EAST ASIAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

EADN WORKING PAPER No. 114 (2017)

The Globalizing Hansik Campaign: a Malaysian Critique

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The Globalizing *Hansik* Campaign: a Malaysian Critique

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Acknowledgements: This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the Global Development Network administered by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies as EADN Secretariat and the University of Nottingham Malaysia's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences under Grant FASS/2014/001/SMLC/KGC. In addition, I would like to thank the Korean student interpreters and transcribers for their time, help and extensive network. Without them, this research would not have been possible: Kang Dong Kyu, Kim Ho Young, Kim Tae Yeon, and Kim Somyung.

Abstract

This paper reviews the South Korean government's strategies to globalize Korean cuisine (*hansik*) for its First World bias and overlooking important dynamics operating locally. In particular, the discourse as expressed on the Korean Food Foundation website demonstrates this desire to be accepted by the West and to be at par with Japan. Based on interviews with Korean restaurant owners in Malaysia and a survey with Malaysian diners, I argue for an emphasis on the role that Korean migrants play in inadvertently promoting *hansik* as part of the gastrodiplomatic negotiations in line with their processes of adaptation and settlement in Malaysia.

Keywords: global hansik campaign, Korean cuisine, halalization, Malaysia, Korean restaurants, Southeast Asia, Korean diaspora

Introduction

In the last five years, the South Korean government has been actively promoting its cuisine globally, with the aim of propelling *hansik* to the world's top five by 2017. This campaign builds on the success of its earlier strategies like the Korean-Wave (*hallyu*) to command soft power and brand itself on the international stage.[1] Funded by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Korean Food Foundation (KFF) was established in 2009 to globalize *hansik*. Multipronged strategies include awarding scholarships to South Korean students to train overseas in culinary schools and training foreign chefs in the art of Korean cuisine. In addition, KFF would provide incentives to hotels to open Korean restaurants, operate a food truck in New York City and give out free lunches and recruit Korean celebrities as ambassadors. KFF also published a Korean Menu Guide in 2012, and provided support to overseas Korean restaurants and food businesses by giving government grants for consultation on the expansion overseas (Pham 2013: 14). Critics of the *hansik* globalization campaign cite bureaucratic inefficiency, lack of coordination and communication between ministries, wrongful marketing strategies, and wastage among many others. The S. Korean National Assembly Budget Office pointed out that KRW 21.9 billion was spent in 2012 on the globalization of *hansik* campaign and called it "a waste of time, manpower and organization" (Hall 2013). A bigger setback perhaps was when foreign tourists, 80 percent of whom were Asians, rated its food only 'C' in a 2014 survey (*Yonhap News*, March 16, 2015).

So far, the campaign has been analyzed from the angle of gastrodiplomacy (Pham 2013) and advancing Korea's soft power abroad (Kuznetsova 2014; Cwiertka 2014). Adopting Rockower's idea of gastrodiplomacy, Pham defines it as a strategy to win the hearts and minds of

middle-class consumers through the stomach (Pham 2013: 5). Upon acknowledging the campaign's criticisms, Kuznetsova's Master's thesis mostly embraced suggestions from Korea-based expatriate bloggers to help improve foreigners' experience of *hansik* domestically, since the push to globalize *hansik* is motivated ultimately to improve the national economy and boost tourism. This included the use of standardized romanized spellings of Korean foods, making menus more accessible via translation and annotation, advocating an overall better service in restaurants, gastro-tourism and "collaboration with foreigners" to improve its marketing strategies and publications that contained grammatical mistakes and poor vocabulary. The results of my interviews with Korean restaurant and grocery mart operators in Malaysia support many of the points raised. However, there seemed to be little connection between the state-run global campaign and the operators of the restaurants I encountered. Most had not heard about the campaign and those who did had little direct involvement in it. In fact, an analysis of the Korean Food Foundation website demonstrates that the main targets of the campaign lie in the developed world, with capitals in London and Paris, New York and Los Angeles, and other global culinary players like China and Japan. Only in 2014 did the Korean Food Foundation turn its attention to Southeast Asia, by publishing guides to Korean restaurants in Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The Korean government's outreach to countries whose culinary status it is trying to catch up with reflects its middle power syndrome and may distract it from the existing success occurring in neighboring countries to its south, to which it places secondary importance due to ASEAN's less developed economic status. This paper considers the role of Korean restaurants and grocery marts in Malaysia in the globalizing *hansik* campaign. Taking a local standpoint, one that encompasses Koreans based in Malaysia as well as Malaysian *hallyu* fans and *hansik* consumers, I argue that the globalizing *hansik* campaign needs to involve the on-the-ground cultural intermediaries whose localized knowledge and experience can make the campaign a success. Korean migrants and transnationals ultimately practice a kind of everyday gastrodiplomacy that may be more impacting and long-lasting due to its personal nature of face-to-face interactions than the state's ostentatious and top-down campaign strategies. A more complex picture emerges with a closer analysis of the dynamic processes occurring in the Korean foodscape in Malaysia (and Southeast Asia more generally). This includes halalization, franchises, and increasing diversification away from barbecue.

