

Exploring Korean Modern Life through the Kitchen*

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Geundaebooeokui Tansaenggwa Imyeon [The Birth and Hidden Aspect of the Modern Kitchen]. By Do Younjung. Seoul: Spacetime, 2020. ISBN 978-89-5592-440-4

Introduction

Do Younjung's *The Birth and Hidden Aspect of the Modern Kitchen* is a book published based on her doctoral dissertation, "Adoption and Development of the Modern Kitchen in Korea: Focused on the Rationalization of Housework" (Seoul National University, 2018). The author has been extensively studying housing, with a particular focus on the kitchen, as evidenced by a wide range of publications and articles. The kitchen in Korean homes has been expansively studied by numerous academics, making it a well-known subject of research. Do's book provides a comprehensive analysis of the Korean kitchen area, delving into the cultural aspects of kitchens in both Eastern and Western contexts throughout the initial decades of the 20th century. Her work was highly recognized by numerous important honors, including the 11th Simwon Architectural Award for Academic Researchers in 2019 and the Korean Housing Association Research Award. In addition, *The Birth and Hidden Aspect of the Modern Kitchen* was acknowledged by the National Academy of Sciences as a commendable scholarly publication in 2021.

Because this book is a revision of Do's doctoral dissertation, some of the content may be too professional and esoteric for ordinary readers. However, if an individual is able to surmount this minor barrier, the book challenges the reader to not only acquire knowledge about the culinary aspects of Korean households that we are most acquainted with, but also

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to contemplate the broader implications of our modern life. The objective of this article is to critically evaluate the organization and substance of the book.

Organization and Content

The Birth and Hidden Aspect of Modern Kitchen consists of seven chapters, including the introduction. The introduction is divided into several sections, including “The Contradiction of the Kitchen,” “Modern and Kitchen,” “Misunderstanding of the Kitchen,” and “Modern Kitchen and Korean Housing.” Initially, the author highlights the growing popular fascination with the kitchen, yet acknowledges the scarcity of critical research on the subject, as well as the overlooked historical significance of the kitchen. In this context, the author focuses on the modern kitchen, which she regards as a significant milestone in human residential history due to its exceptional popularity since the early 20th century among individuals with strong desire for new kitchens. Do asserts that the kitchen is a universally recognized area, although its definition is challenging. She contends that the perception of transformation in the kitchen is frequently associated with the enhancement of women’s social position, and this viewpoint is one of the most significant misconceptions regarding the kitchen. She mentions that this matter will be addressed in subsequent chapters. The author confidently affirms that the kitchen functions as the focal point of both living and working for all members of the family, with a particular emphasis on men. This argument confronts our preconceived notions regarding the kitchen. Furthermore, she elaborates on her idea in subsequent chapters by underscoring the need of examining the kitchen through the lens of architecture rather than furnishings.

Chapter 1 “The Modernity of the Kitchen” explores the transformations in ideas and constraints of the kitchen that occurred in the Western world between the late 18th and early 20th centuries. The term “housework” gained prominence in Western society as a modern concept that was absent in previous societies. The transition of housekeeping labor from maids, who had long been responsible for such tasks in traditional culture, to housewives is a relatively new trend, beginning less than a century ago.

The author begins by examining Catherine Beecher’s analysis of the kitchen, followed by an exploration of specific instances of community organizations and their diverse “modern kitchen experiments” pertaining to co-housework and shared kitchen during the late 18th to early 19th centuries. Do explains that these outcomes were results of a novel approach to conceptualizing progress in the kitchen, wherein individuals prioritized economic advantages and effectiveness by enhancing the value of domestic labor and engaging in collaborative efforts. Nevertheless, the concept of kitchen innovation in that period ultimately proved to be a mere experiment due to its failure to consider practical considerations.

This prompts us to consider the specificity and universality of the kitchen as a space.

The author describes a phenomenon emphasizing scientific management methods and efficiency, which were also extended to domestic labor under the concept of “time,” during the early 20th century. According to Christine Frederick’s book, the contemporary kitchen is characterized by concepts such as “rationalizing the motion flow” and “maximizing efficiency with minimal exertion.” The concept of a “motion diagram” has emerged and has been consistently modified and referenced up to the present time. The concept of pursuing optimal efficiency within a limited space has led to the progressive commercialization of kitchens since the modern era. According to the author, the kitchen underwent a reorganization in response to the modern concepts of the nation-state, industry, and family, as the emphasis on efficiency was introduced to domestic work.

