

Well-Nourished Beauty

Culinary Symbolism in the Mass Culture of North Korea, 1960-2014

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ABSTRACT

In the official discourse of the “paradise on earth” of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), food evolved from a neglected and downplayed topic to become a symbol of national authenticity and loyalty to the Leader. This article seeks to trace the historical development of culinary symbolism in North Korean official mass culture in correlation with the changing trends in DPRK official propaganda.

Key words: North Korea, DPRK, food culture, nationalism, culture, socialist realism, social transition

RESUMEN

En el discurso oficial del “paraíso en la tierra” propio de la República Popular Democrática de Corea (RPDC), la cuestión alimenticia evolucionó dejando de ser un asunto descuidado y minimizado para convertirse en un símbolo de autenticidad nacional y lealtad hacia el Líder. Este artículo pretende trazar el desarrollo histórico del simbolismo culinario en la cultura oficial de masas de Corea del Norte, en correlación con las tendencias cambiantes en la propaganda oficial de la RPDC.

Palabras clave: Corea del Norte, RPDC, cultura alimenticia, Corea del Norte, nacionalismo, cultura, realismo socialista, transición social

RESUM

En el discurs oficial del “paradís a la terra” propi de la República Popular Democràtica de Corea (RPDC), la qüestió del menjar va evolucionar deixant de ser un assumpte descuidat i

minimitzat per esdevenir un símbol d'autenticitat nacional i lleialtat cap a el Líder. Aquest article pretén traçar el desenvolupament històric del simbolisme culinari en la cultura oficial de masses de Corea del Nord, a corre-lació amb les tendències canviants en la propaganda oficial de la RPDC.

Paraules clau: Corea del Nord, RPDC, cultura alimentària, nacionalisme, cultura, realisme socialista, transició social

1.Introduction: Food versus Morality in “Classic” North Korean Popular Culture

For a long period, food imagery was kept to a low profile in North Korean official culture. Until the beginning of the 1990s, even women's magazines aimed at North Korean housewives did not run regular recipe columns, which made them different from their Soviet origins¹. While North Korean works of literature and the arts generously presented pictures of rich crop harvesting, with their unavoidable images of fat stocks and fruit and vegetable abundance, they lacked pictures of consumption of these products in the form of appetising dishes. North Korean works of cinematography occasionally included images of celebrations with communal feasts, yet the characters rarely had the possibility of actually eating the displayed dishes. Instead, they were portrayed singing and dancing around the tables. In addition, the characters were often presented as sitting absent-mindedly in front of lavishly-served tables, unable to touch the food because they are too busy discussing or contemplating lofty political subjects. Such scenes can be found in abundance in classic North Korean films of the 1980s-early 1990s such as *Broad Bellflower* (*Toraji kkot*) (1987), *Girls from my Hometown* (*Nae kohyangŭi ch'ŏyŏŭl*) (1991), *City Girl is Marrying a Village Fellow* (*Tosichŏyŏ sijipwayŏ*) (1992), among many others.

Interest in food in the works of “traditional” North Korean literature and films often served as a signifier of negative personality traits. While protagonists tended to ignore food due to political excitement or overwhelming labour responsibilities, antagonists on the other hand tended to devour food. Normally, this served as an indication of their greediness or egocentrism. Such a scene exists in the 1979 film *Hello!* (*Annyŏghaseyo!*), where a local bureaucrat who neglects his responsibility to care for new settlers is portrayed as devouring chicken soup the moment a settler's family is abandoned and left on their own. In another film, *A Train Waitress* (*Uri ryŏch'a p'anmaewŏ*) (1972), another bureaucrat is portrayed as enjoying cool beer and snacks while a train station refrigerator is broken, lea-

¹ Gronow and Zhuravlev (2011)

ving customers to endure the harsh summer heat without refreshments. In the film *Central Forward* (*Chungyang kongryŏsu*) (1961) one of the major characters Ch'yŏgyu demonstrates his lack of inner discipline via excessive interest in food and drinks. In the film *The First Year of Marriage* (*Kyŏhon hu ch'yŏhae*, 1984), a positive female character pays no attention to family cooking being enwrapped by her workplace responsibilities. Her less politically conscientious husband, on the contrary, is concerned with her bad cooking skills and insufficient care of his elderly father (her father-in-law). The backward husband is sternly criticised by the majority of people around, including his father.