This paper begins with an evaluation of the global *hansik* campaign strategies by analyzing the Korean Food Foundation website and Guide to Korean Restaurants in Indonesia and Malaysia. The second section discusses the everyday strategies and negotiations of Korean restaurant and grocery mart owners in promoting *hansik* and Korean culture in Malaysia. A mixed methodology is deployed combining textual analysis, interviews with Korean subjects and an online survey of about a hundred Malaysian responses to Korean food and their dining

experiences in Korean restaurants.[2] Out of 42 Koreans I interviewed, 12 were restaurant operators and four were grocery market owners in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. Fieldwork interviews were conducted at the Korean restaurant or mart where the owners worked in Mont Kiara and Seri Hartamas, two wealthy upper-class Kuala Lumpur suburbs inhabited by Japanese and Korean expatriates, between November and December 2014, and in Kota Kinabalu from 18th - 30th August 2015.

The Korean Food Foundation—Globalizing *hansik*

> "Korean food is the food that was passed down by the ancestors of Korea. It is also the food that is totally indigenous to Korea." – Korean Food Foundation

In May 2009, the government-funded *Hansik* Foundation Act was enacted, and the *Hansik* Globalization Development Agency inaugurated, comprising 36 members from relevant government departments, academic institutions and CEOs from the food industry (Pham 2013: 7). Formed under the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MFAFF) and funded with KRW 700 million (approx. USD 620 thousand), the Korean Food Foundation (KFF) was charged with promoting and expanding *hansik* (Jung 2010). According to the KFF website, the foundation aimed "to create more opportunities for businesses related to agriculture, forestry, marine, restaurants, travelling and culture. [In addition, by] achieving this purpose, it will also improve Korea's image." This point reflects explicitly that the globalizing *hansik* campaign is about nation branding and ultimately expanding trade overseas and improving the overall national economy.

The KFF goal of "ensuring that Korean food is recognized in major foreign countries,"[3] is telling. This may explain the initial exclusion of Southeast Asian countries in the early years of the campaign, despite the fact that Singapore is South Korea's sixth largest trading partner[4] and that Malaysia is its seventh largest trade partner and second largest foreign investor in 2013 (Bernama 2014). There is talk of increasing trade volume between ASEAN and South Korea to USD 200 billion by 2020 (Remo 2014). It is also the second largest contributor of development aid after Japan to Vietnam, where the Korean diaspora is estimated at 130,000, according to the *Thanh Nien News* (October 1, 2014). What counts as the major foreign countries is implied on the KFF's main page (http://www.hansik.org/en/index.do) that clearly targets English-speaking cosmopolitans. This is also reflected in the chosen spokespersons who are either Westerners or Koreans who have been trained abroad, including Korean-American executive chef and food writer Judy Joo with her "Korean Food Made Simple" recipes. Other brand ambassadors are Seoul-born and Kiwi-educated and -trained chef Lee Jin-ho, and Seri or Myung Hyun-Ji, chef at

Abu Dhabi's Burj Arab Hotel ("My Little Kitchen").[5] Others are Edward Kwon,[6] a young French actor named Fabien Yves James Corbineau ("Fabien Yoon"), and English-speaking French food critic Benjamin Joinau as host of a gastro-tourism program "Tasty Trail with Benjamin." On the bottom of the page, a row of photographs named "A World of Korean Restaurants" is featured by country. This may not have been updated for it only covers a handful of restaurants in Japan, France, Germany, England and Switzerland. The search engine under "World of Korean Restaurants" does not include any in Southeast Asia. Below this, a list of partners symbolized by national flags also reflects a bias for Western countries and Japan and China. Similarly, the Foreign Consultative Groups[7] exclude any based in Southeast Asia.

