

Hallyu and Beyond (An Essay on Korean Food and Customs)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

With the World Cup of 2026 in full swing, I could not help but notice the various corporate entities advertising their brands for the multitude of viewers from around the globe. As a non-Korean, I could see the prominence of various automotive and tech brands from Korea such as Hyundai, Samsung and LG which were on full display in this international advertising market. While technology and high-tech market was once believed to be exclusively dominated by the West and Japan, Korea's pumjil (품질) standards—or standards of quality—now seem to be indicative of Korea's competitive desire to not only match their bitter rivals like Japan, but to finally surpass them (1). In this short essay on hangug munhwa (한국 문화) or Korean culture, I will discuss my connection and insights in regards to the attitudes or mentality of Koreans, their popular traditional foods, and some of their observed customs. This will be examined from the scope of a foreigner, a student of Taekwondo residing near Toronto's Koreatown and as a Japanese Canadian with an open mind.

As a foreigner or an oegug-in (외국인), I recall being drawn to Korean culture through 'The Korean Wave' (1) or hallyu (한류) and in particular the films of Korean director/auteur Bong Joon Ho. In his popular 2006 film The Host (2) which became an instant success at the box office overseas, we meet the tight-knit Park family who are residing in South Korea's capital of Seoul when a mutant Godzilla-type 'monster' or goemul (괴물) emerges from the Han River to carry away their youngest family member, a young girl named Hyun-seo. While Seoul and its suburbs go into lockdowns with the strange 'foreign' creature believed to be the host and carrier of a deadly virus, the Parks embark on a quest into the gloomy depths of Seoul's sewer system to try and rescue Hyun-seo who is believed to be trapped in the vicinity of Wonhyo Bridge. While Korean cinema was initially my main doorway into life on the Korean Peninsula, I vaguely recalled the K-Pop craze of the 2010s with Psy's chart topping hit 'Gangnam Style' and the rise of BTS or Bangtan Sonyeondan (방탄소년단) which translates into "Bulletproof Boy Scouts" in English.

While hallyu can include more cultural aspects than cinema and popular music, it first manifested itself in the 1990s within Asia and then reached the West in particular as Korean cuisine (1). Taking Taekwondo classes in Toronto's West End, I developed a narrow view into the culture of Korean Canadians, often failing to notice some of nuances into their customs and cultural behaviour. While dining with family in Toronto's Koreatown I recalled the first time I ordered bibimbap in a popular and affordable restaurant called Buk Chang Dong Soon Tofu where I soon learned the custom was "to eat soup and rice with a spoon and use chotkkarak (choat-kah-rahk), 'chopsticks' for eating other dishes." (1) I also recollect being impressed by the multitude of side dishes that came with my main meal and arrived at the table all at once. While attending a Taekwondo community barbecue in Toronto's High Park, I remember learning that Korean broiled ribs were called kalbi (갈비), a much more interesting way in my opinion to enjoy beef on a barbecue grill than the conventional burger or hotdog that is very

much a fixture in North America. Another popular Korean food that is best purchased in a Korean supermarket or enjoyed homemade through the Korean-Canadian community is the quintessential seasoned vegetable dish called kimchi (김치). "There are some two dozen varieties of kimchi, but probably the most common version consists of Chinese cabbage that has been pickled in a volatile mixture of red pepper, garlic, scallions, radishes, ginger, and salt." (1) My favorite variety of kimchi is made with daikon radish and can be purchased at the P.A.T. Central Supermarket in the heart of Toronto's Koreatown.

As a second-generation Japanese Canadian or 'nisei', I am more integrated within Canadian culture than my other relatives on my father's side. However, while observing traditional Korean gatherings especially around the dinner table in films like The Host (2), I notice a few similarities with conventional Japanese dining customs. For instance, the meal "may well be eaten in traditional style, seated on the floor." (3) Also, it is acceptable to slurp noodles loudly, which indicates that the meal is both appetizing and enjoyable. However, while Japanese people will often pick their rice bowl up and hold it in their hands to eat, "Koreans consider [this to be] bad manners" (1). As a Japanese Canadian, I grew up eating homemade sushi and California rolls and would occasionally go to a Japanese restaurant to have sushi à la carte made with various types of seafood. After trying kimbap (김밥) for the first time in Koreatown, I preferred that the seaweed rolled rice did not contain raw seafood for a change and instead came with pickled radish and other cooked or cured ingredients. This felt like a more sustainable dining option than its Japanese counterpart which is now known by many environmentalists to be tied into overharvesting various types of choice fish and seafood. While Koreans still consider the Japanese as a rival neighbour stemming from repeated attempts by Japan to turn the Korean Peninsula into their own colony, a desire by the Korean-Canadian community to protect their heritage and culture from assimilation manifests itself in places like the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. On a recent visit to the museum's Gallery of Korea, I found a wooden rice cake stamp or 'tteoksal' (떡살) to be culturally significant and very much distinct from its Japanese counterpart known as a 'kiri-mochi' stamp. (4)

One take-away from exploring different aspects of hallyu as a student and assistant instructor of Taekwondo is that "[c]ontemporary culture in Korea still holds anshim [or peace of mind] up as the ideal, and much of the Korean language, etiquette, and ethics is designated to create and sustain an environment of anshim [안심] in personal relations, in business, and in any other public activity." (1) Also, "[i]n the wartime, tong-il (통일) [or the 'Great Reunification Dream'] remains one of the most politically, economically, and socially sensitive and provocative terms in the Korean language, stirring longings, fears, and anger over this new suffering exposed on Korea by outsiders." (1) In The Host (2), the effects of war and invasion are subtly noticed through the expression seo-ri (서리), a Korean term for stealing food. In Korean culture, it is deemed acceptable and not criminal in the Peninsula for children to 'forage' when hungry due to the unjustness of systemic poverty brought upon by seemingly perpetual divisive forces beyond an innocent child's control.

Sources:

1. "The Korean Mind-Understanding Contemporary Korean Culture", Boyé Lafayette De Mente, Tuttle Publishing. USA. 2017. p.283-284, p.59, p.95, p.184-185, p.9, p.329.
2. The Host-괴물 (2006). Dir. Bong Joon Ho. Showbox. South Korea. 119 min.
3. "Culture Smart! Korea-The Essential Guide to Customs and Culture", James Hoare, Kuperard, Great Britain. 2021. p.83.
4. Wooden rice cake stamp, ROM's Gallery of Korea, Late 20th Century
<https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/1562061/wooden-rice-cake-stamp->