The tendency of classic North Korean popular culture to ignore or demonise food consumption is especially noticeable if one compares it with South Korean popular culture, where food often has self-important positive connotations and serves as a major mediator between characters. This cultural difference allowed Russian pro-DPRK activists to develop one of their favourite arguments about an alleged fixation on the food and insecurity of South Koreans in the sphere of nutrition². In one recent internet discussion, for example, Irina Malenko characterised the tendency of South Koreans to discuss culinary issues in detail and uploading photographs of dishes before eating to Facebook as an “obsession” and evidence of the “mental abnormalities” of “capitalist South Korea” - in contrast, of course, to the highly spiritual DPRK³.

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Since the early 2000s, however, North Korean mass culture has suddenly changed a decades-long pattern of its approach to food. The previous neglect of nutrition has been replaced by a splash of interest in the issues of gastronomy and imagery of food abundance. Pages and screens were overflowing with images of food and people eating with gusto. Filmmakers and writers found new exemplary characters of “our military-first” Korea: not just regular soldiers or construction workers but devoted chefs with unique professional philosophies. North Korean popular songs started to extoll the taste and nutritious virtues of various national dishes.

Providing strict state regulation of North Korean “socialist realist” culture, this radical change of attitude to the issues of gastronomy was far from being spontaneous. Transformation of culinary symbolism in North Korean official cultural discourse must be contextualised in the broader political and social changes of the DPRK.

² Irina Malenko (2013)

³ Н.Габрусенко про судьбу северян-беженцев на Юге, *Livejournal*, March 31st, 2015 <http://makkawity.livejournal.com/3342564.html>, accessed, 19.07.2015

2.The Place of Food in “People’s Paradise”

The reticent attitude to depictions of food in the DPRK of the 1950s to early 1990s can partially be explained by the influence of Soviet culture, which has its roots in traditional Russian culture, with its practices of harsh fasting during Lent and austere Christian disapproval of gluttony. The major factor contributing to North Korea’s cultural aversion to depictions of food, however, was a result of more complex contemporary and practical circumstances. The economic model of the DPRK which followed the outline of the Soviet Union of Stalin’s era, and which has been described by János Kornai as leading to “economics of shortage”⁴ put a major emphasis on heavy industry and militarization of the North Korean economy. Within this model, consumption was understandably discouraged. As N. Eberstadt has noted, “North Korea, in fact, appears to have had a lower ratio of consumption to output than any other communist state in the 1950s. Through the 1960s, the 1970, and the 1980s available evidence suggests that the North Korean consumer sector became increasingly marginalized”⁵.

In response to this economic strategy, North Korean propaganda used to discourage consumption and endorse altruism and asceticism as the alleged core values of the North Korean mentality. Following the same logic, exemplary labour heroes of North Korean literature and the arts used to work mostly in heavy industry and agriculture, and rarely in consumer services, catering or light manufacturing.

However, North Korean ideology failed to totally erase images of food from North Korean cultural space. For the essentially atheist *juche* ideology, food served as the major materialistic symbol of the new socialist “paradise on earth”. Traditional peasant visions of prosperity such as “a house with a tiled roof, a bowl of boiled rice, soup with meat and silk clothes” were the cornerstones of this ideology. The rituals of distribution of food and consumption items as the personal presents of the leader to every North Korean citizen aimed to demonstrate how successfully the “father of the nation” executed his duties as the national breadwinner. According to the widely disseminated anecdote, just before his death “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il had signed documents to distribute 1kg of fish to every person in Pyongyang”⁶.

