

# Dining Elegance and Authenticity: *Archaeology of Royal Court Cuisine in Korea\**

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## Abstract

*Korean royal court culture was doomed by the fall of the Joseon dynasty at the hands of Japanese imperial forces at the beginning of the twentieth century. After the establishment of Japanese colonial administration in 1910, court traditions mostly disappeared as displaced royal family members and their former attendants grew older and suffered economic hardships. It was only in the 1970s that royal court cuisine began to receive official attention as part of efforts to reconstruct and preserve national cultural heritage. In 1970, the royal cuisine of the Joseon dynasty was designated by the state as the Important Intangible Cultural Property No. 38. Through a detailed case study of Hwang Hye-seong (1920-2006), the second state-designated holder of the cultural property, this paper examines the process by which “royal court cuisine” was identified and redefined within the framework of the Important Intangible Cultural Property system in Korea, and analyzes how the royal cuisine thus reconstructed has come to be established, recognized, and successfully commoditized as a specific brand of haute cuisine in the dietary culture of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Korea.*

**Keywords:** royal court cuisine, Important Intangible Cultural Property, politics of authenticity, branding, commodification of tradition, national identity

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The age-old traditions of the Korean royal court were lost with the fall of the Joseon dynasty at the hands of Japanese imperial forces at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many court life traditions faded away and disappeared as displaced royal family members and their former attendants grew older and more impoverished after the establishment of the Japanese colonial administration in 1910. It was only in the 1970s that royal court cuisine began to receive official attention as part of efforts to reconstruct and preserve national cultural heritage that had been lost or was in danger of vanishing. In 1970, a former court lady named Han Hui-sun was designated by the state as the skill holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property (IICP) No. 38, the Royal Court Cuisine of the Joseon dynasty.

In the following year, the title was bestowed upon a gastronomist named Hwang Hye-seong, who had been key in having royal cuisine listed as an IICP for state protection. It was also Hwang who cited former court lady Han as the “legitimate heir” and recommended her designation as the first holder. Later, in the early 1990s, a new Korean table d’hôte (*hanjeongsik*) restaurant opened in Seoul, claiming to serve “royal court cuisine.” Its advertisement reads:

In March 1991, the cuisine of the royal court was reconstructed for the first time at Jihwaja restaurant. . . . Using only the best seasonal ingredients, its taste is light and simple, giving a unique character to Jihwaja’s dishes. Those who work at Jihwaja do so with the spirit of “enlightening the public of the royal court cuisine” rather than simply of “selling food.”

– From the promotional pamphlet of Jihwaja

This paper examines the process by which “royal court cuisine” was identified and redefined within the framework of the Intangible Cultural Property system introduced in 1962, and how the royal cuisine thus reconstructed came to be established, recognized, and successfully commoditized by the entrepreneurial efforts of the Hwang family, in particular, as a specific brand of haute cuisine in the dietary culture of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Korea.

The restaurant mentioned is one of several successful haute cuisine restaurants serving traditional Korean meals in courses that began to appear in big cities in South Korea starting in the early 1980s and became popular in the 1990s and 2000s. The spread of exclusive restaurants combining Western and traditional practices in serving reflects both the growing desire of the urban middle-class population to dine with enhanced elegance and to introduce more sophisticated aspects of Korean tradition to foreign guests. In the case of Jihwaja and others that followed, the fact that they specialize in royal cuisine is intended to attract particular attention.

Given the widespread acceptance of the notion of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), it would not suffice to merely acknowledge that certain cultural elements conceived of as age-old tradition are often not transmitted intact from the ancient past but in fact have relatively recent origins. Dietary practices are no exception. What should be understood and explained is, at any given particular historical moment, why and by whom particular elements are emphasized or claimed as valuable tradition and how they are subsequently accepted as such by the general public.<sup>1</sup> I will attempt first to examine how the new type of Korean table d’hôte restaurants combining traditional and newly arising needs in dietary practices has evolved over the past three decades, and analyze the historical background against which royal court cuisine has come to occupy a notable position.

### **Korean Meal: Its Basic Structure and Changes**

The Korean dishes most well-known outside the peninsula are arguably marinated beef (*bulgogi*), pickled cabbage (kimchi), and rice mixed with vegetables (*bibimbap*). Indeed, in Japan where some

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1. It is more than a quarter of a century since the thesis of “invented tradition” was first raised. A useful critical reconsideration of the thesis can be found in Vlastos (1998).

