# Exoticizing the Familiar, Domesticating the Foreign: *Ethnic Food Restaurants in Korea**

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**Abstract**

*This paper is based on anthropological fieldwork on ethnic food restaurants in Korea that provide international cuisine (except for Chinese, Japanese, and mainstream Western cuisine). In particular, the research focused on Indian restaurants, noticing their rapid increase in today's restaurant scene in Korea. Through interviews and observations, the author explored how a foreign cuisine is perceived and accepted by local customers, and how restaurateurs strategize their businesses to suit the Korean cultural environment as entrepreneurs. Koreans construct and express their global identities through consuming these ethnic cuisines. Cultural processes of standardization, localization, and hybridization function over the course of the cuisine's adaptation within Korea. Simultaneously, each ethnic cuisine acquires its own global identity in the process.*

**Keywords:** ethnic food, ethnic restaurants, identity, globalization, culture of consumption

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## Introduction

A food connoisseur whose job allows him to travel abroad frequently, Mr. Lee telephoned an Indian restaurant near a university in Seoul to make a reservation for a dinner with a group of colleagues. He had dined there once previously, and found the place satisfactory. The restaurant was charmingly decorated with an Indian theme, the food was delicious, and the manager and staff looked Indian. Everything was in line with his expectation of what a proper ethnic restaurant should be: a place where one can dine on authentic ethnic food as part of a cultural experience. However, as soon as he began conversing with the manager on the phone, he thought something was wrong. Instead of the Indian manager he met on his previous visit to the restaurant, a "Korean" man identified himself as the manager. Mr. Lee was extremely disappointed, thinking that the management of the restaurant has changed. He decided to confirm. "I think I met an Indian manager the other time. Has there been a change?" The person on the line replied, "Oh, I am that manager. I am an Indian myself. You must have met me!" As he was clarifying the situation, his Korean gained a distinctively Indian accent. The reservation was made, and when the group arrived at the restaurant, they found that the manager was a native of India with a high level of proficiency in Korean. This anecdote represents the constructive processes of the meanings and roles of ethnic food restaurants in today's Korean society. It shows the dynamic negotiations and compromises engaged in by Koreans and the operators of ethnic food restaurants. Together they define what ethnic food restaurants are supposed to be in Korean society.

This paper is based on anthropological fieldwork on the meanings and positions of ethnic food restaurants in contemporary Korean society. This is an attempt to understand how Koreans experience the process of globalization by focusing on ethnic food. When we use food culture as the lens through which to observe the process of globalization, we can find concrete and useful illustrations of several key concepts in the discourse on globalization: homogenization

(standardization), heterogenization (localization or fragmentation), and hybridization.

Consumption of ethnic food is not only an expression of identities by the diverse ethnicities residing in Korea, but is also a way for Koreans to construct their identities through consuming exotic food and the accompanying culinary culture. In this study, interviews and observations were made in various contexts where ethnic food is consumed in Korean society. Most interviews and observations were conducted in Seoul, but some fieldwork was also carried out in Ansan, a city about one hour's drive from Seoul, where a distinctive community of multiethnic immigrants is located. Both restaurateurs and consumers were interviewed, along with specialists in food production and consumption.

## Ethnic Food and Ethnic Food Restaurants

Ethnic food,[1] if one defines it as a nondominant food practice, has been part of human history as long as people have been moving to locations remote from their birthplaces. Ethnic food has enriched local food cultures by introducing new ingredients and recipes. While ethnic food increases variety in local food culture, a form of standardization (homogenization) occurs when a cuisine is introduced to other cultures as ethnic food. For example, Chinese cuisine, whose variety and depth of culinary sophistication are almost limitless, has been more or less standardized when it is served for American consumers. Except for exclusive upscale restaurants and, of course, restaurants catering to a Chinese immigrant population, only a limited number of dishes became widely available in the ubiquitous Chinese take-out restaurants in the United States. These include stir-fried meat and vegetable, fried noodle or rice, fried meat or seafood in egg batter, spring rolls, and dumplings. One could expect practically the

1. Ethnic food is widely used in America to mean many different cuisines, but primarily used as a category for non-European cuisines nowadays.

same array of Chinese food whether in California, New York, or Minnesota. These processes of homogenization and standardization can also be found in the cases of Mexican and Thai restaurants in the United States. In other words, there is great variety among diverse ethnic cuisines, but with the individual cuisines, one can find a high degree of similarity from restaurant to restaurant within particular contexts.