Being squeezed between these two objectives, North Korean official culture could not do completely without food imagery; yet its food related topics used to

⁴ Kornai, János (1980)

⁵ Eberstadt (2010): 177

⁶ Styles (2015)

be largely producer-oriented, not consumer-oriented. When pondering the blessings of the socialist paradise, North Korean propagandists tended to focus on the abundance of the foodstuffs and raw products rather than on their culinary applications.

It is important to comment that the rare food images in the works of official North Korean literature and the arts in the DPRK of the 1960s to early 1990s used to replicate traditional Korean perceptions of “good food” with its characteristic abundance of high protein and refined products. No table in a North Korean film or work of art was presented without a bowl of white rice, regardless of the fact that in real life everyday rations of North Koreans consisted mostly of mixed grains.

Even more significant were the casual references to dog meat in the works of North Korean culture. Apparently North Korean ideologists did not know or paid no attention to the negative international perceptions of the issue of consumption of dog meat in Korea. A feature film *Rich Village* (*P’ungseŏghan mau*) which was produced around the early 1990s contains claims of the alleged special nutritious qualities of dog meat (“dog meat is much more nutritious than beef”) and a scene of dog killing which is curiously observed by younger characters. The scene finishes with a joyfully impatient invitation to a family member to join the feast: “Come quicker before the dog’s liver gets cold!” Quite in tune with North Korean cultural tradition, however, the characters failed to enjoy the ‘precious product’ being distracted by the duties of their labour.

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3.The Arduous March as a Challenge to North Korean Ideological Doctrine

In the mid-1990s, the DPRK approached the hardest period of its history after the Korean War: the famine. This humanitarian catastrophe was an immediate consequence of a chain of unhappy events such as the termination of the decades-long Soviet economic assistance and bad weather conditions. International experts agree, however, on the conclusion that the inefficiencies of the North Korean economic system should be considered the primary reason for the shortages. For the national ideology and legitimacy of the North Korean leadership, the famine represented a significant potential danger, for it was the first time in the DPRK’s history when its leadership was forced to publicly reveal the fact that its citizens were starving despite living in the “people’s paradise”.

The famine itself was not a novelty in the DPRK. In 1954-1955, for instance, the DPRK experienced a severe famine, yet it was not publicly announced. Kim Il Sung recognized the fact of starvation in his private conversations with the diplomats of socialist countries which he visited in order to beg for more economic help; yet Kim could be sure that these conversations would be left behind the closed doors. The then-sponsors of the DPRK were not eager to air the dirty linen of their “socialist brother” in public, and thus undermine the international authority of the socialist system.

Notably enough, some foreign witnesses of the North Korean famine did not agree with the general line. In his conversation with the Soviet ambassador in 1956, Bulgarian ambassador Grigorov shared the pain which he had recently experienced while watching dystrophic North Korean patients in a Bulgaria-managed Red Cross hospital. Grigorov was indignant at the fact that the famine was not openly recognized and discussed: the official propaganda in the DPRK continued to extoll the alleged achievements of a socialist economy. In any case, Grigorov’s private opinion had no influence on the political line of Soviet and Bulgarian partners toward the DPRK.

After *perestroika*, North Korea lost its socialist sponsors. To receive assistance from the international community, the DPRK had to ask for it loudly and publicly. This move indeed saved many North Korean lives; yet it could be potentially explosive for the official ideology and thus for the legitimacy of the North Korean regime, which had been based on the claims of material prosperity. The DPRK state ideologists had to invest significant efforts and creativity into suggesting a suitable version of events and match the incompatibilities of reality and ideology.