Only in December 2014 did the KFF finally publish a few books focusing on Korean restaurants in Southeast Asia: specifically, Vietnam, Thailand and one that combines Malaysia and Indonesia. This is timely, since Korean food is gaining popularity in Malaysia and Indonesia, due to the positive reception of Korean dramas and K-pop. Indeed, a television drama *My Love from the Star* has popularized *chimaek*, Korean fried chicken and beer (Tang 2014). Not only that, many Malaysian food blogs and websites with food reviews such as HungryGoWhere and FoodMalaysiaMostWanted provide free publicity for restaurants. There are supposedly 264 Korean restaurants in Malaysia alone,[8] but the guide selects only twenty (based on décor, price and cleanliness).

The *Korean Restaurant Guide to Indonesia/Malaysia*

I now want to analyze the Malaysia section of the restaurant guide. The book is published in Korea but hard copies are available and distributed in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta and downloadable as an e-book or a smartphone application.[9] Overall, while some care has gone into producing the guide (local foodies were selected to introduce and review the restaurants and the guide distinguishes between the Malay and Indonesian languages in the two country sections), some clues suggest that the conceptualization of the guide did not really consider local habits and the identity of the local customers. The index included factors that Malaysians are not duly concerned about, such as whether takeout and reservations are allowed and if delivery service is available. Unlike in Seoul where timeliness and quick delivery is assured and is not hampered by bad traffic conditions, Malaysian food businesses rarely do deliveries. This is because most Malaysians regard eating Korean food as a social event. It is valued as part of eating out where the ambience and being with family and friends and sharing bountiful food with them is just as important as the food itself. After all, the common discourse about Korean food is that it is meant to be shared (Kim Y.J. 2014). Diners see the spread of *banchan* on the table in their serving bowls; these side dishes are refilled repeatedly, and the hot pots arrive while still boiling. They eat barbequed meat that is cooked right in front of them and could take

photos with mobile phones and post them instantly on social media or share in blogs with friends --- all of these form part of the excitement of going out to eat Korean food. Moreover, Korean food is quite expensive compared to local cuisine, so it does not make sense to pay to eat it at home (without refills!) when one could pay to be served in a restaurant and soak in the atmosphere of the décor, possibly listen to K-pop music and/or watch videos playing on the screens.

Halal Korean?

One of the key missing points about the index is the *halal* (permissible by Islam) sign: the restaurant guide did not indicate if the restaurants were *halal* or not, which means that although it was presented in Malay and English, it was not really targeted at Malays, who are constitutionally defined as Muslims. Indeed, most Korean restaurants serve pork on their menu and even if they do not, very few are certified *halal*. When I asked one Korean proprietor why, he explained that the process of obtaining *halal* certification is a complex one as it is highly regulated and requires certain conditions to be met, such as employing Muslim workers in the kitchen and making sure not only that the meat and ingredients were *halal* but that the processes are also *halal*. None of the Korean restaurants I interviewed was *halal except one*, and proprietors acknowledged that their Malaysian customers were mostly ethnic Chinese. In the guide, only one of the restaurants reviewed, Sweettree in Ampang, is mentioned as "one of the few Korean cafes with a *halal* status" (though the *halal* status of the oldest upscale establishment in town, Koryowon, and the more affordable Kohyang, also included in the guide, is left unmentioned). Paradoxically, Chinese Malaysian customers would not read the guide in Bahasa Malaysia, even though it is the official language. They prefer to read it in English or Chinese. Hence, despite the desire to appeal to both a local and international readership, the trilingual Malaysian edition shows a lack of knowledge about Malaysia's multicultural ethnic politics and misses the fine nuances that someone on the ground would be able to catch. The use of Malay suggests it is catering to the majority Malays or that Chinese Malaysians would also prefer to read in Malay, yet there is no indication that would assure Muslim Malays that it is *halal*.