In recent years, ethnic food has received more attention in the context of globalization as people became more alert to the possibility that the domination of Western culture will further accelerate. Valuing the diversity of local traditions also enhances people's appreciation of ethnic food. Waters (2001) argued that one of the results of the globalization is the realization that all ethnic identities are legitimate. These identities include those without nation/state status. The increase of ethnic food restaurants has been most notable in Western societies. Robertson (1995) called this a "universalization of particularism," meaning that various kinds of ethnic cuisines have become popular in many different locations of the world.

## Ethnic Food Restaurants in Korea

The production and consumption of ethnic food in Korea has a close relationship with class status. Food in general is an important marker for "distinction" (Bourdieu 1984), and Goody (1982) also attempted to analyze the relationship between cuisine and class in historical processes. Consumption of food carries powerful meanings because food becomes a part of one's physical self. The close relationship between food and identity is clearly shown in the examples of Jewish dietary rules and beef-avoidance among observant Hindus. Those food-related rules are not simply dietary rules but strong components of who they are and who they are not. Appadurai (1988) argued that a newly created "middle-class Indian cuisine" significantly contributed to the construction of a new collective identity in India after independence from the British colonial rule. The publication of cook-

books to establish and standardize the new national cuisine was pivotal in this process. Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) conducted a historical study on the central position of rice in defining Japanese national identity. Han (2000) and Ju (2000) have both argued that kimchi might be the Korean equivalent of a defining food like rice for Japan. Park (1994) examined how Chinese residents in Korea have adapted Chinese cuisine to suit their own palates and in the process established a Chinese identity within Korea.

## Expectations and Adaptive Strategies in Ethnic Food Restaurant Businesses

Ethnic food restaurants in Korea satisfy both the expectation for exoticism while remaining within the comfort zone of such expectations. It is a guarded and safe form of exotic experience, custom-made for Koreans to a certain degree.[2] These characteristics are expressed in the interior decoration, the selection of menus, and the modification of original recipes to cater to the palates of average Korean customers. In this way, the ethnic restaurants dutifully carry out their role, akin to the object of "tourist gaze" (Urry 2002). The experience that Korean customers have is that of a distinctively unusual yet comfortable form of exoticism.

Since the majority of Indian restaurants in Korea are operated by Nepalese immigrants, not Indians, Nepalese owners strongly argue that there is in fact no significant difference between Indian and Nepalese cuisine. The Nepalese restaurant operators argue that they can provide authentic Indian cuisine without much difficulty. To support this argument, they enthusiastically emphasized that the relationship between the Indians and the Nepalese has always been ami-

2. This is comparable to what Starbucks Coffee shops provided American consumers who wanted a European (Italian) coffee drinking experience in the comfort of a familiar environment. In this case, Italian-style coffee-drinking is filtered through the expectations of middle- and upper-middle-class Americans (Bak 2005).

cable. Otherwise, they asked, how could the Nepalese have survived, although surrounded by India in all directions?

The restaurateurs I interviewed were obviously proud of their food. For example, the owners of Indian restaurants maintained that Indian food is the healthiest cuisine. As evidence of this, restaurateurs mention that their signature dish, tandoori chicken, is put into an oven after removing all the fatty skin, their dishes use a plethora of vegetables and fruits, and many ingredients of Indian food, such as turmeric, have medicinal qualities. But even with this pride that they have in their original recipes and ingredients, they are ready to adjust their recipes to attract more Korean customers. In this way, the restaurateurs are negotiating the notions of authenticity with their customers.

The managers of Delhi Indian Restaurant in two locations told me that they are preparing their dishes sweeter than the versions popular in India because they believe that Koreans nowadays like their food sweet. They make their curries and a variety of *nan* bread sweeter by adding sugar or honey. However, some diners already familiar with Indian food strongly dislike these attempts, complaining that sweetness and Indian spices simply do not harmonize on the palate. In this way, efforts to please one group of customers may alienate others due to the different backgrounds and expectations of customer groups. An attempt to modify the original may seriously harm the expected authenticity of the cuisine and restaurant, which can in turn negatively affect the establishment's appeal for some customers.