The first stages of North Korean propaganda during the famine period followed the previous tradition. The country was announced to be currently undergoing a period of the “Arduous March” – this pretty euphemism was an allusion to the march of Kim Il Sung’s guerrillas in 1938 Manchuria, another heavily mythologized event of contemporary North Korean history. The suggested version of the causes of the second Arduous March included neither references to the termination of foreign economic assistance, imminent deficiencies in the North Korean economic system, nor the inefficiency of its leadership. Instead, North Korean “economic problems” were attributed to the following reasons: 1) an alleged national psychological trauma over the death of Generalissimo Kim Il Sung in 1994, 2) the economic blockade initiated by the vicious US imperialists, 3) the DPRK’s responsibility for preserving international socialism after the destruction of world Communism, and 4) poor harvests⁷. Since all of the above-mentioned reasons

⁷ For the suggested reasons for the famine of the late 1990s, see Yun Hyŏn-chŏl, [2002]

were externally imposed, the paradigm of the Arduous March freed the North Korean leadership from any responsibility for the failures of economy. The citizens of the DPRK were summoned to tighten their belts and work even harder for the sake of their country and the leader.

State-sponsored culture and the arts were mobilised to create persuasive tropes and conventions for the Arduous March. The renovated narrative of food was among these tropes.

3.1 Step One: Reinforcing and Strengthening Previous Patterns of Food Representation

Immediately after the beginning of the ‘march’, North Korean mass culture reinforced the previous anti-consumerist traditions which neglected nutrition or denied the importance of food. Typical in this regard are the films *A Family which Blooms in Songs* (*Norae sog e kkotp’in un kajyŏg*) (1996) and *A Family Basketball Team* (*Kajeŏronggu sŏsudan*) (1998). Both works, screened at the height of national food shortages, promoted the idea of the prevalence of will and good spirit over material conditions and the value of good nutrition.

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One of the subplots of *A Family Which Blooms in Songs* features a character who hopes to improve his singing ability with the help of a traditional remedy, a kind of honey water, only to find out that his efforts are in vain; his performance could improve only after he performs songs with better enthusiasm and with a spirit of collectivism and loyalty to the leader. *A Family Basketball Team* shows the evolution of weak family member Wŏ Chŏ into an agile and strong sportsman. At first, Wŏ Chŏ’s loving wife tries to improve his physical condition with calorie-laden dishes such as chicken soup, but with little effect. Instead of devouring rich food, Wŏ Chŏ turns into a strongman due to his perseverance in sport. During a family training session, he proudly claims to his wife that there is “no need for this thick chicken soup anymore”. Both films conveniently ignore fact that in the contemporary DPRK honey and chicken meat had turned into rare delicacies quite a while prior.

Furthermore, *A Family Basketball Team*, whose plot revolves around the idea of the popularization of sports in accordance with the teachings of Kim Jong Il, consistently contrasts the value of eating to the value of sports. During family gatherings, which involve consumption of a humble roast potato, the head of the family, a basketball coach in a rural school, warns the younger members of the family against the dangers of overeating and the immorality of greediness. The only negative character in the film, a minor local official Kim Ch’ae-sŏ who once

refused to work at the rural school because of his 'selfish' love for comfort, is shamed as obese. When the character complains about forgetting somebody's name, his sister immediately connects this supposed loss of memory with insufficient physical activity and overeating and lectures him, telling him that "the lengthier your belt, the shorter your life". Curiously enough, the actor Kang Wŏg-suk who plays this role looks to be a perfectly normal body weight.

Thus, the propaganda of moderation of food consumption in the film is related not to the objective deficiency of food but rather to the issues of individual discipline and social responsibility.

A poem written by Han Chŏng-gyu in 1998⁸ called *The Words I Often Say to My Children* contrasts food to morality in an even more radical way:

When a grown up and a smart child
Sees the empty pocket of his mother and
Still holds his hand outstretched, begging for the impossible,
How ungrateful this child is!
Today our motherland is suffering much
Because she is saving socialism, which the others could not save
So, do not hold your hand out, do not beg!
Do not let the hearts of your parents who cannot give you plenty
Feel even more pain!
The ancient people said
That only after bellies are full and the back is warm
People can smile and dance.
But is it really so?
Let's smile, and dance, and march ahead.
Today the dead heroes of Paektu Mountain
See us smiling and dancing in the snowflakes,
With only fresh snowflakes in our bellies.
We should smile and sing,
And our Fatherly Marshal
Will have more strength.