Although the majority of Korean restaurants are not *halal,* as pork is an integral part of Korean diet, there is no shortage of interest from ethnic Malays in *hansik*, since they have been following *hallyu* and K-pop since the trend hit Malaysia. A website "Muslim Backpackers in Seoul" started up by a Malay Malaysian in 2011 reflects this interest in all things Korean (*hallyu*, tourism in Korea), and finding *halal* Korean food in Seoul is one of them. There are blogs and comments posted online asking if a particular restaurant is *halal* or not, or if there is a *halal* version of a dish that Muslims can try. There are also shared recipes by Malay bloggers of Korean dishes, or

reviews of Korean restaurants in Malaysia written in Malay and English. One Malay woman was so keen on kimchi that she began producing and selling her own *halal* kimchi.[10] Korean restaurant owners have not really explored this market, as they are reluctant to give up pork on their menus. It also depends where the restaurant is located, as Malaysian suburbs tend to be racialised (King 2008). Korean owners in expensive areas like Mont Kiara which is frequented by well-off foreigners, Japanese, Koreans and Chinese, do not feel compelled to make their restaurants *halal* as their market is mainly non-Muslims. However, if they are located in suburban malls frequented by all ethnic groups, such as Sunway Pyramid or Midvalley Megamall, they might offer a *halal* menu (Street Café), go pork-free, or advertise that they use *halal* meat (Kohyang) and avoid cooking with alcohol (like Bulgogi Brothers).

Thus, becoming *halal* is part of the process of adaptation and "glocalization" in Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia. For the KFF to not take the *halal* indicator into consideration is a major cultural faux pas. Conceptualizing a *halal* version of *hansik* addresses some of the inherent tensions in the campaign goal to "keep the traditions of Korean food" while at the same time trying to "satisfy the tastes of everyone in the world."[11] In fact, "halalization" is already underway when it comes to marketing Korean food products in Malaysia. There is less publicity about the gradual awareness and exploitation of *halal* consumption. There is an existing untapped Muslim market potential in countries where *hallyu* has made a mark, such as Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia. For example, the *Korea Herald* ran a story about Korean supermarket Homeplus promoting Korean products at the Malaysian Tesco as part of a Korean food fair last year that included food sampling and building awareness about *halal* Korean food products among Muslims (Lee H. J. 2014). Thirty out of 150 food products were said to be *halal*. This comes after the news that giant food conglomerates like CJ and Pulmuone are rushing to get *halal* logos on their export products after Nongshim led the way (Park S. S. 2013; Asia News Network 2014). Instant noodle consumption is very high in Malaysia and Indonesia, and Nongshim and Pulmuone hope to tap into the larger Muslim market with their *halal* noodle products in these countries. These news articles all stress the idea that demand for *halal* Korean food is driven by the popularity of *hallyu* (Salama 2015). While many of the Korean restaurant managers I interviewed did not seriously consider becoming *halal*, the new restaurant operators were definitely aware that the time was right for getting into the food business, since there was growing interest in Korean culture. Indeed, this is borne out in the online survey carried out.[12] For the open-ended question "What got you interested in Korean food?", 30 out of 101 responses cited Korean films, dramas, variety shows and cooking programs, as well as K-pop, while 33 respondents pointed to specific unique characteristics of *hansik*: naming favorite dishes, cooking methods, taste, variety, ingredients, healthiness and visual presentation. The other reasons given can be grouped into three larger categories: those who are adventurous, curious of the hype and new trend or who are foodies interested in trying new cuisines (13); those motivated by friends and family (15) and those who have travelled to or lived in Korea or were

introduced to it by a Korean contact (six). Four were "accidental tourists" for whom the Korean restaurant was conveniently located or accessible due to its ubiquity in malls, or had just happened to be there and who had no special interest in Korean food.