## The Popularity of Ethnic Food in Korea

There are several factors in why ethnic food restaurants have gained popularity in Korean society. Most importantly, Koreans have become much more globalized in recent years. They have more information on other cultures, and are willing to experiment with the less familiar. An increasing number of Koreans have traveled abroad, and

want to experience global cultural diversity in Korea as well. The increased availability of information on food and restaurants, and particularly the sharing of knowledge via websites on cuisine or tourism (for example, menupan.com or wingbus.com) have also allowed Koreans to experience exotic cuisines without putting in too much time and effort. Koreans have been dining out more frequently with increasing economic affluence and more women working outside the home. As one possible destination for such exploratory culinary excursions, ethnic restaurants have increased in popularity. The ethnic restaurant business really started to take off after the 1988 Seoul Olympics, when Koreans began to seriously look outside their society and sought a global identity. Before this, the few ethnic restaurants available in Korea mainly catered to foreigners who already had experienced these cuisines prior to their arrival in Korea.

People who run restaurants in the same ethnic food category are obviously competitors, but also collaborators who exchange information with each other on the Korean market and try to promote their particular cuisine. They strive to increase the number of Korean customers who enjoy their cuisine. These efforts have significantly enhanced the visibility of ethnic food restaurants in Korea.

## Categories of Ethnic Food Restaurants and Their Customers

There are a significant number of inexpensive restaurants located in commercial districts and college neighborhoods, where customers can satisfy their curiosity and appetite for ethnic food at a cost similar to ordinary Korean-style eateries. The majority of the owners of these establishments are Koreans, but the number of owners/managers who are from the original places of those ethnic cuisines is on the increase. Some restaurants in this category provide customers with so-called authenticity in food and other related cultural experiences. The cooks of restaurants in this category are almost always professional chefs who have appropriate visas and come to Korea through personal networks. Many of them boast that they used to

work at major restaurants in their native countries, and supervised a large number of chefs and staff. The price level at these places tends to be moderate or low.

Another significant cluster of ethnic food restaurants is located in Itaewon, where a distinctive foreign community has existed since the Korean War. In fact, the highest concentration of ethnic restaurants in Korea is found in this neighborhood. Nowadays more than half of the customers who patronize the ethnic restaurants in this area are Koreans, and the rest are foreigners who are not necessarily from the region where the particular ethnic cuisine originates. Some restaurants sell religiously appropriate dishes (particularly halal foods). Ethnic cuisines popular with Western residents in Korea, such as Turkish or Thai, have more than one establishment in this neighborhood. Regardless of the variety of cuisines, most places offer service in English.

The third category is that of ethnic restaurants in the areas where such immigrant communities have been established with the influx of a large-scale foreign work force starting in the 1990s. For example, the city of Ansan has a well-established district where immigrants who work in nearby factories come in order to satisfy their nostalgia for home. These restaurants tend to serve dishes which are regularly eaten in ordinary homes in their countries. The food is relatively cheap and the menu is not very extensive. Some restaurants in this category also sell groceries from countries of origin, along with mobile phones, network services, and international telephone cards. Other examples of ethnic enclaves include the Korean-Chinese community in Garibong-dong, the historic cluster of Chinese restaurants in Incheon, and the community of Mongolian and former USSR nationals in Dongdaemun.

The fourth category is upscale ethnic restaurants in affluent neighborhoods. Naturally, prices tend to be high in these restaurants. In some cases, the price for the same dish may be twice as much as what the customers would pay in restaurants in other locations. Their price ranges sometimes surpass those of upscale French or Italian restaurants. The ethnic restaurants in this category have sophisti-

cated interior design and tend to carry lengthy wine lists. The owners are without exception Koreans, while the serving staff may be either Koreans or immigrants from the cuisine's original area. The cooks are almost always from the cuisine's country of origin. Some dining establishments were influenced by the Japanese style of cooking ethnic dishes since some chefs come to Korea after working in Japan, which has a longer history of ethnic restaurants. Other examples in this category include those in Garosugil, Cheongdam-dong, Samcheong-dong, and Hannam-dong.