500,000 Korean residents still live as a legacy of colonial rule, *yakiniku*, the Japanese term for Korean-style grilled beef, has come to function as a synecdoche for Korean cuisine and Korean restaurants in general. In countries where large-scale Korean migration started later and more visible Korea towns have emerged in international cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Beijing, restaurants have more specialized menus focusing on foods like *sundubu* (soft tofu stew), *agujjim* (braised monkfish) or *seolleongtang* (beef bone broth) reflecting trends popular in Korea at the time of their migration. Whatever their specialty is, one distinct feature of these Korean restaurants is how the food is served. The basic structure of a Korean meal is cooked rice and soup with a number of “side dishes” which almost invariably include kimchi. Cooked rice is so central to the Korean meal that a table set for a meal is called cooked rice table (*bapsang* or *bansang*). A basic meal is usually accompanied by soup, stew, broth, or some liquid dish. The status of a meal is often measured by the number of side dishes such as “three side dish rice table” (*samcheop bansang*), “seven side dish rice table” (*chilcheop bansang*), or “twelve side dish rice table” (*sibicheop bansang*).<sup>2</sup>

Another distinct structural feature of a Korean meal is simultaneous service wherein all dishes including dessert are placed on the table at the same time and eaten according to the preference of the diner. The same feature can be noted not only in everyday meals, but also at ceremonial repasts such as those for a new bride, sixtieth birthday celebrations, or ancestral rituals. In addition to the basic rice and soup, the side dishes at these ritual tables include meat, fish, cooked vegetables, pickled vegetables, rice cakes, noodles, fresh and preserved fruit, honey pastries, and various other foodstuffs depending on the region and the individual.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Korean table setting is that

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2. It is believed that a “twelve side dish table” was an appropriate status marker for a king in the past (M. Kim 1977, 97-98; Hwang, Han, and Jeong 2003, 31). It is said, however, that, to the dismay of his mother, the Lady Hong, King Jeongjo who had been known for his frugality had always insisted on three side dish table for an ordinary meal (Y. Kim 1987, 404).

the foods are offered in large quantity and are not supposed to be consumed entirely by the person to whom it is offered so that the remaining food can be shared by others. It is the generosity and sincerity of the people who prepare and present the meal that is displayed to the observers. After the meal, the table is handed down to subordinates to be shared, from the king to officials and servants, from elders in the family to those of younger generations, and from ancestors to descendants. Ceremonial meals for the king (*eosang*) were distributed among officials, while ordinary meals (*surasang*) were eaten by servants, mostly the court ladies who prepared and served the food to the king, starting with elderly and high-ranking court ladies and moving down the *salle* to lower-level female attendants (Hwang, Han, and Jeong 2003, 31; M. Kim 1977, 71, 100-102).

The custom of handing down the table was firmly institutionalized in the concept of *toeseon*, a term that may be translated as “to move the table and to offer the food.” Commensality was emphasized not by eating together at the same time but from the same surface. Eating together from a common table with family members and guests was introduced during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) along with the modern concept of *danran katei*, a convivial family circle (Sand 1998, 198-201).<sup>3</sup>

Since the early 1980s, however, some restaurants in Seoul, such as Yongsusan, began to serve Korean dishes set out in European-style courses, rather than all at once. This was a major innovation as it replaced the simultaneous traditional serving style and introduced a rough structure of starters, main courses, and desserts to Korean meals, an element undoubtedly adopted from the West. These new type of Korean table d’hôte restaurants became more popular and

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3. According to Sand (1998, 200), synchronizing mealtimes, sharing an eating place, and introducing the common table was a major device for “imposing a regime on the household’s time, and bringing about, at least in appearance, a convivial domestic group governed by egalitarian rules” in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan. Sand also notes that this was a reverse of the process that occurred in Europe and the United States, where the refinement of table manners and increased variety of household goods engendered the replacement of a common pot with individual dishes.

widespread in the 1990s and 2000s in the urban, middle-class areas of Seoul and nearby satellite cities such as Bundang and Ilsan, while in provincial cities even newly emerged Korean table d'hôte restaurants continued to serve dishes simultaneously except for the dessert course.

