

McDonald's in Seoul: Food Choices, Identity, and Nationalism

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In this chapter I explore the relationship between food and national identity, taking McDonald's as a primary point of departure. In what ways do Koreans accept—and, more important, refuse to accept—American-style fast food as part of their culinary culture?¹

Field research for this project was conducted in Seoul during the summer of 1994, a time when many Koreans were debating issues of food consumption and nationalism. From the outset, then, this was not simply a study of hamburgers. The research took me, of course, to McDonald's restaurants, but I also had to consider the impact of foreign foods on rural and urban communities, and the role of organizations such as the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (NACF, or *Nonghyŏp* in Korean) in the public discourse on food. In the eyes of many Koreans, hamburgers, especially hamburgers identified with American-owned restaurants, stand in symbolic opposition to locally produced, Korean rice.

In Korea today, McDonald's remains immersed in public debates regarding dietary choice, protectionism, and national

identity. These controversies are closely linked to a Korean dilemma: people wish to be, simultaneously, nationalistic and global. In recent years the Korean government has been negotiating the terms of its trade agreements with other countries, and the removal of an import ban on rice has been at the forefront of the confrontation between potential rice exporters (notably the United States) and local producers. The government has tried not to alienate the farming population, but has had a hard time justifying its ban on foreign rice now that Korea has become the twelfth-largest trading nation in the world.²

In 1992, when trade negotiations were under way, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing and NACF jointly produced a poster to promote the consumption of local agricultural produce. The slogan read "Healthy eating = Eating our Rice," and the poster depicted a large grain of rice trampling a greasy hamburger. American trade representatives complained that the poster was insulting and blamed the Korean government for blocking free trade.³ As this incident indicates, rice and hamburgers are clearly understood symbols representing indigenous Korean food versus imported American food.

My concern is not to predict whether or not McDonald's will prove to be a successful business venture in Korea; I am interested in the historic and symbolic meanings Koreans associate with McDonald's. Most of my informants, business people and consumers alike, agreed that an ever-increasing number of people are eating American-brand fast foods, either because they wish to sample Western cuisine or because fast foods are convenient. As the domestic economy expands, more and more people will see McDonald's food as an affordable choice. Koreans' attitudes toward American fast food vary with their gender, economic condition, and political viewpoint.⁴ There

are also dramatic generational differences: it may be hard to convince a Korean child, whose favorite venue for birthday parties is McDonald's, that hamburgers are not part of her indigenous food culture.

The symbolic conflict between hamburgers and rice sheds light on contemporary society in Korea. As Arjun Appadurai has noted, in every society certain objects or commodities carry powerfully loaded social messages, much as cloth did in the context of Gandhi's resistance to British imperialism in pre-1947 India.⁵ Foods, especially staple foods, often become intertwined with a group's identity, as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney shows in her discussion of the central role of rice throughout Japanese history.⁶ She argues that food is literally subsumed into the bodies of human beings and, given that it is shared with one's family, colleagues, or friends, that eating together unifies people. Consuming the staples that grow in one's native soil further reinforces the idea of oneness with fellow diners.

In his discussion of special commodities in particular cultural contexts, Appadurai argues that those items most saturated with social messages (e.g., cloth or rice) are "likely to be least responsive to crude shifts in supply or demand, but most responsive to political manipulation."⁷ Despite careful presentation and planning, many Korean critics perceived McDonald's as the vanguard of encroaching American capitalism, the inevitable accompaniment to U.S. political and cultural influence. McDonald's found itself caught in the middle of a political debate that turned into a popular campaign against imported food. As rice symbolizes Korean indigenesness, so McDonald's hamburgers carry the burden of symbolizing Americana—regarded with deep ambivalence by many Koreans. In contrast to the situation in China, described by

Yunxiang Yan in Chapter 1, this direct link with American culture did not necessarily increase McDonald's popularity in Korea.

A Brief History of McDonald's in Korea

Even before McDonald's restaurants appeared in Korea, many Koreans recognized the brand name; McDonald's was frequently mentioned in the media as the quintessential giant American fast food chain. In the 1970s the United States headquarters of the McDonald's Corporation commissioned a market survey to investigate the prospects for expanding into Korea. To the company's disappointment, the survey found that Koreans were strongly anti-American, a reflection of the uneasy relationship between the two countries since the end of World War Two.⁸

By the 1980s, however, the McDonald's Corporation determined that the Korean business environment had changed. Cultural symbols associated with internationalization and globalism were rapidly gaining popularity during the preparation for the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympics, both held in Seoul. McDonald's took advantage of this opening, which came at a time when the overloaded market for fast food in the United States encouraged the company to expand internationally.