There are large franchise restaurants for some popular ethnic cuisines such as Thai, Vietnamese, and Indian. Many dishes are Koreanized and standardized. For example, the use of coriander or cilantro is minimized, or provided only when the customers asks for it specifically. The food tends to use fewer spices and limit the use of oil. The restaurants in this category are not clustered in a particular area, but can be found in major commercial areas or near universities, where they can expect a steady flow of customers.

## Cases[3]

### *Bombay*

Bombay is an Indian restaurant located near the front gate of a university in the northeastern part of Seoul. At the time of the first interview with the owner, the restaurant had been in business for about one and half months. They have only one cook, who came from India and had supervised a 30-person staff as a restaurant head chef for 16 years before his arrival in Korea. The owner is from the Punjab region of India. For both the owner and the chef, Bombay is their first restaurant experience in Korea. A mutual acquaintance introduced them, and the cook obtained a working visa for chefs.

3. The names of the restaurants in these case studies have been changed to protect their identities.

The food at Bombay is Northern Indian, reflecting the hometowns of the owner and chef. The owner claimed that the two of them cannot even eat South Indian food, since it is so different. The owner came to Korea in 2000 to export used PCs to India, but the price of Indian PCs has dropped significantly and used ones from Korea are no longer a savings for Indian consumers when compared to newly made domestic ones. The most popular dishes at Bombay are tandoori chicken (14,000 won for a whole chicken, usually shared by two people), butter chicken (10,000 won for a serving for two), and chicken curry. The "whole chicken" served at Indian restaurants is smaller than that of other cuisines because Indian restaurants normally do not use the wings. Customers usually try well-known dishes first, before moving on to other, less familiar menu items. The owner claimed that he tried to put the lowest possible price on the dishes that Bombay serves so that even students can visit the place without worrying too much about money.

Bombay buys Indian basmati rice[4] from small-scale traders. One kilogram of rice costs 11,000 won. It is much more expensive than Korean rice varieties, but has a distinctive nutty fragrance and soaks up sauces better, making the food taste more like the food served in India. They hope that once the regulation on rice import for individual consumption is lifted, Indian restaurants will be able to lower the cost. They buy Kingfisher Beer (a well-known Indian brand) at 4,500 won a bottle from the wholesale importer, and sell them at 5,500 won. The owner asserted that he does not make much money from them, but carries them for customers who might want them, and believes that a proper Indian restaurant has to have Kingfisher. They also have Italian wines on the beverage list, but so far, no one has ordered them. Students do not usually drink beer or wine there, probably because of tight budgets.

The owner said that one or two customers a day have problem with the coriander in their food, but others seem to really love it, and

4. A long-grained rice favored in Indian cuisine.

consider Indian food without coriander unthinkable. They make sure to ask their customers if coriander is desired when they take orders. There is a wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Guri, a town northeast of Seoul, where the restaurant regularly buys their coriander.

Bombay has made some changes to make their food more palatable for Korean tastes, including toning down the spiciness. According to them, Korean food's spiciness only comes from chili peppers; but Indian food gets its distinctive taste from a combination of many different spices, which some Koreans dislike. As Koreans also tend to express distaste for "oily" foods, the chef mixes the oil with other ingredients during cooking, so the final dish looks less oily on the surface even though the amount of oil remains the same.

The owner confided that he had opened his restaurant at the current location because he has lived in this neighborhood for the last five years while engaged in the used computer trade. Some Indians live there because there is a bus line that runs to the Sikh temple in Gwangneung. All in all, he likes running his restaurant in Korea because the business has been good and he sees a bright future here.

One of the interesting characteristics of Bombay is that there are very few overtly "Indian" components in the interior of the restaurant. The place just looks clean and modern, and could be a restaurant of any variety. When asked about this, he said he did not want to decorate his restaurant in typical Indian style, so he just made it look modern.

About 60 percent of his customers are the students at the nearby university, and the rest are non-students who live in the neighborhood. According to him, the number of people among his customers who have visited India is still very small and do not make up a significant group of visitors to the restaurant. Most of his customers come as couples, who can have a meal for 13,000-14,000 won per couple. This price is a little higher than that of the cheapest meals near campus, but still quite affordable for many students.