Many works of North Korean culture in the late 1990s employ a narrative about a character who neglects his professional duties because he or she goes searching for food for his or her hungry family. One example is the storyline in a short story called *Green Notebook* (1999) by Han In-jun⁹. In the majority of works, such be-

⁸ Han Chŏng-gyu (1998): 130-132.

⁹ Han In-jun (1999): 57-65

haviour is criticized as greedy, selfish and ultimately, indecent. Additionally, in some works, the supposed 'gluttony' of a character is punished. For example, an episode in a two-chaptered film *Chagangdo People* (*Chagangdo saramdŭl*) (2000) where a hungry technician goes in search of corn at the moment when he is expected to repair a TV set for the brigade. Due to his 'selfish' behaviour, other workers (whose daily rations consist of 40 kernels of corn) are not able to watch the speech of the Dear Leader. The deviant is demoted with the severe admonishment "even if we have our stomach full we cannot survive without watching the Dear Leader".

Notably, however, the anti-materialist and anti-food discourse of the "Arduous March" was far from being consistent. Despite propagated neglect regarding the issues of nutrition, actresses and actors who played the roles of enthusiastic labour heroines and loyal soldiers in films about the Arduous March tended to look rather well-nourished. It is suffice to remember the actresses Ryu Kyeon-ae and Pak Yeong-mi who played the roles of the female leaders of the 'Storm Brigade' in the serial *Daehongdan Party Secretary* (*Taehongdan chaekim pishŏ*) (1997-2001). During their heroic battle, both heroines stoically endured hunger, yet did not seem to lose their characteristically plump forms. Another famous actor in these films, Kim Yŏng-il, with his protruded 'beer belly' was often screened in films about the Arduous March, such as *Onnyu Landscape* (*Onnyu p'unggyŏg*) (2000).

The same can be said about illustrations to the fiction which glorified exploits of enthusiastic fighters of the Arduous March. Most of these enduring heroes were portrayed as sturdy and stout, with big round faces; overall, these images were close to the traditional peasant ideas of healthy, well-nourished beauty.

3.2. Step Two: A Shift toward Gastronomy

Since the early 2000s, North Korean media abruptly changed a decades-long pattern of its approach to food. Official media, including even the leading Party newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*, began to publish recipes of nutritious dishes. Public visits of the Dear Leader to the famous restaurants Onnyugwan and Ch'ŏnyugwan, exemplary bars such as Kyŏhŭnggwan, supermarkets, and even chewing gum factories¹⁰ where the Dear Leader made his famous "on the spot guidance" were widely broadcasted in the North Korean media.

The change in the paradigm was a logical continuation of the slogans which accompanied the beginning of the rule of the new leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong Il. According to the official state propaganda, the genius of Kim the Second alleged-

¹⁰ "Radost' KimJenlla" (2009)

ly allowed the DPRK to “turn the Arduous March into a march to paradise”. The supposed victory which in reality brought little relief to suffering North Korean citizens required some visual proof; so began the imagery of food abundance.

Unlike earlier representations, the food which featured in North Korean mass culture in the early 2000s had nothing to do with the old Korean ideal of great feasts. As physical representations of newly-acquired wealth, North Korean propagandists proposed mundane and agriculturally uninteresting products. Among them were not only well-known corn, potato, rabbit and goat milk/meats, but also Jerusalem artichokes, which normally are foraged in the wilderness. The dishes which served as symbols of the restored abundance were also basic and unpretentious. North Korean popular songs glorified the virtues of *kimchi* made of radish and soups made of soybean paste.

The campaign of promotion of these plain dishes in the DPRK had some similarities with the culinary nationalism which bloomed simultaneously in contemporary South Korea. Both countries glorified “our food” as the epitome of healthiness and as a guarantee of longevity. Both Koreas claimed the alleged uniqueness of their national culinary traditions. Popular culture in both Koreas widely employed culinary shows and TV dramas about popular restaurants. Also common to the cultures of both Koreas were images of new characters who, instead of joining a ‘Storm Brigade’ (North Korea) or a prestigious university (South Korea), became cooks.

