

Book Review: Katarzyna J. Cwiertka (2012) *Cuisine, colonialism, and Cold War: Food in twentieth-century Korea*, Reaktion Books (London)

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Katarzyna Cwiertka's 2012 text extends scholarship on food (see Goldthwaite, 2017 and Simonow, 2021 for recent work in rhetoric and South Asian studies, for example) into Korean studies and complicates conventional (English-language) political and economic narratives of 20th-century Korea by examining food consumption, culture, and manufacture. Like many accounts of Korea's twentieth century, Cwiertka emphasizes dramatic change, but by focusing on soy sauce instead of politicians, for example, this book sheds light on some aspects of the "mundane reality of the everyday" (p. 171). She argues that "the lives of contemporary Koreans, both in the North and in the South, have been largely shaped by colonialism and Cold War" (p. 12). More particularly, Cwiertka contends that "it was war – both 'hot' and 'cold' – that strengthened the dietary legacy of Japanese colonial rule on the Korean peninsula" (p. 171). In other words, she finds and emphasizes the roots of much contemporary (especially South) Korean food culture in the behaviors, factories, and systems of the bygone Japanese colonizers.

This short book contains six chapters plus a brief introduction and conclusion. Four body chapters investigate the Japanese colonial era, while two trace developments in South and North Korea after 1945. In Chapter 1, Cwiertka describes the way the Japanese empire leveraged Korea's food production for consumption in Japan and, as Japan's wars of expansion accelerated in the 1930s, by the Japanese military. The early colonial period was marked by Japanese efforts to increase agricultural production (especially rice, but also beef [p. 29]), she explains, while following Japan's invasion of Manchuria, the Japanese increasingly developed Korea's food processing industry to support its armed forces (pp. 17, 23). Beer, biscuits, canned meat and seafood were all increasingly manufactured in Korea—and especially the northern area nearest Manchuria—to supply soldiers (p. 30). Chapter 2 argues for the "transformative impact of (Japanese) consumer culture on (Korean) colonial society," (p. 44) in the development of a diverse (Japanese, Chinese, "Western," and Korean) restaurant scene that "became part of the daily life of Korean urbanites" (p. 43), and in department store cafeterias. The eager participation

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of many urban professional Koreans in these “new modes of consumption” (p. 12) instigated by their colonizers “reflect[s] the ambiguity of the lived colonial experience” (p. 48).

Soy sauce, which Cwiertka calls (problematically, I think) the “‘soul’ of Korean cuisine,” is the subject of the book’s third chapter (p. 58). She investigates how the Japanese industrialized soy sauce manufacture in Korea, especially during the wars of the 1930s and 1940s, arguing that soy sauce “provides us with unique direct evidence of how colonialism permeated Korean cuisine” (p. 58), especially *after* the colonial period as South Korean companies employed Japanese-era processing techniques (and sometimes facilities) (p. 70). “Most [South] Koreans do not realize,” she claims, that the homogenized taste and chemical ingredients of soy sauce that “they consume on a daily basis is a product of the colonial experience,” revealing “the far-reaching, longstanding and unforeseen consequences of Japanese colonial rule” (p. 60). In Chapter 4, Cwiertka addresses the hunger that marked many Koreans’ experiences during the Pacific War and Korean War, arguing that Japanese systems for controlling the food supply were recycled by postcolonial governments (p. 80). Food rationing and the *aegukpan* patriotic units (89-91), for instance, were adopted (with varying degrees of success) by North and South Korea after liberation (pp. 95, 99, 102). She concludes by describing the impressive UN food supply system during the Korean War (pp. 108-112).

