Food and Nationalism:

Kimchi and Korean National Identity*

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· Keyword: Korea, Food, Nationalism, Kimchi, National Identity

【ABSTRACT】

In order to deepen our understanding of the relationship between food and nationalism in general, and of Korean national identity in particular, this article aims at investigating the case of kimchi, this representative culinary symbol of Korean everyday life. My approach is to analyze historically three different phases of the emerging process of kimchi as national symbol: 1) Declaration of independence in taste, 2) Promotion of the national food, and 3) International conflicts around kimchi as national food. The case of kimchi is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the strength of national symbols related to basic human activities of eating and drinking; its' emergence is intimately related with national economic development; its' main promoters were autonomous actors of civil society pursuing their professional or sectoral interests; and the state

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intervention at the later phase provoked international conflicts due to the inherently contradictory nature *of internationalization of national symbol.*

Ⅰ. Introduction: Food and Nationalism

For Ernest Gellner, "nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent". From this simple definition follows that of the nationalist sentiment which is described as "the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment"[1]. This politics-centered definition, in spite of its operational value as a research and analysis tool, reveals to be problematic when dealing with the subjective dimension and micro-level nationalism. It can be appropriately argued that nationalist movement has originated from, for example, the feeling of anger against colonial situation, a flagrant case of the violation of the nationalist principle. But this macro-level explanation doesn't account for why specific individuals engage in nationalist movement neither why people feel anger or satisfaction depending on the violation or fulfillment of a principle. Furthermore, nationalism needs to be explained not only from the functionalist perspective *à la* Gellner as a prerequisite and concomitant of modernization, but also in its subjective dimension of affection, attachment or hatred.

Micro-level and/or subjective interpretative analysis has contributed to enrich our understanding of nationalism. Benedict Anderson duly underlines the cultural roots of nationalism in building the *Imagined Communities:* A new way of apprehending time and space rendered possible the imagination of 'horizontal-secular, transverse-time', while print-capitalism allowed the emergence of national consciousness by broadly diffusing 'national print-languages'[2]. Historians point to *The Invention of Tradition* as a process or mechanism permitting the use of history as legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion[3]. These invented traditions, defined as "a set of practices ...

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1) Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.1.

2) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* (London: Verso, 1991), pp.9-46.

3) "because so much of what subjectively makes up the modern 'nation' consists of such constructs and is associated with appropriate and, in general, fairly recent symbols or suitably tailored discourse (such as 'national history'), the national phenomenon cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the 'invention of tradition': Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions"

with a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past"[4], often serve as an efficient instrument of nationalism. Michael Billig explores a new perspective in *Banal Nationalism:* The national consciousness doesn't always manifest in its political and extreme form but also in more unconscious and less visible way in everyday life through routine symbols and habits of language[5]. All these studies pay particular attention to how individuals come to think, imagine, manipulate or are manipulated by the national phenomenon in their everyday life. In this perspective, nationalist sentiment is not only, neither principally, a sentiment of anger or satisfaction depending on the congruence of political and national units. Rather, the national identity of individuals "comprises both a cultural and political identity and is located in a political community as well as a cultural one.[6]"

For A.D. Smith, the fundamental features of national identity are 1) an historic territory, or homeland, 2) common myths and historical memories, 3) a common, mass public culture, 4) common legal rights and duties for all members, and 5) a common economy with territorial mobility for members[7]. Food and eating can be considered as one of the most important nexus of national identity: Every human being has to eat several times a day, everyday, as long as he (she) lives, and every human society has its own food preferences and way of eating. Furthermore, food is potentially related to all the principal features of national identity: It is often produced on the soil of homeland; Culinary tradition is full of myths and memories; Eating is an important part of mass public culture; Food for survival forms an implicit element of modern citizenship; Food production and consumption constitutes the basis of national economy. Therefore, recent literature on nationalism and national identity takes seriously the issue of culinary habits[8].

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in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.14.

4) Hobsbawm (1983), p.1.

5) Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism,* (London: Sage, 1995)

6) Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity,* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), p.99.

7) Based upon this analysis, nation is defined as "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members": Smith (1991), p.14.

8) David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat,* (London: Routledge, 1997); Stephen Mennel, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present,* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Peter Scholliers, Ed. *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages.* (Oxford: Berg, 2001); James L. Watson, *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1997; James L. Watson and Melissa L. Caldwell. Eds. *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating.* (Malden, MA: Blackwell), 2005.

Individuals decide what, when and how to eat, or at least have preferences[9]. Mouth is considered the "gateway to the body"[10] and "the act of consuming food may represent the basic locus of identity, conformity and resistance"[11]. Of particular interest for national identity is the fact that food can have two contrasting functions: "It can serve to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or, it can serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segregation.[12]" National food serves of course the former function of reinforcing equal, intimate and solidarity-based relations among members of national community. For C. Palmer, it is of utmost importance to understand "how individuals became consciously aware of cultural community" and "how a sense of nationality is constructed that links individuals to a particular cultural tradition."[13] She considers food along with the body and the landscape, as the three flags of identity. Thus Nir Avieli sees the study of national iconic dishes as bridging the gap between theory and praxis of nationalism by concretization of the imagined community[14].