However, despite some formal similarities, culinary nationalism in South and North Korea was driven by different objectives and, for that reason, differed in many formal aspects.

Blooming culinary nationalism in South Korea was investigated in detail by Kasia Cwiertka. As she accurately noted, in South Korea a “nostalgia market for romanticized versions of the past represented by goods, performances and experiences” took root¹¹. The diversity of contemporary South Korean food market is often perceived as dangerous to the national culinary tradition. Above all, as P. Ferguson emphasized, South Korean culinary distinction has to endure the pressures of globalization¹². The commodification of the imagined culinary tradition in South Korea aims at the moulding of the new image of Korea overseas through culinary associations, somewhat in the mold of Italy or France.

¹¹ Cwiertka (2012): 137.

¹² Ferguson, P. (2010): 102-9.

In contrast, North Korean culinary tradition has been stable; the DPRK culinary nationalism entertained no expansionist ambitions and aimed strictly at the domestic audience. As it was stated above, the primarily ideological goal of this tendency was the continued support of the self-image of the DPRK as the “people’s paradise”. That was why, unlike South Korean culinary nationalism, which extolls both royal and rustic Korean cuisine, North Korean discourse contrasted plain famine-relief food to the traditional staple of rice and extolled these unpretentious foods as better than rice substitutes. In a characteristic manner, production and consumption of such “better foods” were sanctified by direct appeals to the authority of the Leaders.

One of the first films produced during the Arduous March which approached the issues of cooking and eating from the new angle was *Officers’ Wives* (*Kungwanŭi anhaedŭl*) (2000). This film, which narrated a story about the collective spirit of a distant military unit where soldiers and officers lived the life of one happy family, is filled with images of cooking and eating. Revolutionary enough, the film employed the image of a good protagonist who is eating impatiently and a lot. His speedy devouring of food shocks his young wife, a delicate city dweller; yet she soon discovers that this is a normal eating manner of an always busy officer.

In addition, the film employs the theme of *toengjang chigye* (soy bean paste soup) and *kuksu* (noodles). These dishes used to emerge in some previous works of North Korean cinematography, such as for instance, in the fourth chapter of *Nation and Fate* (*Minjŏkwa unmyŏg*) (1992). Yet, in this film *toengjang chigye* had primary connotations of a food of nostalgia. A protagonist Ch’oe Hyŏ-dŏ (based on the real character Ch’oe Tŏ-sin) returns to his motherland after many years of living overseas. The character is prosperous and pampered; yet when served *toengjang chigye* at the house of his friend (and the friend’s wife felt the necessity to ask the guest whether he ate this modest dish) Ch’oe extolls: “I could forget anything for these years but not this delicious smell!” Then he eats the whole bowl of *toengjang chigye* with tears on his eyes.

In contrast, *Officers’ Wives* which was produced in the leaner year of 2000 presents *toengjang chigye* and *kuksu* as delicacies to be cherished for their particular nutritious qualities.

In a similar way, a play by a dramatist Yun Tae-jong titled *The Lucky Potato* extolled the nutritional qualities of Jerusalem artichokes, which members of a particular collective farm started to grow on their fields following the instructions of the departed Great Leader (Kim Il Sung) and the orders of the Marshal (Kim Jong Il). The play focused on the fact that artichokes should be used in the production of *mulyŏ* (syrup), *toengjang* (soy bean paste) and *kanjang* (soy sauce) for human

consumption, as well as in medicine for curing burns. The play contains a song with the following lyrics:

Pantries of every house are filled with artichokes
That is why there are smiles on the faces of every member of our collective farm.
Our prosperous collective farm is a place of growing Jerusalem artichokes
That is why our songs are filled with happiness.