Chapter 2 “Kitchen Improvement Theory” deals with various discourses surrounding kitchens inside Japanese and Korean households throughout the early 20th century. First, the author employs a method of semantic network analysis, unprecedented in kitchen studies, to prompt a reevaluation of the notion and significance of Korean kitchens in the early 20th century.

Do analyzes kitchen-related articles published in the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper between the 1920s and 1930s. Within the articles, the term “woman” consistently occupied a prominent position in the conversation, while the occurrence of the term “sanitation” declined and the term “efficiency” rose in the 1930s as compared to the 1920s. This research methodology elucidates the intrinsic attributes of modern Korean kitchens, a result that has not been previously revealed in previous studies.

On the other hand, Japanese individuals regarded the traditional kitchen as a subject of reform that bore resemblance to a Western-style standing kitchen. Japan similarly adopted the European trend of prioritizing science and efficiency around the same period. In Japan, Western notions such as “time research” or “motion research” were introduced, along with images of kitchen flow akin to Frederick’s diagram. Consequently, Japanese magazines and designs exhibited a vivid manifestation of the transformations occurring within Western kitchens.

Furthermore, the author explains that the term “science” played a pivotal role in elucidating the attributes of the kitchen throughout that era, albeit with a slightly altered connotation compared to that of the present day. It referred to the process of “westernization” or “civilization,” and the kitchen was considered the most appropriate setting for the scientific efficiency and optimization. Korean architect Park Gilryong, who was actively engaged in the scientific reform movement during that period, was also impacted by this. He provided a range of recommendations for enhancing the kitchen through a variety of newspapers and books. Nevertheless, the author highlights that Park Gilryong’s kitchen reform plan, akin to the prevailing Japanese culture of that era, was merely an aspirational concept that could not be effectively implemented in practice. The author provides

an impartial analysis of Park Gilryong's kitchen reform theory, which has been referenced in several prior scholarly investigations, without engaging in a critical assessment and evaluation of the contextual framework around his housing enhancement strategy. The author claims that Park Gilryong's comments pertaining to the kitchen were primarily limited to discourses rather than tangible implementation throughout the Japanese colonial era.

Chapter 3 "Kitchen Modernization Project" delineates the societal expectations and changes that occurred within Korean kitchens subsequent to the liberation and Korean War. In the 1950s, following the war, South Korea wanted to overhaul people's lifestyles, resulting in the portrayal of a "virtuous wife and sagacious mother." The prevailing societal climate of conserving fuel had an impact on kitchen renovations, as resources became scarce in the aftermath of the war. The aforementioned ambiance persisted throughout the 1960s, prompting South Koreans to pursue modifications in kitchens with the objectives of enhancing efficiency and promoting standardization. Enhancements of furnaces and sinks were undertaken in both urban and rural residences, with a specific focus on improving the kitchen in rural dwellings in conjunction with the *Saemaul Undong* (New Community Movement).

Simultaneously, the author explicates that the prevalence of sink installations in residential kitchens witnessed a notable surge, propelling the emergence of the "standing kitchen" trend since the 1970s, coinciding with the widespread adoption of stainless steel sinks in South Korea. Nevertheless, the concept of "kitchen integration" was distinct from that of a "standing kitchen" due to its reliance on advancements in heating methods. In the context of a traditional Korean home, a kitchen was commonly associated with a low-rise dirt floor and a furnace designed for the purposes of cooking and heating. This kitchen is typically positioned adjacent to the main room. The kitchen, unlike other living areas, had a semi-external design where individuals wore shoes. The attic installed above the kitchen has a low ceiling, contributed to the creation of a distinctive ambiance. Several attributes of these conventional kitchens have persisted in Korean households for a considerable duration, with certain elements persisting even within the modern housing arrangement known as apartments. Consequently, the kitchen, formerly seen as a somewhat exterior area, underwent a process of integration in conjunction with alterations in heating methods. Furthermore, the author provides a compelling explication of the origin of the Jangdokdae Elimination Movement, which involved the removal of clay crocks used for sauces and condiments. Additionally, the author explores the concept of the multipurpose room, which arose as a result of the convergence between traditional housing and modern and contemporary housing. From 1960 to the 1970s, kitchens appeared to be fully equipped with a "Koreanized" style modern kitchen, taking on several forms. Nevertheless, work remained to reconfigure the kitchen and dining area, which will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4, where

the concept of LDK (living room, dining room, and kitchen) would be introduced.