The owner likes to compare his restaurant and the food with that of Chinese restaurants, which are also numerous in the area. Eating at Chinese restaurants is one of the least expensive options for stu-

dents. The owner said that when he sees the food sold at Chinese restaurants here, it looks like the restaurant spends less than 1,000 won on raw material to make a 5,000 won dish, while in contrast, he declares, it is very costly to prepare Indian dishes. For instance, cashew nuts, used in large quantities in some Indian dishes, are very expensive in Korea, and the average cost for 100 grams of spice is 4,000-5,000 won. The only main ingredient they can source locally is the vegetables. He expressed concern that the price of vegetables would go up with the advent of winter.

The owner and the chef argued that Indian food uses only what is good for human body. For example, wild turmeric, one of the main ingredients in Indian curries, used to be picked by old people in the Himalayas, and was very good for health. Nowadays turmeric is cultivated. In the past, people used to drink *gee* (clarified butter) in large quantities because they needed the calories for strenuous physical work. Now people do not engage in as much physical labor and do not drink *gee*, but still, *gee*, turmeric, and *lassi* (yogurt-based drink) are important components of Indian cuisine.

The customers of Bombay whom I interviewed, including university faculty and students, seemed to think the restaurant as one of the places that added to the cosmopolitan composition of eateries around the campus. While the majority stated that they would not dine at Bombay everyday because it would be excessive to eat Indian food so often, they were definitely willing to patronize the restaurant once in a while to diversify their meal choices. Some of the characteristics of Indian restaurants in general, and those of Bombay in particular, seemed to bother some customers, who disliked the fact that the kitchen is too slow by Korean standards. This is partly due to the fact that there is only one chef (although the restaurant is small, with only five tables), but also reflects the characteristics of Indian cooking style. Most customers order *nan*, a distinctive flat bread, as part of their meal, which must be baked right before it is served. Some foods, like curry, can be prepared in large quantities in advance, but the popular tandoori chicken should be cooked after the order is made so that it does not dry out from overcooking. Korean customers

are used to having their food ready on table almost immediately after ordering. Complaining over the wait for food is almost a regular part of Korean customers' dining experience; therefore, they would expect similar experiences at other ethnic food restaurants in Korea.

### *Delhi on Garosugil: Indian/Nepalese Restaurant in an Upscale Neighborhood*

This place opened in August 2009 on Garosugil, arguably the most chic neighborhood in Seoul at the time of research. Delhi is the second Indian restaurant on that street. The first one is a branch of a popular and upscale Indian restaurant chain that has other branch restaurants in Cheongdam-dong and Samcheong-dong, both areas known for upscale restaurants and cafes.

The managing owner of this restaurant is a 40-year-old man from Nepal who came to Korea as a student and later engaged in the export trade between Korea and Nepal. The main business for him was to export Korean merchandise to Nepal, which included blankets and knit sweaters. As Indian food gained popularity among younger Koreans, he resolved to open a restaurant. Although he is from Nepal, which has similar cuisine to India, he decided to open an Indian restaurant first, with plans to include Nepalese dishes later. He says that Nepalese cuisine is too exotic for ordinary Koreans to enjoy regularly, but he plans to include some spicy and soupy dishes from Nepal because Koreans seem to like having spicy soup to recover from hangovers.

The managing owner compared the business strategies of this establishment with that of another branch restaurant near a university (the third case in this paper). He said that the strategies of the two locations will be quite different given the difference in clientele. In their Garosugil restaurant, they sell more wine and have higher prices, while the restaurant near the university try to provide a less expensive menu. The interior decoration also reflects the difference in customers' socioeconomic background. More ornate and expensive furniture and objects outfit the Garosugil branch, and management

was confident that Delhi is probably the most elegantly decorated Indian restaurant chain in Korea. They brought hand-carved furniture and ornaments from Nepal, and the restaurants are, in a way, display rooms for these items. If so inclined, customers can order such decorative items for purchase.

When I interviewed the customers of this restaurant, they first pointed out a disparity between the food prices and the level of wine on the list; the food was fairly expensive reflecting the overall price level in the area, but the wine list was too limited and inexpensive, although they admitted that spicy Indian food and delicate wines may not go well together. However, customers of restaurants on Garosugil expect a wine list to be included as part of the dining experience. They said the restaurant operators need to make a solid wine list after rigorous research on good pairing between Indian food and wine. The customers also mentioned that the niche market of Indian restaurants on Garosugil may have some identity issues; most restaurants on that street double as cafes during the daytime, selling pricy drink menus with simple lunches as a strategy to deal with the high rent in the area. For most Korean customers, having a drink at an Indian restaurant does not sound very appealing. Indian restaurants are places to eat food with strong flavors rather than cafes where one can enjoy an elegant cup of tea or coffee. Selling an inexpensive lunch menu is not sufficient to meet the rent for spaces on Garosugil.

