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Food Culture in East Asia: An Enquiry into the Culinary Regionality of East Asian Eating and Drinking

Topic and Research Question

Food is a daily necessity of mankind. From a biological-technical perspective, our bodies need food to function. But at the same time, the intake of food has become a very institutionalised endeavour. The *whats* and *hows* of alimentation are more of a cultural question than they are nutritional. Since *food culture* thus is an expression of social construction it can be used as means of identification for cultural regionality. In analysing China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, this thesis aims at answering the question, if such an East Asian regional food culture exists. This is achieved by deriving an analytical framework from existing ethnographic culinary research.

State of the Art

Studies on cultural aspects of food and eating are predominantly occupied with certain limited aspects of a society's culinary traditions. Wang (2015) has produced a comprehensive study of chopsticks as the iconic utensil of East Asian food intake. Kopplin (2002) has insightfully arranged leading experts on the history and art of lacquerware. Others prefer studying a particular country rather than the region at large, as has been done by Ashkenazi & Jacob (2003), Carter (2003), Chang (1977b), Cotterell (1987), and Newman (2004). Again others, e.g. Lee (2009a) and Sherman & Billing (1999) look at the motivational drivers behind certain food related cultural institutions. In answering the above mentioned research question, this thesis is meant to close the gap between their narrow subjects of research and the broad scope necessary to address a regional food culture as a whole.

Methodology and Approach

The literature generally distinguishes three approaches to the study of food:

- (1) *Functionalists* are mostly concerned with the relationships and dependencies within the organic system that is society. Food merely plays a *manifest* or *latent* function within these relationships.
- (2) *Structuralists* look at the universal patterns behind *taste*. This structure, like the structure of language, helps understanding the human mind and the functioning of society.
- (3) *Developmentalists* share a common interest in change as a factor in the cultural realm. Development of food patterns thus is shaped by the environmental

factors influencing a society, incl. social, cultural, economic and political structures.

The approach chosen by this work cannot be easily subdued to any single one of the above described approaches. Rather it follows what Mennell et al. (1992) have entitled *ethnological food research*. It draws its universally applicable set of research criteria from the study presented by Chang (1997). The methodology developed (category) is graphically presented on this poster by tables 4.1 and 4.2, which also summarise the results (country). As such, the method of analysis employed here is not limited to any one single aspect of the three aforementioned.

Main Facts

The main facts identified in this research are summarised in tables 4.1 and 4.2. The categories established as guiding framework have been analysed in accordance to their respective local (country) peculiarities. The most noteworthy of which are highlighted here:

Rice and noodles are the region's staples, having fed the East Asian population for centuries and continue to do so. Rice in particular has transcended beyond its nutritional importance into a cultural institution and important means of expression for ideas and beliefs.

Animal protein within the diet is covered at varying ratios by terrestrial and marine sources, ranging from 50:50 for Japan and South Korea, 60:40 for Taiwan and Vietnam, and 70:30 for China.

While versatile and divers seasoning and condiments

Summary of Findings					
Category	Country				
<i>Ingredients</i>	China	Korea	Japan	Taiwan	Vietnam
Staples	rice noodles	rice noodles	rice noodles	rice noodles	rice noodles
Plant Foods	leaf greens seaweeds tofu pickles	leaf greens seaweeds tofu pickles	leaf greens seaweeds tofu pickles	leaf greens seaweeds tofu pickles	leaf greens seaweeds tofu pickles
Animal Products	terrestrial (70%) aquatic (30%) eggs (milk)	terrestrial (50%) aquatic (50%) (eggs)	terrestrial (50%) aquatic (50%) eggs milk	terrestrial (60%) aquatic (40%) (eggs) (milk)	terrestrial (60%) aquatic (40%)
Seasonings & Condiments	soy/fish-umami	soy-umami	soy-umami	soy/fish-umami	fish-umami
Beverages	green tea trad.alcohol juice/RTD tea	green tea trad.alcohol carbonates	green tea trad.alcohol RTD tea	green tea n/a RTD tea	oolong beer RTD tea

Table 4.1: Summary of Findings: Ingredients

Summary of Findings					
Category	Country				
<i>In the Kitchen & At the Table</i>	China	Korea	Japan	Taiwan	Vietnam
Methods of Preparation	hot pot stir fry	hot pot	hot pot	hot pot stir fry	hot pot stir fry
Tableware	chopsticks	sashimi (hoe) chopsticks (& spoon)	sashimi chopsticks	sashimi chopsticks	chopsticks
Meals & Menus	china staple, soup & side dishes (shared)	metal staple, soup & side dishes (shared)	wabi sabi staple, soup & side dishes (shared)	china staple, soup & side dishes (shared)	china staple, soup & side dishes (shared)
Table Rules, Manners & Rituals					
<i>Ideas about Food</i>					
Religious Beliefs & Superstition	offering	offering	offering	offering	offering
Health	TCM	TCM	TCM	TCM	TCM

Table 4.2: Summary of Findings: Continued

as well as local taste preferences exist throughout the region, a joint aspiration of *umami* unites the region. It is achieved by the use of seaweeds and pickled condiments and sides. In addition, this hunger initiated a whole branch of soy and fish based sauces and pastes, originating from the region but gaining global popularity.

The chopsticks are a ubiquitous and at the same time exclusive characteristic of East Asian culinary culture. This led to the definition of three distinct culinary world regions, defined by their respective choice of main utensil: fork (and knife) feeders of Europe, North and South America; finger feeders of the Middle East, South and South East Asia; and chopstick feeders of East Asia.

Not only with chopsticks, but with tableware in general, new materials and industrial produce is gaining significance in East Asia. Traditional shapes and styles however continue to guide the local taste, like the *wabi sabi* appreciation of nature represented in Japanese tableware. Evocative of Douglas, 'staple, soup and side dishes' is the ultimate East Asian meal pattern, the grammar behind the language of East Asian eating.

On the surface the shared servings of China, Taiwan, Vietnam and to some extent Korea differ greatly from the individual servings of Japan, the underlying principle is nonetheless represented throughout the region.

Results

The evidence presented in this study strongly points towards the existence of an East

Asian culinary region. It is upon future research to identify whether it is limited to the countries under analysis here or extends beyond them.

This does not deny the existence of local taste preferences and characteristics. It rather highlights the shared functions, structures and developments that guide the region's cuisine. While this paper does not try to stir up nationalist sentiment, it has therefore contributed to a supranational understanding of East Asian food culture, rooted in the manifold peculiarities of exchange and interaction that have, in the realm of food, created regionality before and across national borders.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at>.

About the Author

Martin holds a BA degree in International Business and Management from FH KufsteinTirol. From his career in international hospitality management he draws his academic interest in food and culinary culture (in East Asia), the role of food in the building of identity and as means of cultural diplomacy.

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