In this article, the case of kimchi, a hot and spicy Korean side-dish, is analyzed in light of the above theoretical perspective. Kimchi is considered as the Korean culinary symbol not only by the Koreans themselves, but also by many foreigners: According to a poll by Gallup Korea in 2006, kimchi was cited as the 'symbol of national culture representing Korea' by 22.1%, second only to the national flag, *taegeuggi* with 34.9%. These were followed by *hangeul,* the Korean writing system (17.2%), *mugunghwa,* the national emblem-flower (13.9%), and *dogdo,* small islets over which Korea and Japan both claim sovereignty (13.2%)[15]. At first sight, it is surprising that a mere side-dish appears as a national cultural symbol along with the trinity of national identity symbols like the national flag, anthem, and emblem[16], as well as with the 'noble' writing system

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9) Food preference is defined as "the way in which people choose from among available comestibles on the basis of biological or economic perceptions including taste, value, purity, ease or difficulty of preparation, and the availability of fuel and other preparation tools": Monica L. Smith, "The Archeology of Food Preference" in *American Anthropologist.* September 2006. 109, 3. p.480.

10) P. Rozin and A.E.Fallon, "The Acquisition of Likes and Dislikes for Foods" in J.Solms and R.L.Hall. eds. *Criteria of Food Acceptance: How Man Chooses What He Eats.* (Zurich: Forster Verl), 1981. p.45.

11) Smith (2006), p.480.

12) Arjun Appadurai, "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia" in *American Anthropologist,* 8, 3, (1981), p.496.

13) C. Palmer, "From Theory to Practice: Experiencing the Nation in Everyday Life" in *Journal of Material Culture,* 1998. 3, 2. p.180.

14) Avieli, Nir, "Vietnamese New Year Rice Cakes: Iconic Festive Dishes and Contested National Identity" in *Ethnology.* Spring 2005. 44, 2. pp.169-170.

15) *Hankyoreh,* July 27, 2006: This opinion poll was ordered by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in the selection process of 'One Hundered National Cultural Symbols', presented as 'the cultural DNA of Korean people'.

and 'sacred' territory. Outside Korea, kimchi is perceived as the characteristic Korean dish as reflected in the title of books such as *The Kimchi Cookbook: Fiery Flavors and Cultural History of Korea's National Dish*[17], *The Kimchi Matters: Global Business and Local Politics in a Crisis-Driven World*[18], or in the naming of a club of Korean-French international couples, *Kimchi-Fromage.*

Therefore, it appears to be of particular interest to investigate this symbol of national identity in order to deepen our understanding of the relationship between food and nationalism in general, and of Korean national identity in particular. My approach is to analyze historically three different phases of the emerging process of kimchi as national symbol: 1) Declaration of independence in taste, 2) Promotion of the national food, and 3) International conflicts around kimchi as national food. These three phases are chronologically ordered in case of kimchi without necessarily being exactly sequenced. This case study is an attempt to answer to several theoretically oriented questions: What are the determinants of the selection process of national symbols, and put simply, why kimchi? Who are the principal promoters of this particular food as the national symbol, and what are their main motives? What are the consequences for kimchi to become the national cultural symbol, especially in light of internationalization and globalization of national cuisines and economies?

Ⅱ. "Declaration of Independence in Taste"[19]

Kimchi has been for a long time an important part of Korean cuisine, more precisely an essential side-dish accompanying rice, the main staple, and other dishes. It belongs to the family of pickled vegetables whose consumption can be documented and traced back to Antiquity. It has known many profound transformations concerning its raw materials, the spices utilized, and the preparation method. In order to understand the

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16) R. Firth, *Symbols, Public and Private,* (London:),1973, p.341.: "The National Flag, the National Anthem and the National Emblem are the three symbols through which an independent country proclaims its identity and sovereignty, and as such they command instantaneous respect and loyalty. In themselves, they reflect the entire background, thought and culture of a nation."

17) Kim Man-Jo, Lee Kyou-Tae and Lee O-Young, *The Kimchi Cookbook: Fiery Flavors and Cultural History of Korea's National Dish,* (North Clarendon: Periplus Editions, 1999).

18) Marvin Zonis, Dan Lefkovitz and Sam Wilkin, *The Kimchi Matters: Global Business and Local Politics in a Crisis-Driven World,* (Evanston: Agate), 2005.

19) The expression is from Han Kyung-Koo: Han Kyung-Koo, "Some Foods Are Good to Think: Kimchi and the Epitomization of National Character", *Korean Social Science Journal,* 27, 1, (2000), p.224.

sudden ascension of kimchi as national food in the 1980's, I discuss the value of kimchi as a national symbol and the historic context of its emergence.

1. Value as Symbol

The value of kimchi as national symbol comes from its generalized daily consumption among ethnic Koreans. Most Koreans eat kimchi everyday, even at every meal. Rice is the main staple, but can be occasionally replaced by noodles: Whatever the main staple, kimchi is the *sine qua non* of Korean meal. As for many national myths and symbols, the pseudo-scientific studies tracing their origins back in history abound but serious historical studies about their actual evolution are rare or absent. We do not have the history of kimchi consumption, but some literary episodes or historical facts show the generalized daily consumption of kimchi among Koreans at least in 20th century: The South Korean troops sent to Vietnam in the 1960's and 1970's, and Korean construction workers in the Middle East in the 1970's were the first clients of massive kimchi exports. International migration of Koreans was followed by their indispensable side-dish.

The equation reproduces itself in the United-States among Korean migrants. Exposed to a foreign environment, kimchi rapidly became the symbol of Koreanness: "Just as the smell of gimchi[20] signifies for me my mother's love and my homeland culture, for her it signifies a daughter who remains proudly Korean despite the dominant white culture in which I was raised."[21] It seems that well before the advent of kimchi as national food in Korea herself, it had already acquired the heart of Koreans in foreign countries as a popular psychological and physiological connection tool with the Homeland.