In 1986, a joint venture called McAnn was established between a Korean partner, Mr. Ann, and McDonald's International, headquartered in the United States.⁹ In 1988, the first McDonald's restaurant opened in Apkuchŏng-dong, one of the most exclusive districts of Seoul, known for its cafes and boutiques, which are frequented by affluent, trendy members of the younger generation.¹⁰ McDonald's occupied a newly

opened two-story building, and was immediately identified by the local clientele as a modern, chic place to eat. The founding site still serves as the symbolic representation of McDonald's in Korean popular consciousness.

Soon after McAnn opened its seventh restaurant, Ann himself died. Wishing to boost the expansion rate of its Korean outlets, McDonald's International sought additional partners. ShinMc, another joint venture, was established in Seoul, followed by McKim, the third joint venture, in Pusan, Korea's second-largest city. In July 1994, ShinMc bought out the seven stores originally opened by McAnn, leaving only two partners in Korea.¹¹

By July 1994, McDonald's had 26 restaurants in Korea and was planning to build five or six more by the end of the year. While the number of McDonald's restaurants has increased, the chain's rate of expansion in Korea has been much slower than in the other East Asian markets discussed in this book, and slower than that anticipated by the first Korean partner. Ann originally planned to open three restaurants in 1986 and 58 more by the end of 1990.¹²

Both the media and the general public have taken a keen interest in the fact that McDonald's involvement in the Korean market has been conducted with multiple business partners, which has not been the case in other East Asian countries. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, McDonald's International chose one entrepreneur and placed this person in charge of business in the entire country. Certain elements of the Korean mass media were very critical of local arrangements, accusing McDonald's of forcing its Korean partners to compete among themselves for a bigger share of business, resulting in their paying higher fees to the United States headquarters.¹³ Since the issue of prof-

its is especially sensitive for a multinational firm, this accusation created considerable negative publicity. Two examples of the newspaper headlines exemplify local coverage: "The tyranny of American fast food companies in the Korean market," and "McDonald's joint venture scheme."¹⁴

McDonald's as a "Local" Institution

In 1994 a marketing manager for ShinMc made a strong case to me that the local McDonald's was in fact a *Korean* business. He pointed out that McDonald's International held a 50 percent ownership stake in its Korean operations, while Korean citizens owned the other 50 percent.¹⁵ That McDonald's is Korean is an interesting argument when one considers the company's ongoing efforts to represent its products as authentically American, and hence different from the hamburgers sold at local, supposedly less prestigious, restaurants. The marketing manager I interviewed also emphasized that business in Korea is conducted exclusively by Koreans. This is necessary, he said, because of the complex banking system in Korea and the need to negotiate with numerous government bureaucracies.

Without exception the employees I encountered during my 1994 research expressed positive feelings about their jobs and the restaurant company. As Korean citizens working for a multinational corporation, they certainly did not feel that they were helping foreigners siphon money out of Korean pockets, a common allegation of critics. Employees considered McDonald's a model company, one that donates money to local charitable causes and reinvests a substantial proportion of its profits in Korea. My informants argued that many native Korean firms would do well to emulate McDonald's system of efficient management and social responsibility. Women employees, in

particular, expressed considerable satisfaction with the company's openness and relative lack of hierarchy, which in their view led to greater gender equality than is normally the case in Korean business circles.¹⁶