A popular song, “Potato Pride” (*Kamja charang*), composed by Chang Sŏ-pong and lyrics by Ŏ Ae-ran, tells the story of an extremely healthy old man who owes his health and longevity to the regular consumption of potatoes. Having received his allocated share of potatoes, the old man organizes a birthday feast during which he serves his guests with potato fries, potato liquor, potato sticky cakes, potato donuts and potato noodles (dishes which were usually supposed to be cooked from rice and wheat flour). The song laments the bad old days when Koreans used to live hungry lives and then extolls the wise leadership of the Party thanks to which the people of the DPRK have finally become able to grow enough potatoes. According to the song, this blessing has allowed Koreans to give birth to many children and live long healthy lives.

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Some substitutes for rice which were proposed by new propaganda were of a rather dubious quality. In #10, 2000, *Chosŏn yesul* (*Korean Art*) published an article entitled “Noodles made of Frozen Potatoes” (*ŏnkamja kuksu*). According to the article, this wonderful dish has been known since the time of the revolutionary fight of Kim Il Sung as “partisan noodles” or “Paektusan noodles”. Allegedly, Korean peasants intentionally left some potatoes in the fields so that Kim Il Sung’s guerrilla troops could use frozen potatoes in winter or early spring. The article cites the words of the Fatherly Leader who claimed that “Noodles made of frozen potatoes are good for digestion, and have a very authentic taste. *ŏnkamja kuksu* are tastier than normal starch noodles. They are sleek and go down your throat more easily...It is no exaggeration to say that *ŏnkamja kuksu* are the tastiest noodles in the world”.

4. “A Cook is more Important than a Doctor”: Redirecting Responsibility for Nutrition

Another popular motif of current North Korean culinary nationalism is, as mentioned above, a narrative of a young strapping lad who chooses the unpretentious path of becoming a cook to the big disappointment of some of his nearest and dearest kin. With some variations, such a storyline emerges in culinary films

such as *Onnyu Landscape* (*Onnyu p'unggyŏg*), *Snowy Landscape* (*Sŏp'unggyŏg*), *Our Aroma* (*Uriŭi hyanggi*), *Our Chef* (*Uri ryorisa*) and many others.

It is important to emphasise that these fictional characters' choice of profession has nothing to do with his or her personal inclinations or talents. Instead, this choice has been made by Kim Jong Il. In the new conditions, the Leader announces a cook to be an exceptionally important social figure upon whom lies a responsibility for the people's health and longevity. This claim is expressed in a phrase of a character of the film *Onnyu Landscape*, "a cook is more important than a doctor".

Being limited by the meagre variety of available products, the exemplary North Korean cook is expected to feed customers entirely in *charyŏ kaengsaeng* (self-reliance) style – that is, by applying his or her creativity, devotion to people and exemplary loyalty to the Leader. He or she can raise grazing domestic animals to feed customers, collect wild herbs, or go on long trips in search for a wise old man who keeps ancient recipes of rice wines or noodles.

The most important source of inspiration for the young cook is, of course, the Dear Leader. For instance, in the film *Onnyu Landscape* the character Mu Hang-gi decides to devote his life to Pyongyang noodles because the Leader considered this kind of noodles to be the best in the world. Hang-gi creates a song about Pyongyang noodles and performs it in front of customers. Not surprisingly, the narrative ascribes various values to Pyongyang noodles, such as a supposed abundance of vitamins; the consumption of Pyongyang noodles is said to be able to cure the back pain of one of the film's side characters.

It is necessary to emphasise that working in *charyŏ kaengsaeng* style is not a voluntary choice of a chef character, but rather his or her duty, the failure of accomplishing which is unacceptable. Thus it is implied that in the "people's paradise", the responsibilities of a chef in a state-owned restaurant extend far beyond his job description; the cook is not only expected to cook professionally, but he has to find ingredients for cooking on his own and spend his free time in search for the most economical recipes. While extolling the spiritual satisfaction an enthusiastic chef receives for following the Leaders' orders, new works of North Korean culture characteristically omit the issue of material rewards for such a labour.