The first use of the term *hanjeongsik* was during the colonial period. *Hanjeongshik* was offered as an equivalent to the *teishoku* service available in Japanese restaurants which were usually located on the top floors of modern department stores and also served Korean set menus (Han 2001, 339). On other occasions, the term was used at *yojeong* type restaurants where it meant a large banquet table on which all the dishes were placed at the same time and shared by a group of people, commonly male dignitaries. According to Jeong Hye-gyeong (2007, 101), it was at these *yojeong* restaurants that the communal table was first commonly adopted over the traditional individual table. She also notes that since many of the chefs employed at colonial *yojeong* restaurants were displaced chefs who had formerly worked at court, some of the dishes derived from royal court cuisine began to be introduced to a limited public. However, due to the fact that they often included *gisaeng* (female entertainers) and were frequented by Japanese colonizers and collaborators, *yojeong* carried negative associations that prevented their evolution into modern haute cuisine restaurants (2007, 105).<sup>4</sup>

The new type of Korean table d'hôte restaurants that I refer to here by the term *hanjeongsik* adopted Western conceptions of course meals, emerging in the early 1980s as exclusive, high-class, metropolitan restaurants, partially in response to the growing need for entertaining foreign (Western) guests. A set meal served in these restaurants typically includes porridge or soup, "fusion"-style salad dishes with innovative dressings, cold vegetables, pan-fried meat, fish, or

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4. Many *yojeong* restaurants of colonial origin could be found in big cities well into the 1970s and were used to entertain Japanese businessmen and burgeoning numbers of male tourists in the post colonial era, especially after the normalization of diplomatic ties between Japan and Korea in 1965 (Moon 2009).

vegetables, barbecued beef, steamed pork, cooked vegetables, and other delicacies, with the number and intricacy of dishes adjusted to the price and status of the selected set option. They are often served on at Western-style tables set with wine glasses, napkins, and other non-traditional place settings instead of Korean-style low tables with cushions on the floor. It is possible to trace certain Western influences on the meal structure from the combination and order of the dishes included in each particular set. One of the most unique features of the newly developed Korean set meals is that they offer a course comprised of cooked rice, soup, and side dishes in a “main (*siksa*) course” distinct from all the dishes served beforehand. This demonstrates that the basic structure of Korean meals has not been abandoned altogether, even with so many innovations and compromises (K. Kim 2001, 214).

The second feature of the new Korean table d’hôte restaurants is that although the food is served in courses, each course dish is shared between two to four diners depending on the number of people, instead of individual dishes for each diner. The communal table is maintained, with each person transferring their individual portion from the communal dish to their own plate (sharing plate) rather than eating directly from the communal dish. Soup, stew, or broth is also served in a communal bowl for the table before being individually portioned and consumed. This reflects the increasing influence of the concept of hygiene, although within the family circle the communal aspect of eating is still widely emphasized.

### **Authenticity Claimed: Identifying and Defining Royal Court Cuisine**

Even among this new type of Korean table d’hôte restaurants, the previously mentioned restaurant Jihwaja was innovative for claiming reconstructed royal court cuisine before it had emerged as a popular merchandising option. “Royal court cuisine” is a concept inherently difficult to define, with a number of different dynasties controlling

the peninsula over the course of Korean history. Even if confined to the most recent Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), court cuisine must have undergone numerous transformations during over the past five hundred years through adoption and evolution of new ingredients, spices, and cooking methods.

Jack Goody, in his discussion of the development of haute cuisine in Asia and Europe, noted, “In terms of class and cuisine, the higher in the hierarchy, the wider the contacts, the broader the view” (1982, 105). The royal court must have been among the first to adopt and incorporate exotic elements. According to the recollections of a former court lady, Kim Myeong-gil, the favorite dish of the last two kings of the Joseon dynasty, Gojong and Sunjong, was fried fish prepared by a chef trained in Russia.<sup>5</sup>

Around the time of the Gabo Reforms in 1894, sweets called *piori* and drinks known as coffee were presented to the court and enjoyed by King Gojong, Queen Min, and the Crown Prince in the pastime chamber. An official interpreter of Russian, Kim Hong-ryuk called in Kim Jong-ho, who had been wandering around Siberia, to cook Western food for the king. King Gojong and Crown Prince Sunjong enjoyed fried fish the most. Fragrant coffee was an exotic taste that was compared to millet gruel or medicinal broth that the king used to have before breakfast (M. Kim 1977, 31-32).

This shows that the royal family enjoyed exotic and foreign delicacies, indicating that royal court cuisine constantly adopted new elements and ingredients. There were hundreds of people to be fed in the court at any given time, including the king and queen, their off-

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5. King Gojong enjoyed coffee in his later years as well. In one incident, the coffee that the King and his Crown Prince drank was poisoned with opium. The King noticed the taste was strange and immediately spit it out but the young Crown Prince who drank the whole cup was nearly paralyzed and lost some of his teeth. Kim Hong-ryuk was arrested as a suspect but as “his tongue was pulled out by somebody while in prison,” the plot’s orchestrator was never disclosed (M. Kim 1977, 30-32). At the very least, this episode illustrates how sensitive a palate for coffee King Gojong had.



spring, relatives, concubines, officials, soldiers, guards, and servants. Different occasions, such as everyday meals, celebrations, foreign guests, hunting expeditions, and ancestral rituals all required different foods and protocol (Song 1998). This complicates the task of delineating the boundaries and actual contents of “royal court cuisine” and means that any attempt to reconstruct it is bound to be partial and open to contestation.