McDonald's and Its Rivals

In representing and differentiating itself in the Korean restaurant market, McDonald's has emphasized that it sells *the* authentic American hamburger. Since most Koreans have long believed that McDonald's does indeed make the "real" thing, competitors were forced to change their marketing strategies when the company began operation in Korea. Lotteria, a restaurant chain that opened in Korea prior to McDonald's, initially claimed that it sold authentic American hamburgers made from pure beef. There was some justification for this: until Lotteria opened in 1979, most local hamburgers were greasy patties made from meat of suspicious origin—as I recall vividly from my youth. To bolster its image of American authenticity, Lotteria's employees spoke basic English when transmitting orders among themselves. (Lotteria was owned by a Korean entrepreneur, who started the company in Japan; he was allowed to expand to Korea prior to other "foreign" food chains primarily because of his ethnic origin.) After the introduction of McDonald's and other American chains, the authenticity contest was largely conceded; Lotteria began to represent itself as a purveyor of delicious hamburgers, catering to specifically Korean tastes. The chain developed *pulgogi* burgers (Korean-style barbecued beef) and teriyaki burgers (Japanese-style marinated and grilled beef) which sold well. Meanwhile, Lotteria employees stopped speaking English among themselves and stopped talking about their "American" hamburgers.

Lotteria is currently expanding into China, where products from Japan or Korea appeal to those who want to participate in the new consumer-oriented culture.¹⁷

Another chain, Uncle Joe's Hamburger, invented the *kimchi* burger, which was popular among consumers who did not think a meal was complete without the traditional and ubiquitous condiment, made from spicy pickled cabbage. The owner, an American who has moved to Korea, found that many Korean adults expressed strong skepticism that hamburgers could be eaten as a meal and not a snack. But once he substituted *kimchi* (which is eaten only at regular mealtimes) for cucumber pickles, more people were willing to accept hamburgers as the basis of a full meal.¹⁸ Although still a small chain, Uncle Joe's is considered an "enfant terrible" by its competitors, largely because of its readiness to adapt to Korean culinary preferences.¹⁹

Yet another hamburger chain, with the unambiguous name Americana, is in fact owned entirely by Koreans. It opened in 1980 as a spin-off of an American firm, JBS Big Boy Company, which provided technology and training.²⁰ This chain was initially successful; in 1989 it ranked second only to Lotteria in sales volume. However, in 1991, when the better known and perceivedly more prestigious American hamburger chains (notably McDonald's) were taking hold, locally produced hamburgers were no longer considered "real" American products and hence became less popular.²¹ McDonald's thus began with a definite advantage in the authenticity battle. But as will be discussed below, the chain has paid a high price for becoming a symbol of American culture.

Creating a Market for McDonald's

To understand how McDonald's fits into the Korean culinary system, it is important to know what bread and meat—the two basic components of hamburgers—mean to Koreans. Since its introduction in the nineteenth century, bread has never been incorporated into the standard meal system; instead it is perceived as a snack food. The Korean term for snack is *kansik*, literally “in-between food.” Meat, on the other hand, has always been a highly valued, desirable food, and it is eaten almost exclusively at mealtime. To attract a steady flow of customers who would make substantial purchases, McDonald's had to represent itself as a place where one ate a full meal, as opposed to a snack bar where people spend little money but stay for hours chatting. To the dismay of local management, most Koreans considered McDonald's restaurants to be snack bars.²² Hamburgers were more readily categorized by their bread (*ppang*), than by their meat (*kogi*). To change this perception, the “value meal” was introduced: McDonald's offered a 10 percent discount on four combinations that included a burger, french fries, and a soft drink. The intention behind this campaign was to attract customers who would eat an entire set of foods and, in so doing, realize that hamburgers can form the basis of a filling meal.

At the company headquarters in Seoul, there was serious discussion regarding the proper Korean name for a “value meal.”²³ The chain wanted to emphasize the concept of “meal,” but the equivalent Korean term, *siksa*, was unsuitable because it is not ordinarily used in the sense that McDonald's managers had in mind. The more colloquial term *pap* was even less appropriate because it is used interchangeably for a meal and cooked rice. In the absence of an appropriate local term, they

decided to use the English word "set." Most Koreans would recognize the English as referring to something complete in several parts.

