



TCS LOUPE

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FOOD CULTURES OF CHINA, JAPAN, AND KOREA

LECTURE FIVE

Finding Tastes of China, Japan, and Korea

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LECTURE SUMMARY

Similarities and Differences between Food Cultures of China, Japan, and Korea

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Introduction

Tastes and flavors of food, such as the unique flavor of coriander in Chinese dish and sweet taste of shoyu(soy sauce) in Japanese cuisine, are one of the evident indicators of an ethnic identity. Enjoying tastes and flavors that are different from ours is sometimes an unfamiliar experience, and people tend to express jealousy and sarcasm toward those unfamiliar cultural differences. In this regard, understanding the development of food cultures of China, Japan, and Korea provides a meaningful basis to comprehend and share such cultural experiences.

Geo-climatic differences and the Production of Staple Grains

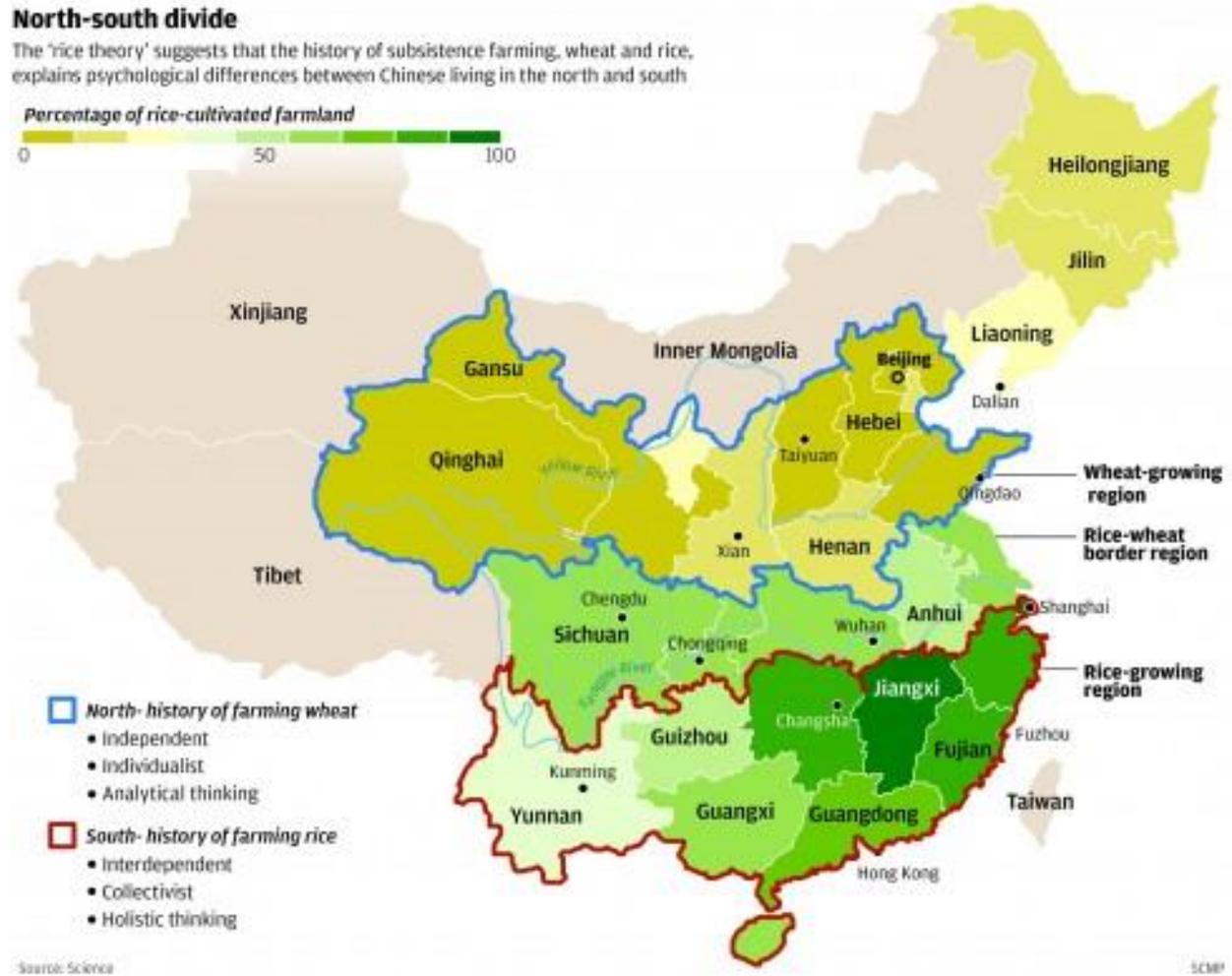
Although the three countries are said to share cultural similarities like Chinese characters and chopsticks, they are very much different in geographical and climatic terms. China is a large continent with wide-ranging climatic conditions, whereas Japan is a long archipelago that encompasses subtropical to sub-arctic climates. Compared to China and Japan, Korea is a peninsula that has temperate climate.