### *Delhi, Near a University in the Northeastern Part of Seoul*

When I approached the manager of this restaurant, they were still engaged in a renovation project and due to open the fourth Delhi restaurant near the subway station in front of the university. The restaurant will occupy the second and third floors of a four-story building. The third floor is designed to accommodate 50-60 people and host private parties. The restaurant was set to open in about ten days, once they acquired necessary permits from the relevant city and district authorities.

The first Delhi restaurant opened in 1991 near the Dongmyo sub-

way station. It started as a combination of a trading firm office and a small restaurant for the Nepalese expatriates in Korea. Slowly, the number of local customers increased, and they opened their second restaurant in the Jongno Tower Building, a major center of commercial activities in a central office district. The third one opened on Garosugil in Gangnam district, a sophisticated and affluent part of Seoul, populated by galleries and upscale cafes and restaurants.

The differences among the four locations called for adjusting the menu, price level, and nature of service to suit customer characteristics. Dongmyo also serves as a retailer of spices and other imported goods, while the Jongno branch is for mostly young, white-collar workers, and the university neighborhood branch is for college students and local residents. The Garosugil branch is the most upscale among the four, due to affluent and trendy neighborhood. In this branch, they plan to have a lengthier list of wine and imported beers to comply with customers' demands. The interior of all Delhi restaurants are decorated with wooden latticed doors and carvings imported from Nepal, which can be purchased by customers at the restaurant's headquarters in Dongmyo. According to the Indian owner of Bombay restaurant, Delhi is a well known success story among the Indians and Nepalese who do business in Korea.

The most popular dish is tandoori chicken. Various kinds of curries (including the spicy *vindaloo*) are popular as well. Mr. Bogati, the manager of the fourth restaurant, said that Koreans are learning that there are more than yellow, turmeric-based curries (modified and introduced by the Japanese to Koreans). Mr. Bogati believes that Indian food will be increasingly popular among Koreans because of turmeric's preventive effects on Alzheimer's disease. The generous use of fresh vegetables and skinless oven-baked chicken will also enhance Indian food's popularity among health-conscious Koreans.

As is the case in other Indian, Vietnamese, and Thai restaurants in Korea, the only problematic ingredient is fresh coriander, which is frequently mixed in or put on top of finished dishes as garnish. Some Koreans dislike the strong flavor of the herb. The staff routinely asks their customers whether to include coriander in the dish when they

take the order. All raw materials except fresh vegetables and fruit come from Nepal or India. One problem, however, is that they cannot legally import the long-grained basmati rice eaten in Nepal and India. Using Korean rice significantly changes the texture and flavor of Indian dishes. Basmati rice is fluffier, nuttier, and more porous, which helps for the rice to soak up more liquid. For now, they are using basmati rice purchased from merchants who bring it into Korea in small quantities. The price is quite high, about 11,000 won for one kilogram of rice.

Due to the location of the restaurant near the university, they expect the customers will be half college students and half local residents. Since the price is relatively low (a lunch or dinner without drink costs about 4,000 won), they think they can attract price-conscious young people who want to satisfy their taste for the exotic. They hope to establish a friendly relationship with the university's student organizations and participate in the university's spring and fall festivals to familiarize the students with Indian food.

Contrary to what is reported in the mass media, the number of customers who seek out these restaurants because of prior travel to the region is still too small to be taken seriously. Most customers experience the cuisine for the first time in Korea, and slowly grow to enjoy it. The owners of the newest branch said that they know the person who runs Bombay and even have had tea with him. The owner believes the pool of potential customers is large enough for the survival of both restaurants, but the owner of Bombay confided that he is a little worried about the scale of the new restaurant, which takes up two floors of a building on a major street. He said he might have to compete by lowering the prices, and is thinking of opening a buffet-style restaurant in the basement of the same building his restaurant is currently occupying.

