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**BOOK REVIEW:** *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth Century Korea*

Review by Eunju Bährisch

HARTS & Minds:  
The Journal of Humanities and Arts

Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn 2014)

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Image: *Pudae Tchigae*, or Piggie Stew.  
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**BOOK REVIEW: *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War: Food in Twentieth Century Korea*** by Katarzyna J. Cwiertka (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 240pp.

*Eunju Bährisch*

The author of the book being reviewed, Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, is Chair of Modern Japan Studies at Leiden University, The Netherlands. Establishing herself as an expert on the food history of modern Japan and Korea, she has published a number of books and articles about the history of food, including her well-known book *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), and her insightful article, "The Soy Sauce Industry in Korea: Scrutinising the Legacy of Japanese Colonialism" (*Asian Studies Review* 30 (4): 389-410). In a similar fashion to her other research, in the book at hand she examines food in the context of international politics and history.

Korea, which was listed among the world's poorest nations in the early 1960s in the wake of Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, showed miraculous growth in the following years, and by the 1990s the average income of South Koreans reached the level of many European countries (117). This book covers the collective hunger of the Koreans, the political turmoil they experienced, and the shock and wonder of a transition to modernity, focusing on the newly gained taste preferences and food habits stemming from the change from a traditional society to a modern society.

The book contains six chapters: 'Breadbasket of the Japanese Empire,' 'Consumption Colonised,' 'Industrialising Korean Tastes,' 'Wartime Food Management and Its Legacy,' 'South Korea: From Food Aid to the Revival of Royal Cuisine' and 'North Korea's Bumpy Road to Affluence.' With the exception of the final chapter on North Korea, the book follows a chronological order from the Japanese colonialist period in the first half of the twentieth century, through the Korean War during the 1950s, to the period of military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s, and finally to contemporary Korea.

In Chapters 1, 2 and 3, the author focuses on Japanese colonial exploitation of Korea and the transformations of Korean food as a result of the Japanese occupation, dealing with industrialised soy sauce and the popularity of MSG. These chapters brilliantly represent the lifestyle of the colonial period, presenting a much richer picture than that of a mere victim of Imperial Japan. For example, her research on the early appearance of Western-style restaurants and department stores in colonised Korea is intriguingly written in Chapter 2. In Chapter 4, the author reveals the problems caused by the U. S. Military Government on food distribution, and how American combat rations influenced Korean daily food consumption. Koreans' flexibility to change their pre-existing food habits according to their political circumstances is well described in this chapter. Moreover, the author correctly points out that colonial rule did not end with Korea's independence from Japan, but was inherited by the Korean dictatorship government, finding similarities between Imperial Japanese policies and the Korean President Park Chung-hee's policies. In Chapter 5, focusing on a constant increase of meat consumption in contemporary Korean cuisine, the author shows that Koreans' collective hunger has finally ended. In the final chapter, a discussion of North Korea, hunger caused by North Korean politics is described in detail so that readers can understand how 'white rice with meat soup' can still function as a political motto in North Korea.

As much successful research in food studies often does, this book draws meaning from seemingly trivial subjects - such as everyday consumption of soy sauce, rice and artificial flavours - and endows graveness and wider importance to these subjects. The author convinces readers of the fact that preference on tastes, flavours and cooking methods can be products of surrounding political situations. Centring around the modern political history of

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East Asia, more specifically South and North Korea, as well as Japan and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, the author successfully illuminates how international politics, such as colonial rule, the U. S. military occupation, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and dictatorship have influenced Korean people's daily life through the food they consume.

Throughout the book, Cwiertka does not view Korean food culture as a passive recipient of foreign influences: her thorough research makes it a dynamic actor that has actively adapted to these influences. For instance, during the Korean War, many new dishes were created, including *Pudae Tschigae*, or 'piggie stew,' which originated from ingredients collected from the U.S. military camps during the Korean War. Although the dish is evidence of food shortage during the Korean War, and is therefore a reminder of painful history for the older generation, Cwiertka shows that the dish is revived as a trendy popular food among the young generation after the late 1990s.

The author claims that the book is 'an attempt to bring to light the raw history of modern Korea as it has been digested through the turbulent decades of the twentieth century' (169) and the book clearly achieves its goal. The book also answers many of my own personal questions, such as why Japanese radish pickle is served at most – if not all - Chinese restaurants in Korea and why *Tonkkasŭ* (Japanese style pork cutlet) used to be sold at Western restaurants in Korea.

It unearths the colonial traces in seemingly very Korean food, digging for its origin and the process of its transformation. For many Koreans, it might be painful to realise that many parts of their everyday life are still influenced by Japanese colonialism, although I believe however stark the reality is, it is better to face it. Many parts of Korean food culture remind Koreans of the country's tragic history, but they also enrich the food culture. For example, *Ramyŏn* (Korean instant noodle) was produced in Korea under the influence of many countries such as Japan and the U. S., and is now considered one of the most representative popular foods in Korea.

The book is not only insightful, but also enticing to read, containing many photographic materials that are valuable as historical reference. The author also writes about her stay in Korea, combining interesting anecdotes with academic thoroughness. This study is unique in the sense that it could have been written only by an experienced scholar who understands both Korean and Japanese political and food histories. I highly recommend this book to scholars and students who are interested in food studies, East Asian studies, modern history and international relations.

### Biography

**Eunju Bährisch** is currently conducting her research on "Coffee Service and Female Employees in Korea" in the department of History and Cultural Studies at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. Her research interests include microhistory, transnational cultural studies and history of emotions. [e.baehrisch@fu-berlin.de](mailto:e.baehrisch@fu-berlin.de)