In Chapter 5, the second longest chapter, Cwiertka sets out to trace developments in South Korea’s food production and culture since the Korean War, broadly characterizing this period as a time of dramatic change from poverty to affluence, with resulting ambiguous impacts on many Koreans’ concepts of their national identity. As elsewhere, she lingers on the enduring Japanese legacy, narrating how South Korean leaders sought to control consumer behavior using colonial-era strategies including curtailing rice consumption and promoting alternative grains—in this case, cheap American wheat—leading to the development of the now-thriving *ramyeon* industry (pp. 118-121). Increasing wealth in the 1980s and 1990s saw the dramatic rise of foreign and foreign-style fast food restaurants, including Lotteria, which Cwiertka asserts prompted a growing anxiety among “many Koreans” that their economy and identities were being threatened by too much foreign influence, an anxiety that she finds manifested in the *신토불이* *sintoburi* campaign of the 1990s (pp. 128-129) and the proliferation of Korean-style restaurants in the 1990s and 2000s (p. 134). She concludes the chapter by attempting to problematize the “commodification of tradition” by South Koreans for global export, including *kimchi*, *makgeolli*, and Korean court food (pp. 139-140). Chapter 6 surveys food and eating in North Korea since 1953, the expansion of the (increasingly incompetent) national food rationing system, the famine of the 1990s (and the UN’s food aid responses), and recent developments in Pyongyang’s restaurant and food manufacturing industries.

Cwiertka’s work has many strengths. At just 173 pages (plus appendices, bibliography, and notes), it presents the material (likely unfamiliar to many readers) in a digestible form. The prose is accessible, and the many images are engaging, particularly Cwiertka’s own photographs from her time researching in South Korea. In my view, the original research on colonial-era food processing, restaurants, department stores, and soy sauce manufacture is particularly compelling and will permanently inform my knowledge of the period. Another important contribution is

simply starting (or giving a boost to) the use of food as a topic of scholarly analysis in English-language work on Korea. Cwiertka convincingly demonstrates the importance of department store cafeterias and canned crab meat, for instance, as loci for the experience of colonial power and cultural change.

One of the book's limitations for readers in 2021 is no fault of its own but due rather to the belatedness of this review: the research is dated. Some of Cwiertka's most interesting data (in my opinion) comes from the "fieldwork" (p. 210 n. 46) that she conducted in Seoul in 2003. Her observations from this period of her 하숙집 *hasukjip* boarding house menus and the popularity of the 2003 TV drama 대장금 *Daejanggeum* (which Cwiertka romanizes as *Taejanggŭm*) offer fascinating snapshots of a few places and times, but readers should be aware that these visions are nearly twenty years old, and they offer no more insight into contemporary South Korea than a visitor's observations in, say, New York City in 2003 would reflect the United States in 2021. Similarly, since Cwiertka's text was published nearly ten years ago, it draws on scholarship that is twenty to thirty years old.

Another limitation, in my view, is that Cwiertka relies, "[w]henver possible," on "English-language rather than Korean- and Japanese-language sources" (p. 13). Her intention for doing so is unstated, but I presume she expected such sources to be more accessible to English-language readers. One (no doubt unintended) result of this choice, however, is a reliance on the historical narratives and preoccupations of a limited group of American scholars (presumably non-native speakers of Korean)—especially the (problematic, in my opinion) question of alleged benefits bestowed to Korea by the Japanese occupation (pp. 15-16). Accordingly, I encourage readers to sample the growing body of Korean-language writing on Korean food, including the work of 주영하 Joo Young-ha and 조희진 Cho Heejin (see bibliography). English-language scholarship by native Korean speakers is also valuable, including that of Cwiertka's own student 박경희 Kyoung-hee Park, who went on to collaborate with Joo and others in producing further fascinating Korean-language scholarship related to food (see 주영하 Joo Young-ha et al.).

In sum, Cwiertka has produced a lively, fascinating text that should open up conversations in English-language scholarship and serve as an introduction to an important topic. Through her prolific writing and collaborations with Korean scholars (see her lectures at the 2014 Kimchiology Symposium, for instance, with discussion by Park Kyoung-hee), she has contributed much to Korean studies and food studies.

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