This geographical and climatic differences affect food production of the three countries. Production of tea leaves can be a good example. The Westerners in the premodern era found it odd that Koreans seldom drink tea whereas the Chinese and Japanese in their daily lives frequently consume tea. It is due to Korea's climatic condition in which cultivation of tea leaves is difficult in contrast to China and Japan where tea leaves are widely grown in their southern areas.

Rice, the staple food of the three countries, had not been produced in the northern part of Korean Peninsula or in Jeju Island with volcanic landscapes. Rice can be categorized into two types of indica and japonica according to the level of glutinosity and both were originally cultivated in the Korean Peninsula. As the rice was exported from Korea to Japan from the 1880s, 98% of the rice varieties cultivated in Korea were replaced with the ones developed in Japan.

Wheat is another staple food of the three countries. Food made from flour started to appear in the Han dynasty and became prevalent from the Tang dynasty. The production of wheat also varies according to the region. Spring wheat is produced in the northern part of Yangzi River while winter wheat is grown in the southern area. Wheat produced in Lanzhou of Gansu Province is particularly high in gluten,

which makes its hand-pulled noodle dough flexible and stretchy. On the other hand, winter wheat is produced in Korea.



<Source: South China Morning Post>

Image 1. Distribution of Wheat Production in China

Buckwheat, the main ingredient of *naengmyeon*, or Korean cold noodles, is one of the fast growing crops that is planted in the summer and harvested in the autumn.

It is why the kings of Joseon promoted the cultivation of buckwheat. Regions where buckwheat is majorly consumed, like northern Xi'an, developed a noodle press machine. Such device was necessary because flour made from buckwheat is low in gluten and is difficult to ferment and knead its dough. Japanese, on the other hand, sliced the noodles instead of using a press machine, which later developed into *soba* combined with *shoyu*.

Table Manners of China, Japan, and Korea

Combination of starch and non-starch dish is the common set of meal in Southern China, Japan, and Korea that mainly consume rice. That is, people in these areas eat starchy foods like rice together with non-starchy side-dishes; they do not eat just side dishes by itself. On top of that, Koreans drink one spoon of soup along with rice and side dishes. It is influenced by the eating habit of the warring states period in China when Confucius lived, which was later introduced to Joseon by the Confucian scholars. Drinking soup was a convenient way to digest meals composed of millet and sorghum in the warring states period. This eating habit transformed into a symbolic table manner of Confucianism.

Table manners of the three countries took different evolutionary paths while mutually affecting one another in a long history. Japan's custom of holding a rice bowl is related to the development of wooden bowls during the period when technologies for making porcelains and bronzeware were not fully developed. Holding a bowl in fact was a convenient way of eating because Japanese used low dining table influenced by the custom of the Tang Dynasty. On the other hand,

Chinese people started to dine on a table with chairs after the Tang Dynasty. As the dishes are shared communally in one table, each individual takes helpings from the large serving dishes of food.

Korea developed a dining etiquette of putting rice bowl down on a table. It is related to the habit of eating large amount of rice as well as the weight of rice bowl. The Westerners who visited Joseon found it surprising that local people ate much rice; their reaction in fact was influenced by the prejudice on heavy eating developed after the establishment of western banquet etiquettes since the times of Louis XIV. Both Chinese and Japanese people consumed as much rice as Koreans did yet started to eat less rice along with the development of restaurants in China after the Song Dynasty, and the modernization process during the Meiji era in Japan.



Image 2. Table Manner of the Joseon Dynasty

Use of Dining Utensils in China, Japan, and Korea

The use of spoon and chopsticks also indicates different food cultures among the three countries developed under mutual influences. Until the Yuan Dynasty, Chinese used spoon along with chopsticks. Yet its necessity started to wane as the wheat growing areas expanded and more people ate noodles and dumplings. In addition, the use of chopsticks became the prevalent way of eating as the deep fried dishes were developed due to the need of long-term preservation in times of disarray.

Because of the glutinous substance of japonica, it was natural to eat rice with chopsticks in Japan. Yet both spoon and chopsticks made in bronze were used in the royal banquets, following the standardized banquet etiquette of East Asia at the time. Korea has long developed the custom of using both spoon and chopsticks. The function of spoon in Korea is now under transformation from a utensil for eating rice to drinking soup and it is expected that the shape of the spoon will become more ladle-like in the future.

