

# Discussion on the Connection between Local Korean Food and Migrant Adaptation from the Perspective of Dietary Changes

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**Abstract:** In recent years, there have been numerous expansions of Korean restaurants, supermarkets and other popular cultural products in Hong Kong. Local Korean food is now a daily food for many people, as well as a place to connect with one's roots for migrant communities. Dietary changes have also been made by the local Korean food community to adapt to life in Hong Kong. Based on research on dietary acculturation, transnational foodways and Korean diaspora identities, it is proposed that the consumption and production of Korean cuisine are closely related to processes of acculturation, identity negotiation and social integration. The first is to introduce the main concepts of dietary acculturation and transnational culinary consumption, and then to analyze how Korean food functions as a source of comfort, capital and a zone of contact for Korean migrants and other residents. Finally, it considers the dual nature of commercialised K-food in creating inclusive and exclusive types of urban belonging.

**Keywords:** Korean food, Hong Kong, dietary acculturation, migrant adaptation, transnational foodways, diaspora, K-culture.

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## 1. Introduction

Food is also a kind of migration and cultural change that is easy to observe. What and how to eat for migrants are closely related to issues of identity, health, family relations and economic life. The appearance of new food in a place can be due to the arrival of migrants and changing tastes among urban residents. In the past decade, with the rapid growth of Korean restaurants, cafes and food products in Hong Kong, it shows that Korean popular culture is increasingly popular among locals and migrants, and people from all walks of life are incorporating it into their daily lives here.

Changes in Diet: More than a list of food in Hong Kong, Korean food is also quite varied. It is a medium for Korean migrants to preserve their culture, a place where second-generation youth and other migrants experiment with hybrid identities, and a commercial field for packaging K-culture for local and tourist consumption. At the same time, dietary adaptation in the Hong Kong environment-such as ingredient availability, work schedules, housing constraints and price levels-is altering the conception of "Korean food" for daily life. Research on dietary acculturation and Korean diaspora foodways was used to study the change in this region.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives on Dietary Change and Adaptation

### 2.1. Dietary Acculturation and Migrant Foodways

Research on Korean migrants has long shown that there have been changes in their eating habits since moving abroad. Research on Korean Americans shows that more acculturated individuals tend to eat more Western-style food, such as bread, meat and dairy products, and are less likely to consume traditional staple foods such as rice and kimchi [1][2]. At the same time, traditional food is often still featured at home during meals and on special occasions; thus, the dietary assimilation is not a full substitution of one food culture for

another [3].

Dietary acculturation is a hypothesis of the negotiation of food change. It includes adding new foods as well as selectively preserving, altering and re-signifying the heritage cuisine [4]. Therefore, migration can lead to hybrid food cultures where elements of both the place of origin and the place of residence are combined in a meal or a week, driven by necessity and desire for symbols. The above studies can provide references for understanding how Korean food has been adapted and consumed by various migrant communities in Hong Kong.

### 2.2. Food, Familiarity and Transnational Consumption

Food is also a way for people across the world to feel at home and express their emotions. Collins' research on South Korean students in New Zealand indicates that migrants often employ both Korean food and international brands, such as coffee chains, to create a feeling of daily life familiarity rather than expressing ethnic consciousness [5]. Qualitative research on kimchi among Korean Americans has also shown that this dish connects them to their homeland through sensory memory, family traditions and gendered division of kitchen work [6].

Based on the above studies, the local Korean food in Hong Kong may have multiple roles for migrants: it can be a concrete connection to home, a resource for establishing a new daily life in an unfamiliar place, and a good item to share with non-Korean friends and colleagues. Therefore, the emotional and social connotations of Korean food serve as a foundation for its role in migrant assimilation.

## 3. Korean Food in Hong Kong's Changing Foodscape

### 3.1. Expansion of Korean Restaurants and K-Culture

Hong Kong has had a rich food culture for a long time

under the influence of Cantonese tradition, British colonization and many waves of migration [10]. Since the 2000s, thanks to the spread of K-pop, Korean dramas and tourism around the world, Korean food has gained more and more popularity among the public. According to the Government and Industry reports, Korean food and beverage brands view Hong Kong as a hub for connecting East Asian consumers with the outside world [9]. Given the high number of Korean restaurants in Tsim Sha Tsui, Causeway Bay and Kowloon City, it is reasonable to assume that they are both good for business and enjoy widespread popularity among the Korean community.