McDonald's management concluded that there was no equivalent for the American idea of value in the Korean business context, where anything recognized as inexpensive is usually deemed inferior to its more costly counterparts. A high-level executive in McDonald's Seoul office told me that the chain hoped to educate Koreans about the concept of value, meaning high quality for low price, in the expectation that consumers would appreciate this aspect of McDonald's meals. In the meantime, the concept of value was translated as *alch'an*, which means something good packed inside a protective shell (such as a ripe pomegranate inside its tough skin, or a chestnut inside its hull). The "*alch'an* set menu" was successful and has helped the company redefine its restaurants as places to have a meal. According to the average transaction count (abbreviated as TC, registering every 1,000 sales) of the chain's restaurants, the set-meal sales rose from 400–500 out of every 1,000 transactions to 600–700 once the campaign was launched.²⁴

When McDonald's enters a new market, the restaurants generally begin by offering standard menu items such as hamburgers, fries, and milk shakes. After several years, when local managers think their business is well established, new items are introduced to suit local tastes in order to boost sales.²⁵ In 1994, McDonald's in Korea was still selling the basic items, which did not include breakfast fare. Local managers were making their first plans to augment the menu with items designed to appeal to Korean tastes, such as melon-flavored milk shakes.

*Ed. Note: This strategy was followed for all the cases examined in this book; see Chapter 5 for a discussion of this process in Japan.

Prices of McDonald's food in Korea are relatively high when compared to those charged in other countries. In 1994, for instance, a Big Mac cost close to US\$3. Each year when *The Economist* publishes its Big Mac index, the comparative prices are instantly quoted in every major newspaper in Korea.²⁵ Although the intent of *The Economist's* survey is to compare the cost of living in various countries, using the price of the ubiquitous hamburger as an index, Koreans read the article in a very different way. Local headlines proclaim: "McDonald's Hamburgers Cost More Here!"

Negotiating Gender, Space, and Meanings of Fast Foods

The ratio of male to female customers in a Korean McDonald's is about 3:7.²⁶ Eating a hamburger in what is perceived primarily as a children's place is not appealing to most grown men. The food-ordering process at fast food restaurants, where people have to order and pay for the food before they sit down and eat it, makes some Korean men feel uncomfortable. In traditional restaurants, customers pay after the meal is eaten, which usually results in everyone's competing to pay for the whole table. Some men told me that they feel awkward and stingy paying for just their own food. Even before the introduction of fast food, women generally felt more comfortable about dividing up the check. Another reason women like McDonald's is that, like most fast food chains and unlike most conventional restaurants, it does not serve alcoholic beverages. An alcohol-free and child-friendly environment is perceived as an appropriate and safe place for women unaccompanied by male family members or friends. McDonald's hopes to increase the number of male customers while retaining its female clientele. Men who do enter the premises tend to buy a full set meal

and spend less time in the restaurant; this makes them highly desirable customers. Given the high rent in urban Korea, and the fact that most McDonald's restaurants are located in central commercial districts, full profitability is only possible when restaurants are packed with paying customers who do not linger, thereby making possible a high turnover rate.

Korean consumers on the whole, however, treat "fast" food restaurants as leisure centers and tend to stay longer than do most Americans. According to a survey conducted at a New Jersey Burger King in 1978, the average customer sat down at the table for only 11 minutes.²⁷ According to my 1994 field observations at two separate McDonald's restaurants in Seoul, the average "sitting time" was 35 minutes. The total number of examples observed was 90: among these, 44 were groups of women (sometimes accompanied by their young children), 14 were groups of men, while 13 were mixed groups (nine of these 13 appeared to be dating couples). Families accounted for six examples, while eight women and five men ate alone. On average, groups of women stayed much longer (33 minutes) than did groups of men (20 minutes). Men eating alone and families with children purchased the largest amount of food per person; they left, on average, within 17–18 minutes. Dating couples stayed longest—46 minutes on average. When one considers that American McDonald's restaurants do a significant amount of business at their drive-through windows, an option that is not feasible at most Korean outlets, one can understand the management's concern for controlling eating time at the Seoul restaurants.

To alleviate the space problem McDonald's has introduced *hostessing*: women employees circulate to assist customers and put subtle pressure on people to leave when they have finished

eating. People who do not buy food from the restaurant and use the space for other purposes are also made uncomfortable by hostesses, who among other ploys will seat strangers at the offenders' tables, thus maximizing use and making loiterers uneasy. Korean customers find it less awkward to be conducted to a seat by an employee than to ask a stranger for permission to share a table. Many customers feel uncomfortable lingering at a table if they are next to a stranger and will leave as soon as they are finished. In their desire for a speedy turnover, employees will go so far as to clean off the tables where customers are still seated. The degree of pressure depends on the neighborhood where the restaurant is located. In more affluent areas, where the traffic is relatively light, staff intrusion is less evident.