Kimchi presents several intrinsic characteristics which perhaps explain the degree to which Koreans are so much attached to the consumption of that side-dish, and the extent to which Koreans adhere to it as a national symbol. 1) Kimchi is a very hot and spicy dish with abundant use of salt and red-pepper. There are many pickled vegetables in China and Japan, but they usually don't taste so hot and spicy. 2) Korean kimchi is a fermented vegetable rich in minerals and vitamins. But it also means that kimchi's odor is very strong and unsupportable but for meal time, even for everyday consumers. Naturally, in a multi-ethnic environment, kimchi with its odor and particular taste becomes the ethnic identity marker of Koreans. 3) Kimchi presents a great variety with

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20) Gimchi is the new spelling of kimchi, following the new system of romanization of Korean language. Nevertheless, I maintained the ancient one because it had already become a word of English language recognized by dictionaries.

21) Lee Sharon Heijin, "The Story of Gimchi Chigae" in *The Massachusetts Review.* Autumn (2004). 45, 3. p.384.

more than 200 sorts according to the Kimchi Museum[22]. This richness and variety are supposed to represent those of Korean culture, just like hundreds sorts of wine or cheese in Western countries.

But so far as kimchi was considered "smells awful BUT indispensable" it could not be raised as a national symbol: "Up until the early sixties, kimchi was an embarrassment in the intercultural settings. Koreans admitted that kimchi smells awful. Although Koreans could not stop eating kimchi, they dared not publicly urge foreigners to learn to enjoy kimchi.[23]" But in the 1970's, some nutritionists began to praise kimchi as health food full of vitamins, minerals and lactic ferments, making it "smells awful BUT good for health". In the 1980's, kimchi became "tasty AS WELL AS good for health and environmentally correct", acceding to the status of national symbol.

2. Historic Context of Emergence

It is always difficult to date the emergence of national symbols unless they are officially adopted by state act or some conscious declaration. For Han Kyung-Koo, the Seoul Olympics of 1988 were the occasion for the 'declaration of independence in taste' by proclaiming kimchi, the national food. Actually, at this time, kimchi was no more a stinking dish to eat by hiding from foreigners, but a healthy traditional food to be presented and promoted among foreigners. The venue of this world event surely represented an opportunity for Korean people to exhibit their proud of economic success and, at the same time, to be recognized by foreigners as a nation possessing a cultural heritage worth the world respect. This thirst for international recognition is very representative of social processes involving identity, and it is in this sense that the Olympic Games can be symbolically considered the turning point of the status of kimchi.

The coronation of kimchi as national symbol in the 1980's reflected several historical streams of the time. First, it was the culminating point of economic development since the 1960's which transformed the country from an agriculture-based poor nation to a dynamic industrial power. Korean people were proud of the economic miracle they had achieved and expected for international recognition of the value and superiority – or at least equality – of their cultural tradition. Second, the student and associative movements of the 1980's underlined the importance of three *min*, *minju* (democracy), *minjog* (nation), and *minjung* (people). These were reactions against the military dictatorship during more than two decades and against a society ruled by cosmopolitan

22) *Hankyoreh*, September 4, 2001.
23) Han Kyung-Koo (2000), p.229.

elites. From this perspective too, kimchi was an ideal symbol because it was not only typically Korean in its taste and character, but more importantly representative of popular culture because it constituted peasants', workers' and poor people's daily dish opposed to cosmopolitan elites enjoying varied and refined foreign food. Third, the 1980's were also the decade of the emergence of food industry, especially interested in traditional foods like kimchi. Industrialization, urbanization, the generalization of nuclear family, the increased participation of women in labor market, these socio-economic changes promoted large scale food industry. Kimchi, the popular Korean side-dish, represented an enormous potential market, even though the traditional way of thinking considering that kimchi's taste comes from the housewife's attention, care and devotion, formed a high cultural barrier to its industrialization.

The first Kimchi Museum opened its door in 1986 established by a small food manufacturer *Myeongga.* The next year, it is another food manufacturer *Pulmuone* who bought the Museum and still owns and manages it in 2006. In 1988, the year of the Olympic Games, the Museum was transferred from Seoul's ancient center to the newly built international exhibition center COEX, and enlarged to present the culinary 'national treasure' to foreign visitors. The opening of this private museum is another event helping us to date the coronation of kimchi and also another fact showing the interrelation between cultural nationalism and economic interests. This Museum contributed greatly to elevate the status of kimchi by providing an institutional base camp for its promotion and prestige. In 1992, a Kimchi Museum University was organized and it was officially registered as a Museum at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 1993 achieving the process of institutionalization.

One can hardly doubt kimchi's status as an indispensable side-dish in everyday life for most of Koreans. Its particular taste and strong odor made it a very suitable candidate as a symbol of Koreanness. With scientific inquiry establishing the nutritional value and the variety of kimchi, it ascended rapidly to the status of national symbol in the 1980's during the preparation of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The establishment of the Kimchi Museum in 1986 by food industry is another step in its institutionalization as the national dish.

Ⅲ. Promotion of the National Food

Once the Korean declaration of independence in taste proclaimed in the name of

kimchi, a surprising national mobilization took off in different spheres of society for the promotion of the national food. The period beginning with the organization of the Olympic Games to the 1990's is characterized by several trends: Continuous economic development which reinforced the thirst for international recognition; Increased economic internationalization and the corresponding reaction with frequent appeal to national identity; Burgeoning civil society in the era of political liberalization and democratic consolidation; Industrialization of food industry in general, and of kimchi industry in particular. These trends form the historic context of the consolidation of kimchi as a symbol of national identity.