The expansion of Korean food facilities will give more choices to migrants. Korean residents of Hong Kong can now get many kinds of Korean food outside their homes, such as barbecue restaurants, snack shops, specialised dessert cafés, etc. At the same time, other people in Korea can also eat some Korean food at lunch sets, delivery apps and food courts. Thus, the spatial and economic integration of Korean food in Hong Kong has created a shared culinary space where various groups make different meanings of authenticity, trendiness and daily life.

### **3.2. Localisation, Hybridity and "Hong Kong-style" Korean Food**

As Korean food spreads in Hong Kong, it is being localised. Menus vary by area in size, heat level, price and how quickly one is done. Some restaurants have been using Cantonese ingredients and a presentation style from Hong Kong for their Korean food, such as serving kimchi fried rice with Hong Kong-style milk tea or offering local snack platters along with Korean fried chicken. Such hybrid products are in line with the needs of local diners and also meet the actual conditions of ingredient supply and kitchen labour.

This localisation has dual effects on the problem of migrant adaptation. Hybrid menus can help Korean migrants dine out with non-Korean colleagues or friends more comfortably by reducing the social distance of ethnic food. However, some people consider these highly local dishes to be inauthentic and look for more traditional neighbourhood eateries or home cooking. Other groups of migrants in Hong Kong, such as Southeast Asian and mainland Chinese migrants, may find the Korean restaurants to be fashionable areas of cosmopolitan life and are not exclusive to any particular community. Thus, local Korean food will be included in the creation of a multi-layered urban food system.

## **4. Dietary Adaptation among Korean and Non-Korean Migrants**

### **4.1. Korean Migrants: Balancing Continuity and Change**

Research on Korean immigrants in North America has identified several recurring patterns of dietary adaptation. More acculturated Korean Americans are more likely to eat less rice and kimchi and more bread, meat and sweetened beverages, especially at breakfast and lunch [1][2][3]. However, many people still choose Korean food for their evening meal, and the overall quality of life will not be affected by assimilation if the old healthy customs are still practised [1][4]. Based on the above studies, it is believed that Korean migrants often have a dual-culture food approach and combine traditional and foreign foods in different settings [11].

Hong Kong Korean migrants face a specific set of constraints and opportunities. The availability of Korean ingredients in supermarkets and special stores, a high density of eating-out choices, and high costs for home cooking in small flats all influence daily food choices. Although some Korean families still cook at home regularly for traditional food, many others have had to rely on restaurant food or convenience items due to long working hours under the demands of Hong Kong's service economy and have consequently changed their diet. Therefore, local Korean food outlets have become both alternatives to home cooking and platforms for Korean migrants to experience the larger dining culture of Hong Kong.

### **4.2. Non-Korean Migrants: Korean Food as Acculturation Resource**

For non-Korean migrants in Hong Kong, Korean food can be used as a resource for adaptation in two ways. First, it allows people around the world to enjoy the taste of a good city's food and modern life in their own homes without needing to live in that city. For instance, research on South Korean students in New Zealand has shown that globally known brands of coffee shops provide socially acceptable environments for migrants to adjust to their new surroundings [5]. Similarly, some of the new arrivals in Hong Kong may offer a compromise between local Cantonese cuisine and food from their home countries at Korean restaurants.

Secondly, Korean food can serve as a common language for all people around the world. Outings to Korean barbecue or fried chicken restaurants can help to foster social relationships among colleagues and classmates of different backgrounds at multinational workplaces and schools. Performative features of Korean food include shared grills, side dishes, and spicy food challenges that promote interaction and storytelling. Thus, local Korean food has become an informal social infrastructure for helping migrants adapt and participate in society.