Some of the potential customers of Delhi, the faculty and students at the university, were not sure whether the third-floor banquet hall of the new restaurant would be utilized as the owners intended. The students said that the two main reasons they often gather in Chinese restaurants is that those restaurants provide an appropriate

space for a reasonable price, and most students have no strong objections to Chinese food. Indian food may encounter stronger opposition from some students. The faculty also said that they may try Indian food once or twice with people who are similarly inclined, but would be reluctant to have a department gathering there because it would be a problem if even one member does not like it. Indian food is still too exotic to be used for such functions.

*Ghandi in Itaewon: Indian/Pakistan Restaurant*

This is a large-scale Indian restaurant with outdoor seating that is frequented by many foreigners. A buffet and grilled meat, which are commonly available in many restaurants of the neighborhood, are also popular dishes here. It is relatively upscale compared to other Indian restaurants in Seoul, and has an extensive wine and beer selection. Among the Indian restaurants included in this research, Ghandi seemed to have the largest percentage of family groups. The restaurant's facilities, including a garden and barbecue, make it ideal for family dining. The owner seemed to be very comfortable with customers of diverse ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the location of the restaurant.

This restaurant opened in 1984, making it one of the oldest Indian restaurants in Korea, and represents itself as a place where one can dine on royal palace cuisine. It has a full bar for drinks, including a wide array of cocktails, and an outdoor tandoor pit. The spacious garden has a glass partition that can be opened on warm days for better ventilation.

Many customers like to use the outdoor tables, which are not very common in Korea. Those who do not have much background knowledge of Indian food often prefer to dine from the buffet table. Although the price is not cheap (20,000 won for lunch, and 25,000 for dinner, excluding drinks), they like to see the food before making their own selections. Many customers, especially young people, order fruit-flavored *lassi*. Older customers, however, expressed the opinion that sweet drinks before or during the meal spoil the appetite.

The restaurant Ghandi has established itself as one of the main "ethnic" establishments in Itaewon. It also seems to enjoy good business with both Korean and international customers.

### *Annapurna in Sinchon*

This restaurant has a primarily Himalayan theme, and is frequented by students of Yonsei University. Prices are low, and the food tends to be much spicier than other Indian restaurants in Korea. Consequently, customers say that the food at this restaurant tastes more "authentic."

One of the distinctive characteristics of this restaurant is that take-out is an important part of sales. At all the other restaurants observed for this research, most customers dine in, and except for the few customers who bring leftover food home, almost no take-out orders were made. Except for the home delivery of certain foods (inexpensive Chinese food, pizza, and fried chicken), Koreans seem to prefer eating in at a restaurant rather than taking out food for consumption elsewhere. This could be related to Koreans' preference for eating food right after the food is prepared, when it is still fresh and hot. Koreans also seem to think that the price of food at restaurants includes the cost for using the restaurant space.

Annapurna is located in a narrow back alley near the university, and is not particularly visible from the main street. The restaurant is very well known among young people who frequent restaurant and food websites, and has received very good reviews from amateur food critics online. Many writers commented that Annapurna is a place for those who are familiar with Indian cuisine and enjoy the distinctive spices, but not a place for novices in ethnic dining. The manager of the restaurant confirmed that he does not try to modify the original recipes because he already has enough loyal customers who like his restaurant's food as it is. He said that some customers eat at the restaurant and order the same food for take-out, to be eaten later.

*Persian Dream: Iranian Restaurant*

The owner of this restaurant first came to Korea as a student in medicine and psychology before he opened the restaurant near a university in central Seoul. The restaurant specializes in Iranian curry and meat dishes, and is located inside an obscure back alley. The interior of the restaurant is heavily decorated with Persian objects. Full of information on Iranian food culture and manners, the menu devotes significant space to highlighting press coverage of the establishment. However, many customers commented that the restaurant's food is very similar to Indian cuisine, and told me that they cannot distinguish one from the other.

The customers are mainly young people. The most popular dish is fried chicken in curry flavored gravy. Except for the manager, all the people serving in the hall are Koreans who work there part-time. The restaurant does not sell any alcoholic beverages. When customers inquire, the serving staff explained that Iran is a Muslim country, and they serve good tea instead of alcoholic beverages.