Young people (especially women college students and dating couples) often convert McDonald's restaurants into cafes where they chat over coffee or soft drinks. During my field investigations I observed many young women touching up their makeup, writing letters, reading books, and even holding reading-club meetings or study groups in McDonald's. The restaurants are a more economical choice than cafes or coffeehouses because they offer clean, comfortable, and air-conditioned spaces for US\$1-2 per person, half or one-third what they would have to pay in a cafe. The courteous service, which is somewhat unusual by Korean standards for a moderately priced restaurant, is another reason why young people feel comfortable at McDonald's.

Holding birthday parties at McDonald's is currently one of the most popular and prestigious ways of entertaining children.²⁸ Moving birthday celebrations from the child's home to a public place has also changed the form of the parties, and

children now expect to celebrate with their friends rather than family members, a break from accepted tradition. McDonald's provides party paraphernalia (such as paper crowns) and complimentary gifts that children take home in plastic bags. (In the summer of 1994, when the weather was unusually hot, the gifts were paper fans shaped and printed like Big Macs.) Without question, these gifts are very effective in making other children want to have their birthday parties at McDonald's. For managers who are trying to create a family atmosphere, the parties are a way to reach customer groups who represent future business. There is thus a constant negotiation between management and customers on the one hand, and between various groups of customers on the other, regarding the definition and use of restaurant space. McDonald's has tried hard to politely "educate" its consumers in the rules of *fast* food restaurants—not only is the service fast, but customers are expected to eat fast and leave fast, too.

Many customers I spoke with said that they were willing to pay the slightly higher prices at McDonald's instead of eating at a locally owned fast food restaurant because they preferred a clean, air-conditioned environment. For this reason, take-out is not an attractive option. Korean consumers have the clear idea that they are paying for *space*, and they wish to enjoy themselves in a pleasant environment. To alleviate the space problem, however, local management has promoted take-out options, featuring this style of consumption heavily in television commercials. Managers I spoke with agreed that it will take some time to convince the Korean public that take-out is a convenient and enjoyable way to eat McDonald's food.

Since most McDonald's restaurants in Korea are located in central commercial areas where transportation is convenient,

the Golden Arches have become an easily recognizable landmark for meetings and rendezvous. There are usually many people standing in front of the bustling restaurants, waiting for friends or colleagues. The restaurant management accommodates these people by installing bulletin boards in the lobbies so customers can leave messages for one another on special memo paper, also provided by the management. Many people who use McDonald's restaurants as meeting places purchase only drinks, or buy nothing at all, going elsewhere as soon as they have met their friends. Those who decide to eat in the restaurant tend to wait for the other parties to arrive before purchasing anything. These local customs aggravate the problem of crowding, but the management seems to have accepted this as the price of their restaurants' popularity.

Another group of people who frequent the restaurants but do not purchase food are those who enter simply to use the rest rooms. Given the lack of public toilets in Korea, the relatively clean and convenient facilities provided by McDonald's encourage heavy traffic. Although the management does not explicitly discourage casual visitors from using their rest rooms, most restaurants display signs saying, "Please order before going upstairs" (where the toilets and most of the tables are usually located).

Consumption, Resistance, and Foreign Imports

During my interviews, many people seemed concerned that the Korean economy would be adversely affected if they patronized foreign-based restaurant chains. It is commonly believed that a preference for foreign goods is a sign of conspicuous consumption and vanity. For example, in an article on the government's plan to allow local companies to produce foreign

brand-name merchandise under a license from the foreign company, to which they would pay royalties, one of the nation's two largest newspapers commented, "This change in policy might prove to be problematic considering our trade deficit, people's tendency to prefer foreign brands, and the trend of [over]consumption."²⁹ Ordinary Koreans are concerned about the percentage of profit going to foreign headquarters.