The authenticity of claim of Jihwaha was chiefly derived from being opened by Hwang Hye-seong (1920-2006), a key figure in listing Royal Court Cuisine of the Joseon Dynasty as Important Intangible Cultural Property. The pamphlet of another royal court cuisine restaurant named Gungyeon, opened in Seoul in 2006 by the Hwang family, reads:

The royal court cuisine [we offer] is the crystallization of the highest culinary culture of our country that combines the best ingredients, the excellent art of cooking, and utmost sincerity. The cuisine you are offered is handed down from Han Hui-sun, a court lady who attended the last two kings, Gojong and Sunjong of the Joseon dynasty, to Hwang Hye-seong and Han Bok-ryeo. In 1971, the Royal Court Cuisine of the Joseon Dynasty was designated [by the state] as Important Intangible Cultural Property No. 38, and Han was named the first holder of the art. In the same year, the Research Institute of Korean Royal Cuisine was established and has provided the focal point for transmitting that knowledge until today. The cuisine of Gungyeon will be the main vehicle of conveying and familiarizing the taste of tradition perfected in these historical developments to modern people.

– From the pamphlet of Gungyeon

As a professor of gastronomy, the now deceased Hwang Hye-seong, the first owner of the restaurant Jihwaja, began to study Korean royal court cuisine before anyone else took interest in the field.<sup>6</sup> Hwang

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6. Not much is known about Hwang apart from the fact that she was born in Cheonan in Chungcheongnam-do province in 1920 to a well-to-do family that ran a local

began to visit Nakseonjae where the last queen of the discontinued dynasty resided until her death in 1966 and began researching court cuisine, recipes, methods of table setting, names of utensils, protocols and terminologies concerning the diet of the king and his family. She also learned about institutional arrangements of the courtly kitchen and so forth, mainly by taking notes from the former court ladies who attended the queen at Nakseonjae.

In order to have the former court lady Han Hui-sun designated as the first specialist in royal court cuisine, Hwang produced and submitted an extended report to the Bureau of Cultural Heritage (later expanded and renamed as the Cultural Heritage Administration) emphasizing the need for preserving royal court cuisine and strongly recommending Han for the position (Hwang 1970). The report contained more than one hundred recipes and introduced numerous court terminologies that had been previously unrecorded, reconstructed from Han's memories. Given that scholarly substantiation, including meticulous research and rigorous examination, is deemed the most critical element in the designation of a particular person as a specialist in IICP, it can be said that Hwang had almost singlehandedly established Han as an IICP specialist. Furthermore, she had also created an outline of the scope and meaning of the royal court cuisine.

IICP skill holders and the scholars who submit the initial recommendation often continue in close relationships, each lending authority to the other. As the initial skill holder is often a relatively uneducated artisan, the role of the supporting scholar(s) is critical. It is this academic authority that legitimizes official recognition of a particular art or craft.<sup>7</sup> What was unusual in Hwang's case was that she succeeded Lady Han as the next skill holder. Han was already eighty-two

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rice mill, and went to Japan to study. She graduated from high school in Fukuoka, on the island of Kyushu in Japan in 1937, and then from a women's junior college in Kyoto in 1940, where she studied Japanese cuisine and nutrition. She started teaching at Sukmyeong Women's Junior College in 1941 (Lee 2001).

7. For further discussion of issues surrounding the protection of intangible cultural heritage in various different contexts, please see UNESCO (2004).

when she was designated as the skill holder of Royal Court Cuisine in 1971 and passed away the next year. Hwang was designated as the next holder in 1973. She established the private Research Institute of Korean Royal Cuisine in 1971, where she formulated “court cuisine” centered on the high cuisine offered to the king and began to teach classes based on those dishes. Since Hwang was then a fulltime professor at Hanyang University, the Institute was run with assistance from her three daughters, all of whom became specialists in royal cuisine. Hwang died in 2006 and her eldest daughter, Han Bok-ryeo, was elevated by the Korean government as the next skill holder.<sup>8</sup> In addition to succeeding to the office of IICP holder in Royal Court Cuisine of the Joseon Dynasty and running the Research Institute, Hwang’s daughter, as well as other family members, has opened four royal court cuisine restaurants in the major neighborhoods of Seoul since Jihwaja’s establishment in 1991.