1. Symbol of Korean Strength: Sports and Health

The affinity of kimchi with the Olympic Games has reiterated and even reinforced since 1988. For every Olympic Games since 1988, kimchi entered the official menu for athletes and Korean food manufacturers supplied it. This internationalization of the national food is considered and presented as a triumph of Korean culture by the media. Each time, the demand for kimchi supply by the Organizing Committee was news for Korean media, reflecting the psychological need for international recognition. The titles of newspapers coverage are eloquent: "*Jonggajib* kimchi of Doosan Foods, selected in the official menu of the [Barcelona] Olympics[24]", "Kimchi, on the Atlanta Olympics menu[25]", "Korean kimchi on the Sydney Olympics table[26]", "Athens Olympics D-6, 1.5 tons of kimchi and side-dish air-transported[27]". We can expect for similar media coverage for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

It is interesting to observe that, recently, the attention of Korean media turned not only to the selection of kimchi in official menu, but also to its popularity among foreign athletes: Under the title "Chinese athletes rush on kimchi", Financial News deplores that, because kimchi is so popular among foreign athletes, Korean athletes can't eat it if they arrive late in restaurant[28]. Segye Ilbo insists on the popularity of kimchi not only among Asians like Chinese and Japanese, but also among "European athletes who know that [it] is good for body[29]".

The logical extension is to explain the performances of Korean athletes by their

24) *Chosun Ilbo,* May 1, 1991.
25) *Kookmin Ilbo,* April 13, 1996.
26) *Hankook Ilbo,* August 23, 2000.
27) *Segye Ilbo,* August 7, 2004.
28) *Financial News,* August 12, 2004.
29) *Segye Ilbo,* August 10, 2004.

consumption of kimchi: The TV station Korean Broadcasting System didn't hesitate to title a report, "Kimchi is our strength[30]". The Korean national dish which also entered in the official menu of 1998 Soccer Worldcup in France, was presented as an explanation for the excellent performance of Korean team in 2002 Korea-Japan Worldcup: "Korean soccer is the force of kimchi, said the Asahi TV[31]", "According to some foreign media, the good performance of Korean team attaining the semi-final in this Worldcup, using strong pressing and tenuous attack, is related to the strength of physical conditions which seems to originate from ginseng and kimchi[32]". Once again, the analysis is not presented as singing one's own praises. Rather, by quoting the analysis or the perception of foreign media, Korean media seek the appearances of objectivity.

Kimchi has also been praised for its beneficial effects on health. Several research teams underlined the positive impact of kimchi in preventing cancer, constipation, high blood pressure and diabetes[33]. Along with these traditional diseases, kimchi's positive effect was cited every time a new disease appeared: "Financial Times, "Absence of SARS case in Korea due to garlic in kimchi[34]"; "Kimchi's lactic ferments subjugate avian flu[35]". As the title of the first article indicates, foreign media are considered as more efficient in elevating the objectivity of the claim. But it can be also pernicious because the Financial Times' article just quoted a Korean researcher claiming the preventive effect of kimchi. Thus, the citation forms a circle with Korean media quoting foreign media, quoting Korean researcher.

This large, frequent, and repetitive media coverage on the beneficial effects of kimchi contributes to its consolidation as a national symbol: It is not only recognized by international society, but receives also the affection of foreigners. Kimchi is not only tasty, but also good for health and prevents traditional as well as new diseases like *deus ex machina* medicine. Koreans should be proud of this culinary heritage coming from 'ancestors' wisdom[36]'.

2. Scientific Legitimacy

The promotion of the national symbol can be reinforced by elevating the scientific

30) *Korea Broadcasting System*, August 20, 2004.
31) *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, June 20, 2002.
32) *Kookmin Ilbo*, June 28, 2002.
33) *Chosun Ilbo*, September 2, 1993; Hankyoreh, November 5, 1994.
34) *Dong-a Ilbo*, April 15, 2003.
35) *Chosun Ilbo*, March 7, 2005.
36) *Seoul Sinmun*, June 9, 1993.

legitimacy of the claims on kimchi's beneficial effects, as well as on its long history. The pseudo-scientific discourses often traces the origin of kimchi back to the Three Kingdoms period (4th to 7th century A.D.): "The safety of kimchi is proved by historical experience because our ancestors have been eating it everyday since the Three Kingdoms period[37]". But more serious historical studies show that the most popular and generalized form of kimchi - hot and spicy, with a lot of red-pepper and prepared with Chinese cabbage - is a rather recent invention. The red-pepper was introduced to Korea by Japanese during the Korea-Japan War of 1592-98, but its utilization was generalized only around 1800. Furthermore, the Chinese cabbage was introduced only at the end of the 19th century[38]. From this perspective, kimchi can also be considered a representative fusion food generalized in modern Korea rather than an invariable form of food representing Korean long-term tradition and wisdom. But as scholars of nationalism know, time is an important legitimating power elevating the status of national symbols.

The mobilization of the scientific community was much stronger in natural sciences. The study of kimchi has known continuous development since the 1950's as follows.

Number of kimchi studies from 1955 to 1996[39]

55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75
2	1	1	3	3	6	2	3	1	1	2	5	6	4	2	5	2	1	2	7	5
76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96
4	8	4	11	4	4	16	20	19	15	12	17	17	30	34	38	15	12	27	40	8

After a period of sporadic studies in the years 1955-1978, the 1980's are the era of more consistent and continuous investigation of kimchi. The period 1989-1991 is characterized by a sudden upsurge in the number of studies reflecting perhaps the heightened status of kimchi as national symbol.

