, beyond accessing generational history, the act of cooking and sharing food together can also be simply that: an intimate act that brings people closer, starting conversations that we may otherwise be too hesitant to breach. As Mishan puts it, “Although heritage draws on the past, it is rooted in the present and is, almost counterintuitively, something new, created in conversation with what is old.”<sup>51</sup>

## **Conclusion**

There seems to be a common theme of ignoring variation when it comes to Korean food, and arguably all cuisines which are not considered the Western norm. Food is not just a “Korean” nor “ethnic” experience, it is a human one. Of course, there are pillars of national

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<sup>50</sup> Ahmad and Ramlan, “In Search of ‘Home’ in the Transnational Imaginary,” 111.

<sup>51</sup> Mishan, “When a Country’s Cuisine Becomes a Cultural Export.”

cuisine that are well known and should be respected, but in learning them and incorporating them in our lives, we must not ignore the deep variety of both diasporic and non-diasporic Korean culinary experiences. It is easy to let generalizations dictate our understanding of things greater and more complex than our individual selves. But just as the diaspora should not be denied the right to learn and explore their heritage through the crucial medium of food, they must recognize their potential non-impartiality to the fullest possible extent—in academia, conversation, and practice. Western bias in food writing and literature has the tendency to perpetuate foreignness in its topics of focus. Food, history, memory, culture, and family are delicate concepts, and should be treated as such, especially in public works and platforms.

When I sought out my parents' perspectives for this paper, their responses were intriguing, and even more so when compared to one another. It was refreshing to ask and receive responses in such a formal manner, for most of what we know about each others' thoughts and memories of food are either assumed or expressed anecdotally at the dinner table. It is conversations like these that I could have again and again with them, and each time it would be different. It goes without saying that the same would apply to interactions with other members of the Korean diaspora, such as Hayan Surl, Eric Kim, and Grace Cho, and with their respective families, each of whom have unique experiences with and definitions of "home."

In place of a physical homeland, "'home' is located in the amalgam of memories, experiences, feelings and sensory perceptions" of food, and is continuously reconstructed through the usage of familiar ingredients, tools, and cooking methods, allowing diasporic subjects to "present new ways of belonging in a transnational world."<sup>52</sup> Gathering and harnessing knowledge about Korean culinary traditions has helped much of the Korean diaspora to explore

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<sup>52</sup> Ahmad and Ramlan, "In Search of 'Home' in the Transnational Imaginary," 117.

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their own identification with the “homeland,” and beyond that, their complex relationships with food and family.

## Index of Translations and Pronunciations

옹기 – ‘onggi’; earthenware pots

할아버지 – ‘haraboji’; grandfather

김치 – ‘kimchi’; fermented cabbage

옹기 그릇 – ‘onggi geureut’; earthenware bowls and dishes

반찬 – ‘banchan’; various dishes of vegetables, tofu, and proteins, which are marinated fresh, steamed, pan-fried, boiled, grilled, broiled, sun-dried, fermented, or raw

친할머니 – ‘chin-halmeoni’; paternal grandmother

육이오 – ‘yook-i-o’; literal translation to 6-2-5, refers to the date June 25, 1950, when North invaded South on the Korean peninsula. Also known as the Korean War.

된장 – ‘doenjang’; fermented soybean paste

고추장 – ‘gochujang’; fermented spicy pepper paste

친할아버지 – ‘chin-haraboji’; paternal grandfather

청자 – ‘cheong-ja’; celadon, and pottery glazed in a jade green celadon color

분청사기 – ‘buncheong-sa-gi’; Buncheong ware, a form of bluish-green toned stoneware

백자 – ‘baek-ja’; also known as

한국 백자 – ‘hanguk baek-ja’; or Joseon white porcelains, produced widely during the Joseon dynasty

뚝배기 그릇 – ‘ddukbaegi geureut’; ceramic stone bowl

찌개 – ‘jjigae’; stew

옹기장 – ‘onggijang’; the skill and art of making 옹기

밥 – ‘bap’; rice, food, meal

국 – ‘guk’; soup or broth

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막걸리 – ‘makgeolli’; fermented rice wine

파전 – ‘pajeon’; green onion pancake

참기름 – ‘cham-gireum’; sesame oil

고춧가루 – ‘gochugaru’; spicy pepper flakes

손맛 – ‘son-maht’; ‘hand-taste’; a term often used to positively describe food that tastes home

and/or hand-made

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