### **Authenticity Maintained: Branding and Merchandising Royal Court Cuisine**

The Important Intangible Cultural Property system of Korea was introduced in the early 1960s in order to protect disappearing traditional arts and crafts. This system aids in identifying such arts and crafts and providing practical means to transmit and preserve skills that would have otherwise vanished. The state designation ratifies the authenticity of a particular person or group among many practitioners, however, it often results in the fossilization of a particular version of the skill concerned (UNESCO 2004). By lending state authority, the system also tends to give hegemonic privileges to a

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8. It is often the case in the Korean IICP system that a child of the previous holder succeeds to the same office. Although each IICP holder must be designated by the nomination committee appointed by the Cultural Heritage Administration, the children of the existing holder usually benefit from the advantage of being qualified as an officially recognized potential candidate during the lifetime of the previous holder.

particular person or group designated as the official holder of the property while discriminating against other practitioners. This applies not only to the area of cuisine, but also to other areas of arts and crafts including the design and making of traditional clothes, furniture making, shamanic dance, court music, or other skills. However, the hegemonic status is not always maintained to the same extent in all areas. Especially when there are doubts and challenges, it needs to be defended via what might be termed “politics of authenticity.”

In the case of royal court cuisine, Hwang’s family successfully maintained hegemonic status through careful coordination of family relations, official connections, academic authority, and business acumen. Hwang Hye-seong served as a member of the governmental committee for cultural properties, and her eldest daughter is the head of the Research Institute of Korean Royal Cuisine and maintains close ties with the Cultural Heritage Administration, sitting on most of the relevant committees and serving as a professional consultant for state dinners and other official government functions.<sup>9</sup>

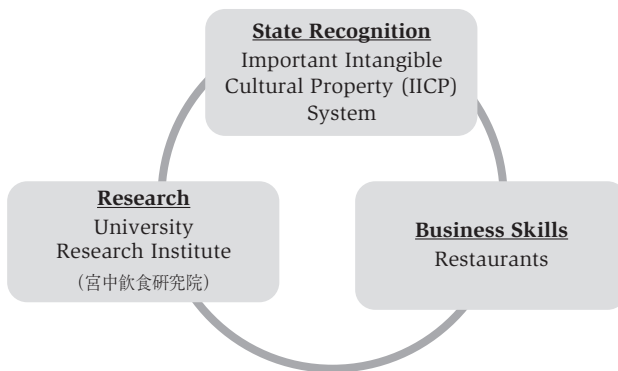


Figure 1. The Hwang Family’s Politics of Authenticity

9. An incident that hints at a close connection between the Hwang family and government officials concerns the location of the first royal court cuisine restaurant they opened in 1991. It is said that the Minister of Culture and Sports at the time first suggested and subsequently arranged for the restaurant to be located within

Hwang's second daughter runs an independent cooking school and her youngest daughter, a university professor, researches Korean cuisine. Hwang's son is CEO of the family business, including four restaurants, a cooking school connected to the research institute, catering services, and factories that manufacture foodstuffs such as rice cakes.

Despite efforts to protect their claim, some doubts have been raised about the authenticity of the Hwang family's version of royal court cuisine and the authority of former court lady Han Hui-sun (1889-1972). Han was admitted to the palace in 1901 at the age of 13 and became "the court lady responsible for the king's meal" (*sura sanggung*) in 1907. According to the common practice of the time, female servants usually became an attendant court lady about 15 years after joining the court and it took another fifteen years or so to become a full-fledged court lady (*sanggung*) (Y. Kim 1987, 40, 44). Some critics find it implausible that Han became a *sura sanggung* in 1907, seven years after her admission to the court, at the age of nineteen.

Even if Han was able to learn about royal cuisine in the king's kitchen, the meal preparation she would have observed must have been much reduced following Korea's annexation by Japan in 1910, resulting in a loss of court ritual and pomp.<sup>10</sup> Defining and understanding the royal court cuisine of the Joseon period solely on the basis of the memories of Lady Han and as reproduced by Hwang and her family members is problematic. The concept requires a more systematic redefinition on the basis of thorough research that traces its evolution.

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the complex of the National Theatre so that it would be convenient to bring foreign guests to experience traditional Korean cuisine (Anonymous interview by the author, July 19, 2009).