With a growing number of scientists studying kimchi, the institutional basis for research was created in 1994 by the establishment of the Kimchi Research Institute in Pusan National University[40]. A Department of Kimchi Food Science was launched in 2000 at Chungju National College of Science and Technology for the formation and training of

37) The author is a professor of food science at the Agricultural Cooperative University: Han Eungsu, "Hangug gimchi munhwa-ui wigiwa gihoeg" in *Munhwa Ilbo,* October 28, 2005.

38) Han Kyung-Koo (2000), p.222-223; Lee Cheolho and An Boseon, "Gimchi-e gwanhan munheonjeog gochal" in Hangug sigsaenhwal munhwa haghoeji, (1995), 10, 4.

39) Choe Sinyang, "1955nyeon-eseo 1996nyeon ggaji-ui gimchiyeongu munheon moglog" in *Sigpumsan-eobgwa yeongyang,* (1996), 1, 1. pp.88-101.

40) Kimchi Research Institute: http://www.kimchiresearch.com/index.html

kimchi specialists[41]. The Department aims at "studying the specialized knowledge and technology for the industrial development of kimchi, which is the representative Korean traditional food, and training specialized technicians of food industry".

For a part of scientific community, especially that of food and nutrition science, the emergence of kimchi as national symbol was an excellent opportunity to develop a sub-field of study. Research on kimchi could be considered an act of patriotism as well as a professional activity. At the same time, the need for industrialization of kimchi production reflected a more profound change in Korean society with a growing number of people eating outside or consuming manufactured food even at home. In the 1990's, the national food was on the industrial track.

3. Industrialization of Kimchi

The 1990's are the period of industrialization of kimchi: The number of manufacturers was increased from 160 in 1992 to 400 in 2000, and industrially manufactured kimchi's production was 450,000t in 2000. Large conglomerates such as *Lotte*, *Doosan*, or *Cheiljedang* were among the kimchi producers as well as companies specialized in food industry such as *Dongwon* and *Pulmuone*, the latter being the owner of the Kimchi Museum[42]. Kimchi produced by relatively large industrial corporations with high level of quality control was destined to be sold to and consumed by households, while a large number of small and medium sized companies produced low quality and competitive price kimchi to be sold to collective meals providers or restaurants.

In 1993, a big kimchi-related industrial market was created with the launch of kimchi refrigerator: Traditionally, a large quantity of kimchi was made in autumn for winter consumption, and it was conserved in jars buried in soil. With urbanization, a majority of Koreans lived in apartment and did not possess the soil where to bury and conserve their kimchi. Refrigerator was a good functional substitute but presented some problems: It was too small to conserve large quantity of kimchi, and the strong odor of kimchi was imbibed into other cohabitants. *Samsung* and *Golstar* (later *LG*), two leaders in Korean electronics industries quasi-simultaneously launched their kimchi refrigerator in 1993. Two years later, *Winia Mando* launched a very popular model of kimchi refrigerator called *Dimchae*, which is the ancient name for kimchi: This model became the leader of the market with its cumulated production reaching 100,000 in

41) *Chosun Ilbo*, November 9, 1999; Department of Pickled Food Science, Chungju National College of Science and Technology: http://www.kimchiresearch.com/index.html

42) *Munhwa Ilbo*, March 6, 2001.

1998, one million in 2000, and two million in 2002[43]. In 1994, only 0.03% of households possessed a kimchi refrigerator, but the rate was 57% in 2004, reflecting the importance of kimchi in Korean families' food habits[44].

It was thus proved that kimchi and its derivative products had an enormous industrial and commercial potential. The scientific and technological approach of kimchi was emphasized with proliferation of kimchi research centers and teams: *Hanyang Yutong*, a chain of supermarkets, opened a research center in 1995 in Seoul[45]; *LG* founded the Kimchi Research Center in their home electronics industrial complex of Changwon in 2002; The same year, *Samsung*, kimchi refrigerator manufacturer, made alliance with kimchi producer *Pulmuone*, which had already organized its own kimchi research team since 1985; *Winia Mando* created its research team in 1993, and experimented different kimchi making and conserving technology with one million Chinese cabbages in ten years time[46].

Finally, the Korean Kimchi Association was established on August 24, 2005 for "the globalization of kimchi by enhancement of quality, increase of exports and diffusion of kimchi culinary culture, to elevate the status as the original kimchi country, and to contribute to the improvement of revenue for farmers and the development of domestic kimchi industry[47]". This association is located in the Kimchi Research Institute in Pusan National University and represents an effort to mobilize both scientific and industrial actors of kimchi and derivatives. So far, the promotion of kimchi has been exclusively the fact of civil society: Journalists bragging the mysterious strength of Korean traditional food, food scientists creating the subfield of kimchi studies, and industrials catching the opportunity of Korean societal change to create a market for industrially processed kimchi as well as for kimchi special refrigerator.

4. State Support

Contrasting with the extent to which the various sectors of civil society were mobilized in the emergence and promotion of kimchi as a symbol of national identity, Korean State's participation is relatively late. The role of the state began with the symbolic manipulation: In 1996, the Ministry of Culture and Sports proclaimed the best five

43) *Dong-a Ilbo,* November 6, 2002.
44) *Hankyoreh,* October 12, 2004.
45) *Kookmin Ilbo,* May 10, 1995.
46) *Chosun Ilbo,* July 9, 2002.
47) Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, *Public notice 2005-111.*

Korean cultural symbols. Kimchi and *bulgogi*[48] couple was among the five along with *hanbog* (traditional dress), *hangeul* (Korean alphabet), *Bulgug* Bouddhist Temple and *Seoggul-am*, and taekwondo (national martial arts)[49]. Ironically, these symbols were called the Corporate Identity of Korean Culture reflecting the mixed-influence of mercantilism (exports rather than imports even in cultural matters) and neoliberalism (commodification of everything, including culture).