Apart from feeding customers, the other important mission of an exemplary cook is maintaining national traditions and upholding the pride of Korean culinary traditions which are sanctified by the Dear Leader. In the films such as *Onnyu Landscape*, *Snowy Landscape* and *Our Aroma*, the chef characters represent the

Korean culinary tradition to the foreigners, and their contagious enthusiasm moves even the most stubborn domestic doubters.

Characteristically enough, the fictional chefs of supposedly 'revolutionary Korea' are driven in their activity exclusively by perceived 'authentic traditions' of Korean cuisine. No experiments or innovations are allowed: a character in *Snowy Landscape* is ready to defend national culinary traditions even at the cost of decency. In some episodes he is portrayed as starting a heated argument with complete strangers on the street dissuading them to buy certain not authentic ingredients for Korean dishes or making a scandal in a famous restaurant, expressing his indignation at the cooking manner of the restaurant staff which fails to follow national traditions.

This culinary purism turns North Korean chefs into ambassadors for truly national cooking traditions. Popular culinary songs such as "Pyongyang noodle" (*P'yongyang naengmyŏ*), "Song about Soy Bean Paste Soup" (*T'ojang norae*), "Song about white-radish kimchi" (*Kimch'ikkaktugi norae*), et cetera characteristically dismiss the idea that South Korean people too might have their variants of national dishes and have their own opinion about the way Korean food should be made. Pyongyang noodle, North Korean bean paste soup, and *kimch'i* of North Korean style are proclaimed as the major dishes to be served during the future feast of the unification of the two Koreas; no South Korean dishes are mentioned at all.

Conclusion

Though newly acquired culinary nationalism of the DPRK after 2000 is often promoted via the images of foreigners, who serve as major judges of value of Korean food, its target audience is reduced exclusively to North Koreans. Notably enough, contemporary propaganda of the DPRK which is specifically aimed at foreigners still rarely employs culinary symbols. For representing Korean traditions, journals aimed at foreigners such as *Korea* or *Korea Today* tend to operate with the images of old buildings or national celebrations rather than with the *kimch'i* or *toengjang chige*. When treating foreign guests North Koreans puts major emphasis not on the authenticity of the served dishes but rather on the abundance of food, with an apparent aim to counter the opinion that the DPRK still endures food shortages.

North Korean organizers of my trip to the DPRK in 2014 often suggested our group dine on pizza and burgers apparently taking pride in the fact that North Koreans were "civilised enough" to serve these Western dishes; it took us special efforts to eventually convince them to allow us to try some authentic North Kore-

an food. Interestingly, many such supposedly authentic dishes in North Korean restaurants reflected the strong influence of Russian culinary tradition though our minders predictably had no idea of this.

The abundance of culinary imagery is surely a new tendency of North Korean culture; yet this can hardly be regarded as a sign of dissent or liberalisation of the state ideology or as any allowances to consumerism. Rather, new culinary imagery in the contemporary culture of the DPRK serves as a tool for such conventional tasks of North Korean propaganda as reinforcing control over citizens and the legitimization of North Korean leadership as they confront new and challenging circumstances.

Bibliography

List of the films

Hello! (Annyŏnghaseyo!) (1979)

A Train Waitress (Uri ryŏlch'a p'anmaewŏn) (1972)

Central Forward (Chungyang kongryŏksu) (1961)

The First Year of Marriage (Kyŏrhon hu ch'yŏthae) (1984)

Rich Village (P'ungseŏnghan mau), produced around the early 1990s

A Family which Blooms in Songs (Norae sog e kkotp'in un kajyŏng) (1996)

A Family Basketball Team (Kajeŏkronggu sŏnsudan) (1998).

Chagangdo People (Chagangdo saramdŭl) (2000)

Daehongdan Party Secretary (Taehongdan chaekim pisŏ) (1997-2001)

Onnyu Landscape (Onnyu p'unggyŏng) (2000)

Officers' Wives (Kungwanŭi anhaedŭl) (2000)

Nation and Fate (Minjŏkkwa unmyŏng) (1992)

Our Chef (우리 요리사) (2000)

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