Newspaper and television journalists keep close track of multinational corporations, including fast food chains. Most of the coverage by the mass media has been negative. Price-gouging and profiteering, low nutritional and sanitary standards, and social irresponsibility are often cited as the main reasons to avoid foreign foods. One newspaper article stated, "Foreign franchise restaurants leave their lights on all night to draw attention to their restaurants despite the nationwide movement to save energy."³⁰ Another article maintained that, "Foreign fast foods are not hygienic, . . . they use bacon and ham that already are past their expiration dates."³¹ Yet another newspaper article claimed that, "Fast food is full of fecal bacilli. . . . The Association of Housewives found as many as 100 million fecal bacilli in one gram of sandwich."³²

American cultural imperialism—defined as the encroachment of cultural practices and values that reflect American political and economic power—is also frequently cited as a reason for Koreans to shun McDonald's restaurants. When McDonald's is mentioned in the mass media, it is usually referred to as "McDonald's, the largest American multinational restaurant chain."³³

The Korean government has also been responsive to public concerns about imports. Transnational corporations have had to operate within the constraints of the "Fair Competition

Law," which is designed to prevent large businesses from taking advantage of smaller competitors.³⁴ The government can severely punish firms that are deemed to have violated fair trading practices, as defined by the general ethos of the business community in Korea. Local managers of McDonald's have found, for instance, that many of the standard promotional tools used in other countries (prizes, special sales) are not feasible in Korea, where such practices might be perceived as unfair competition—especially since small-scale, indigenous food purveyors do not routinely offer similar inducements. The mass media's close scrutiny of foreign fast food restaurants guarantees that government officials will watch every move McDonald's makes.

According to the Korean Fair Competition Law, companies cannot give away more than 1,000 Won (US\$1.30) worth of gifts for purchases lower than 10,000 Won (US\$13). For more expensive purchases, the gift's value cannot exceed 10 percent of the purchase price, or 50,000 Won (US\$65), whichever is smaller. For sweepstakes gifts, the prize cannot exceed 10,000 Won for purchases costing less than 1,000 Won, or 50,000 Won for purchases of 1,000–100,000 Won.

In 1993 McDonald's restaurants in Korea gave out sweepstake tickets to their customers who bought the *alch'an* set menu (priced at 2,250–3,750 Won), with a grand prize of two tickets to Disneyland in California, clearly violating the local Fair Competition Law. Pizza Hut had a similar promotion that awarded winners personal computers.³⁵ American trade officials maintained that rigid enforcement of the Fair Competition Law was keeping American firms from expanding further into the Korean market, and asked the Korean government to amend the law.³⁶

Management personnel I spoke with in Seoul were confident that McDonald's could overcome the inherent difficulties of operating in such a complex environment. They were convinced that their company's efficiency and capacity to deliver good food at reasonable prices would overcome the anti-American and anti-import sentiments that inhibit business; they expected customers to put aside political concerns and make purely economic, "rational" choices. Consumers are therefore courted as individuals, not as representatives of political factions or interest groups. Choosing McDonald's hamburgers over local foods, the management argued, should be taken as an economic decision on the part of an individual consumer rather than as symbolic behavior representing an overarching political ideology. Emphasizing McDonald's good value and convenience as a family restaurant is thus in line with the company's overall marketing strategy in Korea.

Another way to alleviate people's concerns about the "American" identity of McDonald's is to emphasize the Koreanness of the firm. In addition to highlighting the fact that Koreans own 50 percent of local operations, the management also makes it known that many ingredients—such as milk, ketchup, and hamburger buns—are supplied by Korean firms. These suppliers, in turn, sometimes make use of McDonald's reputation to enhance their own. Maeil Milk, a primary supplier to the chain, carries an ad on its milk cartons proclaiming, "Maeil Milk is of such high quality that it has met McDonald's strict standards." This ad supports McDonald's agenda of being portrayed in the Korean popular consciousness as a company that exemplifies cleanliness and pure, fresh food.

Rice Versus Hamburgers

The focal point of the debate regarding imported food and its relation to national identity is Korean rice and rice producers. An argument that seems to convince many Koreans of the need to protect domestic producers is that it is important to be self-sufficient in staple crops for national security reasons. Given that only half a century ago, Koreans experienced a devastating war during which they lacked the basic means of subsistence, this argument is an effective means of answering economists and business people who advocate the theory of comparative advantage in international trade. Koreans would be better off, according to proponents of open trade, if the country focused on developing high-tech industries while importing agricultural produce because Korea has a scarcity of land and an abundance of well-educated labor power. In national politics, rice farmers still constitute a significant voting bloc. Furthermore, many urbanites maintain close ties to relatives in rural areas, which means that urban and rural constituencies are not clearly divided. For many Koreans, the argument that every citizen should eat native produce to protect their compatriots in the countryside has considerable persuasive power—even though the price of Korean products may be higher. The general belief that Korean agricultural goods are superior in quality and nutritional value makes the argument even more convincing.