Ten years later in 2006, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism publicized the ambitious list of One Hundred Symbols of National Culture[50], with, of course, kimchi. One of the proclaimed objectives of this list is to "find out the cultural DNA of our nation". The official reason of selection for kimchi: It is "the best vegetables fermented food created by Koreans". Kimchi figures among eleven symbols related to eating and drinking: Others are *ddug* (rice cake), *jeonju bibimbab* (Jeonju style rice with assorted mixtures), *gochujang* (red-pepper paste), *doenjang* (bean paste), *samgyetang* (chicken broth), *onggi* (Korean pottery), *bulgogi, soju* and *maggeolli* (traditional alcohol), *naengmyeon* (cold noodles), and *jjajangmyeon* (Chinese style noodles)[51]. The criteria for selection were symbolic value, possibility for commercial and industrial development, globalization meaning exports possibilities, commonness in both South and North Korea, and affirmation of Koreanness for disputed territories like *Dogdo*. In a sense, kimchi fulfills all these criteria, even the last one because of the disputes on kimchi standardization with Japan, as will be considered later.

This state policy of symbolic manipulation is symptomatic of the government efforts to generalize the trajectory of kimchi as a successful cultural item. Kimchi, from stinking but indispensable everyday foodstuff, has become a proudly proclaimed Korean national treasure, good for health and environment, and simultaneously very profitable business in both domestic and international markets. The example of kimchi, whose development was entirely autonomous, was to be emulated in other cultural domains.

In 2004, the Planning and Promotion Unit for Kimchi Industry was created with government funding in Gwangju Technopark. Financed by the Ministry of Industry, it is

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48) Usually translated Korean barbecue, *bulgogi* is beef meat marinated in bean sauce and barbecued. Very popular till the 1980's, it fell out of favor in the 1990's and somehow became a Korean food for foreigners. *Galbi*, which is prepared in the same manner but utilizing more expensive beef ribs, are more popular today.

49) *Chosun Ilbo*, December 1, 1996.

50) Ministry of Culture and Tourism, *One Hundred Symbols of National Culture*, (Seoul: MCT, 2006)

51) The Ministry explains that "even though it comes from China, it was localized in a different manner in our country. It is a representative eating out menu for most Koreans with a possibility for globalization". But, some foods coming from Japan, even localized, could not be included among the symbols of national culture, reflecting the particular sensitivity of Korea-Japan relations.

a consortium including central government, local governments of Gwangju and Jeonnam, a research center and six Universities. It seems to be the first case of government funding for a concrete industrial promotion project of kimchi reflecting the policy interest for 'cultural mercantilism'.

The 1990's can thus be characterized as the period of kimchi's consolidation as an important national symbol, with repetitive journalistic promotion and generalized scientific legitimation. As we have examined, all these developments are related to the surprising ascension of kimchi industry, igniting research and development activities, improving kimchi's qualities as everyday health food, and enlarging the consumption basis of kimchi with nationalist appeal in domestic market.

Ⅳ. International Dimension

Because kimchi is not a trivial food, but one of the most popular cultural symbols of Korean national identity, it possesses a particularly high sensitivity when it is put on the international stage. I underlined above how much the praise of kimchi's qualities by foreign voices was quoted, utilized, and sometimes over-exploited by Korean media. In this part, I examine three cases of international issues concerning kimchi: The Korea-Japan conflict about the international standardization of kimchi, the Korea-China conflict upon kimchi trade and hygiene, and the internationally buried potential controversy over kimchi's effect on health.

1. Korea-Japan 'War' for International Recognition

The utilization of martial terminology like 'war' by media is symptomatic of kimchi's status as national cultural symbol involving identity and sovereignty. The first Kimchi War was between Korea and Japan over the international recognition and standardization. The media reported the "Victory of Olympic 'Kimchi War' : Official Provider of Atlanta Olympics, Beating Japan[52]" : The Korean Agricultural Cooperative, *Nonghyeob,* signed a supply contract of kimchi with the Organizing Committee of the Atlanta Olympics. Because Japanese kimchi manufacturer was also candidate for this contract, it was for *Nonghyeob* a matter of national sovereignty: Its representatives insisted that Korea was

52) *Dong-a Ilbo,* April 13, 1996.

the 'Sovereign House of Kimchi' and deployed efforts "to block the Japanese supply of kimchi[53]".

The basic problem between Korea and Japan on kimchi is that Japan has developed her own kind of kimchi, called *kimuchi* – simply the Japanese pronunciation of kimchi –, which is less hot and spicy, and not necessarily fermented like the Korean version, thus with less strong odor. This was a perfectly normal consequence of local adaptation, but unacceptable for Koreans, because 1) Japan was the formal colonial power of Korea, 2) Japanese *kimuchi* recipe was a clear violation of the Korean authentic kimchi fabrication method, and 3) Japanese *kimuchi* market had an enormous potential for enlargement and Japanese manufacturers were potential competitors in world kimchi–*kimuchi* market.