*A Cambodian Restaurant in Ansan*

A Cambodian restaurant is located on the main street of Ansan's commercial and residential district for foreign workers. The restaurant does not have a large Korean signboard; instead, the sign is written in Cambodian with Korean translation below in a small script. The outside of the restaurant is not indicative that it serves food, and the windows are covered with dark cellophane. Inside, the walls are covered with photographs of the Angkor Wat and other Cambodian tourist sites. The overall appearance gives the impression that it is not actively seeking Korean customers.

The owner is a Korean who is engaged in a trading business with Cambodia. He also sells mobile phones and other goods to ethnic Cambodians living in Korea. About half of his restaurant space was devoted to the display of these goods, including Cambodian food products.

The menu was very simple, with a limited selection of beef, pork, chicken, and fish with rice served with Korean kimchi and Cambodian hot sauce. When I ate the shrimp fried rice and pork, the owner suggested that I mix the sauce with the food to make it spicy enough for Korean tastes. Each plate of food costs about 5,000 won, except for some specialty dishes like whole fish. They only carried domestic beer and used Korean rice.

Overall, the restaurant did not seem to be intended as a place for sophisticated Cambodian cuisine, but the customers can at least fill their stomachs with Cambodian flavors. The chef used to work at the Cambodian Embassy in Korea and is a very well-respected chef according to the Korean owner of the restaurant. However, the menu is too limited for him to utilize his full culinary abilities. In addition to the chef from Cambodia, the restaurant also has one part-time female waitress from Cambodia. She is attending a local university, and works at the restaurant to support herself. The owner said that the majority of his customers are Cambodians who work in the area, along with occasional visits by Cambodian women married to Korean men.

## Ethnic Food Restaurants and Identities

When one ethnicity's or nation's food is introduced in other parts of the world, the cuisine undergoes standardization and modification to adapt to the receiving culture. This process helps construct its global identity. Indian cuisine, for example, is offered in buffet style at inexpensive prices in the United States. American customers have certain expectations of Indian restaurants. In the Korean case, the identity of Indian cuisine is still actively being constructed. The restaurateurs and their (potential) customers are actively engaged in negotiating and compromising on what Indian food should be in Korea. How Indian food is positioned in Korean food culture will be another component of the global identity of Indian cuisine. In this process, cultural homogenization (Indian food is available everywhere in the

world), fragmentation (localization of Indian food), and hybridization (Indian mixed with Korean cuisine when they enhance the satisfaction of both) can all be observed.

A Korean restaurateur who is operating a successful Thai restaurant says that one of the remarkable characteristics of Korean customers at ethnic restaurants is that they are predominantly women. She said that the busiest day of the year at her restaurant is Valentine's Day, when couples make reservations to dine out. In most cases, according to her observation, it is the woman who makes the choice of the restaurant. She also said that while it is common to see groups of women eat at her restaurant, she rarely sees groups of men. Similar observations were made at other ethnic restaurants in my research. Women tend to be more flexible and willing to experiment with new cuisine. Many Koreans who have lived abroad testify that Korean women adapted to local food much sooner than men. Consumption of ethnic food and command of related knowledge as cultural capital seem to be highly gendered in today's Korean society.

The process for an ethnic cuisine to acquire a global identity can be applied to the much-discussed issue of the globalization of Korean food. The Korean government and related experts ask the following questions: Which Korean dishes will be most popular among the consumers outside Korea? How should we change to make them more popular? Should we stick to what is traditionally Korean, or modify recipes to suit the tastes of foreigners? Interestingly, it is always assumed that the "global consumers" are Westerners. Koreans attempt to identify what hinders Westerners from fully enjoying Korean food, and experiment with Western course-style Korean food in an effort to find the perfect match between wine and Korean food. In this context, economic concerns and nationalistic sentiments are prevalent. Many Koreans are frustrated to find that Korean food is not as popular as it should be. They also worry that some popular Korean dishes are being introduced to Westerners by the Japanese, thereby compromising the food's Korean identity. Through these complex discussions of Korean food and its identity, the cuisine is slowly gaining its global identity. There is no question that the global

identity of Korean cuisine will be an important component of Korean people's identity throughout this process. Whether in consuming various ethnic foods within Korea or in promoting Korean food globally, diverse groups of Koreans located in different positions within Korea engage in the dynamic process of negotiating, competing, and contesting the nature of relationship between food consumption and their identities.

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