## **5. Korean Food, Identity and Independent Adaptation Strategies**

The migrants in Hong Kong negotiate food on a daily basis and also address larger issues of class and legal status. Middle-class professionals are likely to think that Korean food is a kind of lifestyle and see it as fashionable or modern. Migrant domestic workers and service staff experience Korean food through their labour in restaurant kitchens and homes by cooking, serving, etc. Thus, the relationship between these and local Korean food is mediated by unequal power relations that determine who has the authority to set menus, who defines culinary authenticity, and who enjoys the profits from K-food. Given these asymmetries, any talk of "adaptation" that seeks to consider migrants' agency and constraints should be aware of this.

### **5.1. Gender, Generation and Food Labour**

The modes of change for diet among different people are not uniform. Research on married female immigrants adapting to the Korean dietary life in South Korea shows that these women often have to be the main person to reconcile the heritage of their home food with the constraints of life in South Korea, such as time and money [7]. The same dynamics are expected in Korean migrant households in Hong Kong, and women will be responsible for both the cooking and the

emotional labour of preserving their cultural identity through food.

At the same time, the second generation of young people and single migrants have formed different relationships with Korean food. For them, Korean food may be associated with popular culture, friendship circles and digital media, rather than being the tradition of the family. Studies on the Korean-American identity associated with kimchi show that young participants have exhibited a three-stage change from disinterest to familiarity and finally to nostalgia across different periods of their lives [6]. Hong Kongers are exposed to these generational differences through the high visibility of K-pop and K-dramas, and as a result, Korean food has become popular among non-Korean friends, providing a convenient source for identity exploration and social adaptation.

## 5.2. Independent Adaptation through Everyday Food Practices

In terms of migrant adaptation, daily food practices can be viewed as a kind of autonomous strategy construction. Korean migrants and other residents of Hong Kong are not only choosing the food available at any time; they are actively designing a diet that meets their health needs, budget, religious beliefs and working hours, etc. Studies by Korean immigrants show that they are fond of certain foods from their host countries and are hesitant to try others [4, 8, 12]. The selection is often based on a person's feelings of fullness, comfort and acceptance by society.

Local Korean food can also be made to fit the above strategies through flexible formats, such as quick street food and relaxed barbecue meals, for everyday life. Some migrants regularly visit the same Korean restaurant to relieve their homesickness or work-related stress. Others have also begun learning how to cook some simple Korean food with the ingredients available at Hong Kong supermarkets as a way to acquire life skills and enjoy a new life in a different area. These micro-level practices together promote the overall trend of dietary changes and cultural adaptation in the city.

## 5.3. Commercial K-food and Inequalities of Access

The success of Korean food in Hong Kong has also led to issues of inequality. Trendy Korean restaurants and imported snacks are relatively expensive; therefore, they are more out of reach for low-income migrant workers. This division is in line with the results of dietary acculturation research; income and education level affect people's consumption patterns of healthy and traditional foods [1-4]. Some migrant workers, especially those in unstable employment, may only be able to eat Korean food occasionally and not regularly.

The media often presents Korean food in a glamorous way that appeals to young people, and the hard work of kitchen staff and many of them as migrant workers is not widely known. Studies of cross-border food production show that dishes such as kimchi are now part of a global supply chain involving migrant workers, cross-border trade and national brand promotion activities [6, 9]. Understanding the causes helps place local Korean food in Hong Kong in the larger system of economic and cultural power.

## 6. Conclusion

Local Korean food in Hong Kong has changed with the

dietary habits of the migrant workers. Korean migrants have formed a sense of belonging and psychological support, as well as opportunities for cultural assimilation in bilingual societies; non-Korean migrants and local residents can also experience global urban culture and build a social network with a relatively low cost. At the same time, the localisation and commercialisation of Korean cuisine have introduced new hierarchies of taste and access, making it more difficult to be seen as a simple cultural mediator.

By integrating research on dietary acculturation, transnational foodways and Korean diaspora identity, this paper has identified how Korean food functions at the intersection of individual adaptation, community formation and market logics. The above changes in Hong Kong provide a particular case study for local Korean food, and can also offer some references for the broader issue of how migrant food cultures create a sense of place in big cities around the world. Future research can conduct ethnographic studies of specific neighbourhoods, restaurant networks and household food routines to extend this analysis.

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