The most feverish phase of Korea–Japan Kimchi War was the period 1995–2001 during which the international CAC (Committee Alimentarius Codex) discussed, examined, and finally fixed an international standard for kimchi. In this process, the Korean Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry played a leading role by first submitting a draft proposition in 1995. The Korea Food Research Institute under the Ministry, created in 1987–88, was the concrete actor and negotiator of this internationalization of kimchi. Following the symbolic manipulation by the Ministry of Culture, the main motive of state intervention was 'cultural mercantilism' in order to export merchandises of Korean culture.

The War was in fact a series of negotiations between Korea and Japan over what to call kimchi–*kimuchi:* Korea favored the traditional method of natural fermentation, while Japan opposed such a restrictive definition[54]. Ogawa Toshio, from the Japanese National *Tsukemono* Cooperatives Union, is against calling kimchi only Korean style kimchi, because every food should adapt to local market and one can not ignore the demand of Japanese consumers. Kim Yeongyeol, President of the Korean Food Consortium of Japan, argued that "if Korean kimchi and Japanese kimchi were called by the same name, it would be a second Japanization of name[55]". On July 2001, the kimchi standard was officially registered at the CAC as a consequence of Korean–Japanese compromise: The Korean version of food name, kimchi, was internationally recognized, while a large definition of fabrication method was adopted, opening the way for Japanese manufacturers to legitimately call their products kimchi.

The international standardization policy reflected the state's commercial interest in

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53) *Dong-a Ilbo,* January 11, 1996.

54) See the debate in *Dong-a Ilbo,* September 15, 1999.

55) In 1939, Japan adopted a policy of cultural assimilation in her Korean colony and forced people to take Japanese family and given names in place of Korean ones.

expanding the kimchi international market and in stimulating Korean kimchi exports. But, confronted with Japanese commercial interests, Korean government was forced to accept a broader definition of its national dish. Once kimchi was internationally standardized, another war was awaiting, this time concerning the cost of production and international competitiveness.

2. K●rea-China Kimchi Trade War

The registration of kimchi in 2001 on the internationally recognized CAC was undoubtedly a victory of the Korean national symbol on world stage. Once the rules of the game were defined, it was up to the main actors, Korean and Japanese manufacturers to compete in growing markets: "Codex Registration is the Opening of the Kimchi War[56]". But it was counting without a terrible new actor, China.

At the turn of the century, the prospective for Korean kimchi industry seemed brilliant: In 2000, the Korean annual production of kimchi was estimated 1.5 million tons with 450,000 tons for manufactured kimchi, the majority being still prepared in households. But the industrial part of the market was steadily growing. The Japanese market of kimchi-*kimuchi* was estimated at 180,147 tons in 1998, and Korean exports of kimchi to Japan were also increasing, from 12,080t in 1997 to 24,561t in 1999, the Japanese market representing the quasi-totality of Korean exports (97%). It was perfectly natural to expect for continuous development of Korean kimchi industry on both domestic and foreign markets: The sovereign house of kimchi was to reign on world market.

At the dawn of the new century, China began to export kimchi to Korea in small amounts: In 2002, it was only 1,041t, which means less than 1% of manufactured kimchi market. But the low production cost of China and the consequent international division of labor provoked a rapid delocalization of kimchi industry from the sovereign house to foreign lands. Chinese kimchi exports to Korea traced a dramatic ascension curb to 28,701t in 2003, to reach about 100,000t in 2005[57]. The latter number means that the average annual individual consumption of Chinese kimchi by Koreans is 2kg!

On this strange and explosive context of Koreans importing their national dish from China, the War was ignited by an opposition politician Ko Kyeonghwa, member of National Assembly. As the Chief of Food Security Task Force for the opposition Grand

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56) *Hankook Ilbo*, July 7, 2001.

57) Kim Jaejung, "Junggugsan gimchi-e beomuryeojin hangugsan jeongchigyeongjehag" in *Mal*, November (2005), p.37.

National Party, and based upon results from the Research Institute of Public Health and Environment of the City of Seoul, she declared that imported kimchi from China contained a dangerous level of lead[58]. But the Korea Food and Drug Administration (KFDA) replied that the amount of lead contained in imported kimchi was not dangerous for human body according to WHO criteria[59]. The central government administration proceeded to analyzing imported and domestic kimchi, and found that some contained lead, but the level was far lower than declared by the opposition politician[60]. On 21 October 2005, the KFDA announced that further investigations showed that some imported Chinese kimchi contained parasitic insect eggs, thus deepening the social scandal over and concern with food security. The import of Chinese kimchi fell dramatically, and was practically blocked by Korean customs for hygiene inspection. On 31 October, China retaliated by announcing that Korean kimchi and food products contained parasitic insect eggs, and prohibited their imports[61]. The Kimchi War was declared, but rapidly found the way to the cease-fire around 10 November, with an arrangement and promise of closer cooperation for hygiene and customs inspection. It was reported that the Chinese government was particularly dissatisfied with the media coverage of the news inclining to China-bashing[62].

The Korea-China Kimchi War of 2005 revealed that 1) the low-end market of the national dish was 'occupied' by foreign production, and 2) because of this international division of labor, the domestic political confrontation on food security provoked an international trade war. But more concrete analysis indicates that most of the manufacturers producing kimchi in China and exporting to Korea are Korean entrepreneurs, so that 3) the Chinese government's firm reaction must be understood as an identity-based dissatisfaction rather than a commercially motivated move. It seems that this constitutes an interesting case of spillover from a domestic political debate to the international conflict.