A slogan heard almost everywhere in Korea during the 1990s is: *Sint'oburi*, literally “body, earth, not, two.” Translated more freely, this slogan means that human bodies and their native environments are so closely linked that people should eat what is produced locally in order to maintain cosmic harmony. Understandably, this rhetoric is promoted by

the NACF, as well as by grass-roots environmental groups and housewives' associations, all of which oppose foreign food imports. According to the philosophy of *Sint'oburi*, eating American hamburgers made from imported beef destroys people's harmony with their environment in the most radical way, and through this process Korean identity is lost.

Popular sympathy toward farmers and native rice is fostered by the Korean media, notably television documentaries dealing with agricultural issues. The intention behind these documentaries is clearly shown by their titles, such as: "American rice waiting for our doors to open,"³⁷ "Thailand and Australia, keeping their eyes on the Korean rice market!"³⁸ and "Our rice, our survival."³⁹ All these programs emphasize the seemingly limitless capacity to produce low-cost rice in foreign countries, and the threat this presents to Korean farmers. The programs stress the higher quality of native rice and the need for Koreans to eat what is produced in their own country, for both the physical health of consumers and the economic health of the nation.

The Korean mass media often frame the issue in terms of the survival of farmers, while downplaying the fact that Korean consumers would benefit from the lower price of imported rice. Despite this economic reality, urban industrial workers are often among the most active participants in anti-import campaigns, which are organized by farmers' associations and allied organizations.

Commensality and Individualism in Korea's Culinary Culture

In Korean, as in Chinese and Japanese, the term for "meal" is the same as the term for "cooked rice." Rice is definitely the

most popular source of carbohydrates when compared to barley, corn, millet, and sweet potatoes. Traditionally there has also been a close association between eating rice and enjoying the good life. Korean folklore represents the affluent person as someone who lives in a tile-roofed house (shaped like a whale's back) while enjoying a steady diet of cooked rice and beef soup. For example, the story of Hüngbu, one known to all Koreans, is about an extremely poor yet virtuous man whose children craved snow-white cooked rice (as opposed to low-grade brown rice) and meat broth.⁴⁰ Rice is thus more than a simple grain; it is imbued with symbolic meanings and is perceived as sacred by many Koreans. Women are instructed not to waste a single grain lest they anger the gods and ruin the household's luck.

Only in the 1980s did Koreans finally grow enough rice to meet the domestic demand without imports. In the 1970s the government implemented a number of aggressive policies to promote rice production, including a price support system as well as a research and development program. These policies proved successful, and by 1992 rice production, which had accounted for only 53.7 percent of the total grain output in 1965, had risen to 85.9 percent. As a result, rice farming has become almost synonymous with farming in general. Once Korea achieved self-sufficiency in rice production, the government changed its emphasis to producing tastier rice.⁴¹

Paralleling cultural patterns outlined in Ohnuki-Tierney's discussion of the Japanese diet in the next chapter, eating rice in Korea promotes commensality. People share rice that has been cooked in the same pot and usually share side dishes, except during special banquets. Sharing a residence is often called "eating rice from the same cooking pot." At McDonald's and

other fast food restaurants, by contrast, customers pursue their own individualistic tastes. Although groups of people may eat together, they do not ordinarily share the food—except for french fries. In Korea, even when friends purchase separate packets of fries, they often pour the contents onto a tray and together eat from the resulting pile. This does not, however, create the same powerful sense of commensality as sharing a rice-based meal. One can eat alone in McDonald's and not feel strange; eating in isolation at a Korean-style restaurant, on the other hand, generates feelings of loneliness and self-pity. The dominant view of McDonald's food, according to my informants, is that it facilitates personal choice and promotes individuality, themes which appeal to the new generation (*sin-sedae*), who regard uniqueness as an important quality.