Chapter 4 “Living Room, Dining Room, and Kitchen (LDK)” discusses the origins of the LDK, a room that is now familiar to Korean housing. First of all, the author presents evidence of the spatial segregation between dining and sleeping spaces in South Korean residential structures, a phenomenon that has been subject to many approaches over an extended period. The author used instances of “hatch” and “chanmaru,” which were implemented with the aim of enhancing kitchen efficiency and minimizing motion flow. The notions of hatch and chanmaru, which disappeared within a relatively short span of fifty years, emerged as a consequence of several endeavors aimed at separating and amalgamating spatial elements within the traditional Korean home.

The emergence of the Dining Kitchen (DK) in Japan can be attributed to the division between sleeping and eating spaces. Dining kitchens have been implemented in South Korea since the 1970s to address potential consequences, such as reducing the length of motion flow and creating separate spaces for dining and sleeping. However, conventional ways of living frequently resulted in the development of Living Dining Rooms (LD) that integrated a living room and a dining room, but kitchens remained separate. Consequently, DK, which arose as a groundbreaking and inventive endeavor, remained an incomplete project, prompting the creation of a Korean modern kitchen in conjunction with LDK.

During the 1970s, architects investigated several configurations for living, dining, and kitchen areas as apartment development grew, ultimately eliminating the distinctions between these spaces. The creation of visually and spatially integrated LDKs in South Korea occurred during the 1980s. The implementation of a novel heating method facilitated the integration of the kitchen, which had previously experienced physical and psychological isolation from the rest of the household in Korea, so signifying the emergence of the contemporary Korean kitchen. Furthermore, the process of integrating the living room, dining room, and kitchen spaces in a South Korean family can be expedited when the housemaid (sikmo) disappeared from the family. This LDK exhibits distinctive attributes of Korean housing, particularly in contrast to the speed of adoption of LDKs in Japan, where DK was initially created.

Chapter 5 “Korean Modern Kitchen and Contemporary Life” explores the diverse formations of kitchen design that are presently observed in residential settings within South Korea. Despite its initial establishment as a Korean modern kitchen, LDK has undergone several modifications and enhancements throughout time. For instance, the concept of a “face-to-face kitchen” gained popularity as it allowed for communication with family members in dining and living rooms while simultaneously working in the kitchen. It suggests the expectation that a physical kitchen could foster closer relationships among family members. Nevertheless, the author highlights that the actualization of such an anticipation was a distinct issue.

Furthermore, the author highlights alterations in LDK that first emerged with the aim of enhancing efficiency and optimization processes, and appeared to persist in South Korea. The author refers to this transformation as an “invisible rear space,” establishing a correlation with the advent of LDK-K’ (Living Room, Dining Room, Kitchen-Kitchen Net) or LDK’-K (Living Room, Dining Room, Kitchen Net – Kitchen). This particular kitchen design is a novel approach that seeks to reestablish spatial divisions, in contrast to the prevailing contemporary kitchen approach that prioritizes “the rationalization of housework” through the integration of a living area, dining room, and kitchen. The kitchen underwent a transformation that diverged significantly from the contemporary objective of optimizing efficiency through the reduction of physical movement. The author posits that this could potentially signify “the return to tradition.”

Chapter 6 “The Birth and Hidden Aspect of the Modern Kitchen” provides a comprehensive overview of the aforementioned discussions related to the modern kitchen, while also offering insights into the prospective evolution of the South Korean culinary landscape. The author finishes the book by emphasizing the necessity of further investigating and broadening studies about kitchens, an area that has thus far been overlooked. She advocates research on the kitchen as a diagnostic and predictive tool for future residential style and society, going beyond mere observation of specific areas within the house.

Conclusion

This book enables us to gain a fresh perspective on various aspect of our household that we presently overlook or underestimate. The book begins with the narrative of the kitchen, but subsequently delves into the broader realm of housing and society, illustrating the rapid transformations that have occurred in our modern and contemporary lives. Several notions that have arisen and vanished in Korean housing within a span of less than a century exemplify the housing expectations of Korean individuals, including the kitchen. Furthermore, the book vividly demonstrates that the myth of efficiency, imposed externally, does not fully surpass the inherent resistance of life that is profoundly ingrained in our daily existence.

The housing landscape in South Korea will see further transformations in the future. Therefore, it is vital to persist with research on our residences, including kitchens, to diagnose and forecast our own well-being, our existence, and our community. In the future, I anticipate that the author will persist in uncovering intriguing facets of our lives that have been overlooked by meticulously and fervently gathering and scrutinizing relevant data, as exemplified in this book.

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