10. According to one record, as a result of drastic budget cuts forced by Ito Hirobumi, the number of female attendants at the court in 1926 was about one-tenth the number of pre-colonial attendants, and there were only about ten women working in the royal kitchen, with Han Hui-sun occupying one of the lowest positions in terms of salary (Y. Kim 1987, 59).

The Hwang family is fully aware of such skepticism but insists on the authenticity and superiority of the knowledge and skills transmitted from court lady Han to Hwang and her daughter. This assertion is evident in the following comments by Hwang, which were included in the 1970 report submitted to the Bureau of Cultural Heritage.

In addition, there were male chefs who belonged to the court and prepared the food for the king. However, they scattered after the fall of the Yi dynasty and it is not possible to trace them to gain information now.<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, four court ladies who attended the last queen, Yun, at Nakseonjae are still alive, and Lady Han (aged 82), the oldest of them, is the only surviving female attendant who served in the royal kitchen. . . . I have been learning from her since 1943, studying with her at Nakseonjae, but have always regretted that her knowledge and skill is not conveyed to a wider audience. It is only meaningful, therefore, to open a way for a more correct and wider transmission of the knowledge and skill by recognizing her as a holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property (Hwang 1970, 65-66).

What Hwang and her successors have pursued for the past few decades with considerable success may be described as the process of defining, formalizing, and standardizing royal court cuisine. Hwang Hye-seong played a critical role in the initial introduction and popularization of the concept of royal cuisine, especially by translating knowledge concerning royal court cuisine into the modern language of gastronomy nutrition (Han, Hwang, and Yi 1957; Hwang 1970; Hwang, Han, and Cheong 2003; Han 2005). It was largely thanks to the efforts of Hwang and her disciples that royal court cuisine has become firmly established as part of university curricula in culinary science.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Despite these claims, it is said that Hwang actively discouraged male court chefs coming forward in order to protect her version (Anonymity interview by the author, September 10, 2009).

12. In the 1960s, Hwang arranged for Lady Han to teach courses at Sukmyeong Women's University, where Hwang worked at the time.

In the course of popularizing royal court cuisine, however, Hwang and her family members effectively monopolized its development, especially through the Important Intangible Cultural Property system, developing court cuisine into a merchandisable commodity. Although they could not copyright the term, they are reported to have discouraged the use of the term through various informal channels. Some of Hwang's rivals have complained of pressure from the Hwang family not to use the term "royal court cuisine" (*gungjung eumsik*) in other research and publications. Even the development of college courses on "Royal Court Cuisine" met with strong protests from the Hwang family. As a result, some authors have adopted



Figure 2. *Hwang Hye-seong-ga-ui singmunhwa* (Dietary Culture of Hwang Hye-seong's Family)

terms like *banga eumsik*, referring to *yangban* (traditional elite class) households instead of the royal court, even though there is essentially no difference between the two.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, on the pamphlet of a restaurant recently opened by the family, royal court cuisine is now presented as “Dietary Culture of Hwang Hye-seong’s Family” along with a picture of Hwang and her four children in reconstructed court costume (see Figure 2), conveying a message that the tradition is owned by the family.

During her long years as IICP specialist (1972-2006), Hwang supervised the preparation of numerous state dinners, including the North-South Summit Meeting held in Pyongyang in 2000. More recently, the Research Institute of Korean Royal Cuisine, established and run by the Hwang family, provided consulting services for many Korean TV dramas and films, such as *Jewel in the Palace* (Dae Jang Geum, 2003), *Beyond the Years* (Cheonnyeonhak, 2006), and *Le Grand Chef* (Sikgaek, 2007), further bolstering their status. The unprecedented success of *Jewel in the Palace* in particular, both domestically and abroad has contributed significantly to the popularity of royal cuisine among the general public.

Despite these achievements, at least content-wise, these restaurants as well as the Research Institute of Korean Royal Cuisine struggle to maintain a distinctively unique character of the cuisine with respect to other kinds of traditional cuisine these days. Once-scarce ingredients have become widely available. The growth of the Korean middle class has resulted in greater innovations and elaborations in both presentation and cooking methods, targeting those who seek and can afford distinction and exclusivity in their diet. It is also not possible to prevent other restaurants from emulating and reproducing specific dishes that are believed to be drawn from court cuisine.