In my view, one reason why McDonald's has not been more readily accepted by adult Koreans is that the style of food does not fit easily into the existing Korean food system. Hamburgers, in particular, have not found a "niche" in the preexisting hierarchy of food. Other foreign products, such as instant coffee, Spam, processed cheese, and Coca-Cola, have not presented a direct threat to the rice-based, "proper" Korean meal. Rather, these items have been subsumed into recognizable food categories. For instance Spam, which happens to be extremely popular in Korea,⁴² is treated as a gift item during traditional holidays. It is often sliced and covered with an egg batter and fried, much like minced beef or pork in traditional cuisine. These Spam dishes are eaten with rice and other side dishes, thus fitting comfortably into traditional food categories. Hamburgers, by contrast, constitute an entirely new category. Spam has been thoroughly "localized" in Korea, whereas the Big Mac

is still “foreign,” not only as a trade-marked brand name but also as a category of food.

Perhaps as a consequence of recent economic growth and the rising consumption level, McDonald’s hamburgers are not considered haute cuisine by most Korean consumers. This has made it difficult for the company to find a niche in the local market. On the one hand, managers realize that it is important to portray McDonald’s as the “authentic” American hamburger restaurant; on the other, attempts are under way to become “local” and thereby fit into the class of ordinary purveyors of everyday food.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have outlined what might be called a series of negotiations and contestations regarding the meanings, demand for, and consumption of McDonald’s hamburgers in Korea. Demand, as I have tried to show, is not a “natural” economic force, nor is it a constant and universal state.

All the parties examined in this chapter—Korean consumers, McDonald’s managers and employees, farmers, media analysts, and Korean government officials—would no doubt agree with Sidney Mintz’s point about food: Use implies meaning.⁴³ It is obvious that in Korea, the consumption of hamburgers communicates a variety of often contradictory messages. The farmers who promote the consumption of local produce argue that eating McDonald’s hamburgers is tantamount to treason and the loss of Korean identity. Meanwhile, those who work for McDonald’s convey the message that the consumption of hamburgers is a matter of rational choice, an ideologically neutral exercise based on personal tastes. Nonetheless, the current political environment in Korea encourages individuals to make

consumption choices based on the perceived interest of Koreans as a group, rather than relying on personal preferences or economic self-interest.

The perceived seriousness of eating foreign-based foods is related to a general ambivalence toward achieving a globalized lifestyle and in the process losing one's identity as a Korean. In a study of British eating patterns, Mary Douglas notes that "whenever a people are aware of encroachment and danger, dietary rules controlling what goes into the body would serve as a vivid analogy of the corpus of their cultural categories at risk."⁴⁴ The fact that many children prefer foreign foods (pizza, hamburgers) to traditional dishes (*kimchi*, beef soup) is taken as a warning sign about the impending loss of Korean identity, since what is consumed is literally converted into the bodies of this next generation.

In addition to the essential role food plays in the formation of the body, consuming foreign items also poses a threat to the social body. In Korean society, sharing food promotes solidarity not only among the living, but also between the ancestors and their descendants. The symbolic eating of food that first has been offered in ancestor worship ceremonies (*umbok*, or "partaking of luck") is a vivid example of how food connects various family members, both living and dead. The items used in these ceremonies must be familiar to the ancestors; their consumption, both spiritual and corporal, assures the continuity of Korean descent lines. The contestations regarding the consumption of foreign foods must be understood, therefore, in the context of social practices that involve far more than personal taste.

Korean consumers as a group and Koreans as individuals have been actively creating and redefining the transactional

terms that condition acceptance of McDonald's hamburgers. Most customers I interviewed told me that their food choices do not simply reflect government guidelines or the agendas of interest groups that play on patriotic themes. Nor do they think that they are blindly influenced by the sophisticated marketing strategies of multinational restaurant chains. The young people who use the pleasant environment of McDonald's to socialize and study are fully aware that the management's intended use of this space is at odds with their own. Many customers even feel that they are taking advantage of the company by not spending enough money to compensate for the service received. Korean women have also found their own way to convert the space provided by McDonald's into a retreat from the stress of urban life. These consumers are creatively transforming the restaurants into "local" institutions, a process that is paralleled by McDonald's experience in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan. But what makes the Korean process of localization different from its counterparts in these other East Asian cases is the dominant role of politics. McDonald's in Korea is not simply a corporation; it is a highly loaded symbol of American culture, and as such reflects all the complications and contradictions that have characterized Korean-American relations over the past fifty years.