Communal and Individual Eating of China, Japan, and Korea

Along with dining utensils, the ways of communal eating have gone through historical changes. Whereas China developed communal eating after the Tang Dynasty, meal was individually served in separate trays or dining tables in Japan, which is associated with its culture of cleanliness. In Korea, the individual eating was transformed into communal eating from the 20th Century, influenced by the Western as well as Chinese eating habits. It was the Domestic Science and life reformation movement developed from the West that spread the concept of

'family dining.' Yet this way of eating is also undergoing a transformation as a number of people are dining alone along with the development of individualism and the increase of single-households.



Image 3. Communal Eating of the Tang Dynasty

Conclusion

Historical development of food cultures of the three countries well demonstrates how cooking and eating habits developed from different staples turn into a cultural norm of one ethnic group. In order for three countries to understand their cultural norms, it is crucial for individuals to meet and communicate through the exchange of foods. Finding shared culture of food of the three countries can serve as one of the effective ways for overcoming cultural differences. The three countries can cooperate in earnest only when the people of the three countries become friends

through food exchanges that go beyond the 'food nationalism' which attempts to commercialize one's national food to exclusively promote national interests.

Q&A

1. How did the original varieties of Korean rice started to disappear? Is cultivation of Korean wheat difficult?

During the Joseon Dynasty, 150 varieties of rice were available in Korean Peninsula. From the 1880s, Korea became one of the major exporting areas of rice to Japan and the varieties developed in Japan were largely cultivated for the export. Dissemination of Tongil rice developed in 1970s also exacerbated the extinction of Korean rice varieties. The development of nation-wide supply chain and rice polishing technology also contributed to the proliferation of dominant types of rice varieties.

Historical records suggest that wheat has been cultivated for a long time in northern Korean peninsula. However, the varieties of Korean wheat have not been improved and it is difficult to cultivate the grain with a uniformed quality.

2. How does the use of spoons and chopsticks around the three countries related to Confucian ethics?

Before the Qin Dynasty, the use of bronze spoons and chopsticks were considered to be the basic table etiquette of a noble man, which were settled down as the custom of the ruling class. Korea and Japan were influenced by this custom along with the cultures of the Tang Dynasty. Use of spoon in Japan was limited to royal banquets while Chinese came to use spoon less along with the change of cuisine. The custom of using spoon with chopsticks, however, survived in Korea because

the Confucian scholars preserved this culture intact. As a result, spoon often holds symbolic significance in Korea and has been traditionally used as one of bride's wedding gift to the bridegroom.

3. Why does Koreans prefer drinking cold water? And why are there so many side dishes in Korean cuisine?

Drinking of cold water is related to the recent tendency in Korean society that emphasizes efficacy. That is, as the restaurants in Korea became more and more standardized, cold water was served for the saving the effort of serving.

Large number of side dishes are provided for the purpose of entertaining guests, and in the actual daily lives, people do not consume many side dishes. In fact, serving 3 to 5 dishes was the basic etiquette of Joseon Dynasty. A variety of side dishes were served at the banquets as an expression of congratulation.

4. Is *Hanjeongsik* a genuine Korean cuisine? To what extent do individuals should accept it as Korean tradition?

Hanjeongsik is a term developed in contrast to Western set meal. That is, it is a complete Korean meal with a limited number of options to choose from for each course. *Hanjeongsik* was developed by benchmarking the course meal served in Japanese restaurants of the 1890s. The type of *Hanjeongsik* became diversified featuring particular regional foods. In fact, we need to rebuild the concept of Korean cuisine rather than taking *Hanjeongsik* for granted as Korean tradition.

LECTURE FIVE AT A GLANCE

Similarities and Differences in Food Cultures of China, Japan, and Korea

| Category | China | Japan | Korea |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Staples | Consumption of rice, wheat, and buckwheat as main staples Different availability of staples according to geographical and climatic conditions | | |
| Set of Meal | Combination of starch and non-starch dish | | |
| Table Manner | Taking helpings from large service dishes | Holding a rice bowl influenced by the development of wooden bowls | Putting a rice bowl down on a table influenced by the weight of bowls and amount of rice |
| Dining Utensil | Increased use of chopsticks with the increase in wheat foods and deep fried dishes | Use of chopstick for eating rice influenced by the glutinous substance of japonica | Using both spoon and chopsticks following the Confucian etiquette |
| Communal/ Individual Eating | Development of communal eating after the Tang Dynasty | Development of individual eating associated with culture of cleanliness | Transformation of individual eating into communal eating from the 20 th century |



Professor JOO Youngha of the Academy of Korean Studies is a renowned food expert who analyzes and interprets food from the perspective of cultural anthropology, folklore, and history. He currently conducts vibrant researches on the culture and history of East Asian Food.

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