As a result, although it used to be thought that such dishes as *neobiani* (grilled beef), *sinseollo* (a broth of vegetables, meat, and seafood cooked in brass or silver chafing dish), and *gujeolpan* (a dish

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13. Anonymous interview by the author, May 21, 2009.



with nine divided sections containing meat, vegetables, egg, and mushrooms) were all derived from royal court cuisine, all have nonetheless become widely available at traditional Korean restaurants. It has never been clear what divides royal court cuisine from the cuisine of aristocrats, considering a “trickle-down” effect on the dietary consumption patterns of the nobility (McCracken 1988).

More serious contestation and challenges to the authenticity claim of the Hwang family version of royal court cuisine comes from the academic sphere. The major basis for most contemporary scholarship on Korean traditional cuisine is a large body of classical Chinese and Hangeul literature (Y. Jeong 1975; Hwang 1970; S. Kim 2005; H. Jeong 2007). As reconstruction of food and dietary practices of the past is based on existing texts as well as orally transmitted knowledge, any attempt at reconstruction is bound to be open to contestation. For instance, food historian Kim Sang-bo has raised questions regarding Hwang’s argument that the everyday repast of the Joseon kings was usually a “twelve side dish rice table” (Hwang and Ishige 1988, 69). Kim speculates that Hwang might have misread the relevant texts (S. Kim 2005, 452-455).

### **Royal Court Cuisine in Twenty-First-Century Korea**

According to diners who have visited a prestigious royal court cuisine restaurant, the food served there is neither particularly tasty nor uniquely distinct, apart from the many unfamiliar terms used. Restaurant owners, on the other hand, claim that people are unable to judge royal court cuisine as “delectable” because people nowadays are too accustomed to the taste of modern artificial flavorings. Such court cuisine purveyors point to the lack of flavor or diminished flavor as evidence for the authenticity of their cuisine. As the continued patronage of royal court cuisine restaurants shows, the subjective judgments of previous customers do not seem to discourage others from visiting these places to taste the real haute cuisine of Korea or from introducing it to foreign guests. Indeed, despite numerous criti-

cisms, suspicions, and challenges, royal court cuisine restaurants thrive in today's Korean cities, especially in the capital, Seoul, the most globalized center of the country. All the restaurants run by the Hwang family, for instance, are now listed on the pages of most popular tourist guide books as places that one ought to visit in order to understand Korean traditional culture. Also, as officially recognized authorities of the Royal Court Cuisine of the Joseon Dynasty, Hwang Hye-seong and her daughter Han Bok-ryeo not only operate their own restaurants but also have advised most of the institutions or events related to royal cuisine such as Daejanggeum Theme Park and Korean food festivals held overseas.

The branding and commodification of royal court cuisine in the 1990s cannot be solely attributed to the entrepreneurship and resources of a particular family. It must be understood against the general social milieu of the time: a rising interest in rediscovering forgotten national cultural traditions that reflected newly gained economic prosperity and cultural vitality. Within this context, there have been various attempts to foster appreciation of other lost or forgotten cultural heritage, especially those related to royal court culture abruptly terminated by the Japanese encroachment.<sup>14</sup> Although the Korean royal family nominally continued until the death of King Sunjong in 1926, much of its heritage was distorted and lost through drastic budget cuts and degradations imposed by the colonial administration. Recovering a sense of national pride and identity became intertwined with rediscovering precolonial heritage.

On the consumers' side, such heritage provides a chance to display distinction and exclusivity. Many Koreans consider royal court culture to epitomize style, sophistication, elegance, and the utmost refinement. Before the 1980s in Korea, many of these extravagances

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14. In addition to the Institute of Korean Royal Cuisine, the Korean Royal Costume Research Institute was established in 1979 and provides exhibitions of reconstructed royal costumes and fashion shows. In 2007, the National Palace Museum of Korea was inaugurated at Gyeongbokgung palace, expanding the former Exhibition Hall of the Remains of the Royal Court that was opened at Deoksugung palace in 1992.

had not been available to most Koreans due to sumptuary regulations as well as financial constraints. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, accurate knowledge and understanding of elaborate and refined “high culture” heritage emerged as a new sign of status and identity for modern urban Korean people; in particular, an interested few began to reconstruct and consume elaborate royal costumes for special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and other celebrations (Moon 1997). Many bridal or cooking classes also functioned as a mechanism for introducing and popularizing haute cuisine, including royal court cuisine.