3. Kimchi's Effect on Health

Kimchi's beneficial effects on health have been abundantly studied, publicized and promoted not only by food scientists and nutritionists, but also by Korean media and Korean people in general, especially in the context of international encounters. In a

58) *Kookmin Ilbo*, September 26, 2005.
59) *Chosun Ilbo*, September 29, 2005.
60) *Hankyoreh*, October 11, 2005.
61) *Munhwa Ilbo*, November 1, 2005.
62) *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, November 11, 2005

sense, the national treasury could have but beneficial effects on health. When an American periodical, Health, chose Korean kimchi among international health food in its March delivery of 2006, major important Korean newspapers reported the news with flashing titles: "American Magazine Health Chose Kimchi among Five Healthiest Food in the World with Abundant Vitamins and Repressing Effect on Cancer[63]", "'Wonderful Kimchi', among World Five Best Health Food[64]", or "Seduced by Kimchi, American Monthly Magazine's Selection as the World's Five Healthiest Foods[65]". The Spanish olive oil, the Japanese soy, the Greek yogurt and the Indian lentils were the other World Health Foods. After the declaration of independence in taste, Korea has finally reached the highest level of international recognition not of mere independence but of its superior quality.

What is much less known and publicized is the fact that Korean and Japanese generalized daily consumption of pickled food – *tsukemono* in Japan and kimchi in Korea – is considered a risk factor of frequent gastric cancer: Medical studies have established that salted food as well as high salt diet were main risk factors for this type of cancer along with smoked food and barbecued meat or fish[66]. These studies also underline that vitamins and yellow-green vegetables are protective factors of gastric cancer so that the effects of kimchi on health can not be unilaterally and uniformly said to be good or bad. But because kimchi is the cultural symbol of Korean national identity, it is surrounded by an aura of sanctity which is difficult to attack.

Recently in 2006, Korean newspapers reported an article by Los Angeles Times criticizing Korean 'kimchi patriotism' which hinder possible risks induced by over-consumption of national food[67]. It is too early to say if these reports will be the beginning of a more objective public discussion on the effects of kimchi on health.

So far, Korea fought two Kimchi Wars, one against Japan about the very definition of kimchi, and one against China about food security in kimchi trade. These international conflicts are the logical consequences of kimchi's internationalization in consumption as well as in production. As in most wars, Kimchi Wars were also fought by state soldiers, the Ministry of Agriculture (Korea Food Research Institute) in the first one, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Korean Embassy in Beijing) and the Ministry of Agriculture

63) *Chosun Ilbo,* March 27, 2006.
64) *Dong-a Ilbo,* March 27, 2006.
65) *Kyunghyang Sinmun,* March 27, 2006.
66) Ahn Yoon-Ok and Shin Myung-Hee, "Epidemiology of Gastric Cancer in Korea" in *Korean Journal of Epidemiology,* (1995), 17, 1.
67) *Kyunghyang Sinmun,* May 23, 2006.

(Korean Food and Drug Administration) in the second one. This contrasts with the declaration of independence and national promotion phases largely dominated by civil society actors. Perhaps a third war on the objective and universal value of kimchi as health food is being generated. The internationalization of kimchi has ineluctably brought about these conflicts and pushed the state to the line of confrontation.

Ⅴ. Conclusion: The Politics of Kimchi

In a sense, the emergence of kimchi as national food followed a trajectory similar to that of Korean nation: 1) the liberation from symbolic domination of imported foreign food and declaration of independence in taste by raising the popular domestic food, 2) the large social mobilization and promotion of the national food to praise its' superior qualities, and consequently the scientific institutionalization and industrialization, and 3) the international promotion of kimchi encountering some conflicts, either on the standardization or international trade.

During this process of emergence and institutionalization of about two decades, several characteristics can be underlined: First, eating and drinking are one of the most private acts of human life so that their cultural and political manipulation as national symbol seems to have a very deep and strong appealing power on individuals. Even compared to several national culinary symbols of other nations, kimchi possesses particularities such as its generalized everyday consumption, contrary to some noble, elegant, but high class or extraordinary festive foods, or its reinforced ethnic marker function due to its strong odor, like some French *fromage* in Western environment. In a word, kimchi has some intrinsic qualities as a national symbol.

Second, the timing of kimchi's emergence as national symbol indicates that this kind of cultural nationalism must be intimately related to the general ascension of national status in international society. The 1988 Seoul Olympics constitute not only the symbol of Korean economic miracle but also the culinary declaration of independence. It seems that the shifting involvements between public action and private interest *à la* Hirschmann can metaphorically be applied to the shifting preferences between foreign imitation and national affirmation.

Third, the case of kimchi is of particular interest because its emergence was purely societal. In many cases, the Third World countries nationalisms are stimulated and directed by post-colonial state in its efforts to forge a strong country. In these Asian developmental states like Korea, society has been continuously mobilized in order to

reinforce the state power and plenty. But in the case of kimchi, it emerged autonomously among societal actors including media, scientific community and industries, as a national symbol. The invention of the culinary tradition was also the fact of several universities and industrials. This article indicates that the congruence of industrial interest and psychological need for international recognition was determinant in the emergence of kimchi in such a speed and extent.

Fourth, the state followed the societal emergence by officially legitimating the national symbol and participating in the international promotion of the national treasure. But such a strong nationalistic involvement in this side-dish provoked international conflicts because, even for national dish, the law of international division of labor applies especially if the production is industrialized. Now, the biggest manufacturer of 'Korean' kimchi is China, reflecting the globalization process.

In this study, I did not treat kimchi's status as national symbol in North Korea. The generalized daily consumption of kimchi is the common feature in South and North, and it must be of particular interest to follow and observe the kimchi trajectory as national symbol or merely a basic food in communist North. Furthermore, this research should be completed by other studies of Korean national symbols, and by comparative study of different representative national food.

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