Eating is not just an act of satisfying physiological needs or a matter of nutritional supply. It indicates more of cultural practices to the extent that style and aesthetics matters. Anthropologist Jack Goody notes that the spread of haute cuisine in England can be attributed in part to the changing nature of social stratification and the increasing dominance of the middle class, writing,

The opposition between high and low took on a different shape, more closely related to expenditure than to birth. But the real revolution in the daily food of England occurred as the results of the events and inventions of the nineteenth century. The industrialization of production was accompanied by the industrialization of food, which led to the “complete revolution” associated with an industrial cuisine. Originally middle-class, it extended rapidly with the expanding economy leading to the “bourgeoisification” of the whole culture of food, accomplished through the vigorous support of the mass media (Goody 1982, 152-153).

The successful commodification of royal court cuisine in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in South Korea can be seen as reflecting the developments in the stage following modern industrialization, in which, once again, hand-picked specialties and uniqueness have come to be valued as markers of distinction. For some people, a visit to a royal court restaurant is a chance to experience a fantasy world of the lost Korean court life.

We aspire to be a space where one can taste the essence of royal court cuisine, the apex of [Korean] dietary culture. It is our belief that anyone who visits this place is entitled to be treated with the utmost courtesy, as if he is a king in past times. We intend to inherit the spirit of royal cuisine of the Joseon period, created by chefs of highest skill, with the ingredients from every corner of the country, and with utmost sincerity for only one person, the king.

– From the pamphlet of Gungyeon

## **Conclusion**

Dietary practices undergo transformations over time. Quite apart from the food consumed in everyday context by the majority population, different items of food are emphasized for different political, ideological, and cultural reasons at different periods. Court cuisine had only attracted minimal attention until the 1990s, when it became more widely spotlighted as part of a broader movement to reconstruct tradition and authenticity in Korean society. Increased globalization, along with the growth of the middle class, contributed to its development; efforts to globalize Korean food triggered the need for reconstruction of Korean royal court cuisine. In addition, the concept of royal court cuisine was appealing to those seeking distinction and exclusivity in the midst of increasingly ubiquitous modern Korean table d'hôte restaurants.

Hwang Hye-seong and her family have been at the center of the evolution of Korean royal court cuisine in recent decades. One of the first to take a serious interest in the topic, Hwang began her research by exhuming as well as inventing a “legitimate” heir of the heritage, while also collecting and documenting relevant knowledge and skills. These efforts resulted in her teacher and then herself being designated as a holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property. Once recognized, however, the hegemonic privileges accompanying IICP designation have been used by Hwang and her family to maintain authoritative status over other practitioners in the field through careful coor-

dination of state power, scholarly substantiation, and merchandising skills.

The successful branding and commodification of royal court cuisine by the Hwang family has been accomplished not simply through entrepreneurship, but also with the support of the state and mass media. In particular, the unprecedented success of a television drama, *Jewel in the Palace*, contributed to popularizing royal cuisine among the general public. Increasing international tourism also played a significant role in reviving interest in national cultural heritage. “Royal court cuisine” seems to have had particular appeal to the general public. Food and dietary practices of the past are reconstructed through literature, drawings, and oral tradition, thus making the claim of authenticity by any single party more vulnerable to contestation. Nevertheless, royal court cuisine, reconstructed as the epitome of national high cultural heritage, continues to interest people with an urge for differentiation, exclusivity, and national identity in a globalizing, postindustrial, and postmodern Korea.

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**GLOSSARY**

<i>agujjim</i>	아구찜	<i>neobiani</i>	너비아니
<i>banga eumsik</i>	班家飲食	<i>samcheop bansang</i>	三椽飯床
<i>bansang</i>	飯床	<i>sanggung</i>	尙宮
<i>bapsang</i>	밥상	<i>seolleongtang</i>	설렁탕
<i>bibimbap</i>	비빔밥	<i>shinseollo</i>	神仙爐
<i>bulgogi</i>	불고기	<i>sibicheop bansang</i>	十二椽飯床
<i>Cheonnyeonhak</i>	千年鶴	<i>Sikgaek</i>	食客
<i>chilcheop bansang</i>	七椽飯床	<i>siksa</i>	食事
<i>Daejanggeum</i>	大長今	<i>sundubu</i>	순두부
<i>danran katei</i> (J.)	團欒家庭	<i>sura sanggung</i>	水喇尙宮
<i>eosang</i>	御床	<i>surasang</i>	水喇床
<i>gisaeng</i>	妓生	<i>teishoku</i> (J.)	定食
<i>gujeolpan</i>	九折坂	<i>toeseon</i>	退膳
<i>gungjung eumsik</i>	宮中飲食	<i>yakiniku</i> (J.)	燒肉
<i>naengchae</i>	冷菜	<i>yojeong</i>	料亭

(J.: Japanese)