Globalization and franchising

The KFF website, whether due to poor translation or lack of cultural awareness about how its message will be understood by foreigners, uses superlatives like "excellent" to describe its own cuisine. This comes across as grandiose and overblown. Foreigners may read the unashamed self-praise, coupled with the desire to promote and globalize its food as an imperialist venture, regardless of whether *hansik* is a form of soft or hard power. Is the campaign merely about "grobalizing" (Ritzer 2003) spatial dissemination of a 5,000-year old cuisine, granted some national traditions are invented throughout different periods of history? Does it also inevitably herald "glocal" adaptation and cultural hybridization of Korean cuisine á là bulgogi tacos or *halal* bulgogi? Wanting to do both simultaneously seems paradoxical, and at times, pleasing everyone may undermine traditions. Food programs like "My Little Kitchen" featured on its website specifically state that it caters to foreign palates and is sweeter. The KFF also explicitly aims to commercialize Korean food products.[13] However, is it only Korean food products and not cuisine and restaurants themselves that become commercialized? If this were the case, would it come at the expense of authenticity and originality? Despite the KFF's stated goals of "supporting financially existing Korean restaurants abroad," it has either attempted to compete with existing restaurants (the aborted plan of opening a state-run Korean restaurant in New York City) or taken the credit for the success of Michelin Star Korean restaurants (McPherson 2014).

Korean food conglomerates expanding abroad receive some support from the KFF. This includes franchise restaurants like Mr. Pizza, Crazeburger and Kyochon Fried Chicken (Chung B. G. 2011). Arguably, evidence of what form this support takes has been difficult to track: giving USD nine thousand each to the three restaurants above (ibid.) seems more like a token sum. Providing local contacts and assistance in operations set up in each new location or city and targeting a local market all require the kind of on-the-ground expertise that so far has been missing in the operations of the globalizing *hansik* campaign.

In my fieldwork, none of the Koreans I interviewed had received any economic support from the Korean government to establish or promote their businesses. Some thought that if grants were available, they would most likely go to Korean franchise restaurants like Mr. Bulgogi. Indeed, a recipient of the KFF *hansik* grant is a Korean conglomerate, CJ Foodville (Pham 2013), which has opened up Bibigo in Singapore and Indonesia, in addition to Los Angeles and London.[14] However, in Malaysia, CJ Foodville has instead opened two branches of a French-style bakery,

Tous les Jours. How does Tous les Jours represent "the root of the country's philosophy and traditional culture that bears the Korean culture, spirit, and a 5,000-year history?" asks a former head of the MFAFF (Pham, 6-7). To be fair, Tous les Jours may not benefit directly from the globalizing *hansik* campaign as it does not promote traditional Korean food. However, as a subsidiary of a Korean food giant, its overseas expansion does fulfill the KFF mandate of commercialization and globalization.

Hence, it can be argued that the motives behind the global *hansik* campaign are not wholly cultural, in the form of wanting to raise consciousness about healthy diets and improving global health levels by introducing *hansik*. There is a strong pro-big business component about expansion into overseas markets. This expansion takes the form of franchised restaurants and cafes that may not necessarily sell traditional Korean cuisine. They differ from the Malaysia-initiated local franchised restaurants like the very successful Daorae, established in 2008, that has 16 outlets at the last count and Uncle Jang, which has 11 and which specializes in *dakgalbi*. Apart from global franchise restaurants like Bibigo, Palsaik, and Korean fried chicken (Kyochon, 77Chicken, Bonchon), cafes (Caffe Bene), bakeries (Tous les Jours and soon, Paris Baguette) and ice-cream (MilkCow), Western family restaurants selling steaks and burgers (Lotteria) and even pizza parlors like Mr. Pizza are expanding into China and Southeast Asia (Lee J.Y. 2011; Park E.J. 2014). These franchises ride on the success of *hallyu* and use Korean pop stars like PSY (for Bibigo) and Korean boy band 2PM (for Mr. Pizza) in the advertising and launching of their products. Conglomerates like CJ, which also has a media arm called CJ Entertainment and Media, can draw on the famous bands that are under their employment. Notably, reasons for overseas expansion of franchised restaurants include the introduction of new regulations to protect small and medium-size businesses by the Park Geun-hye administration (Moon & Chae 2014) and the domestic market reaching saturation point (Lee J.Y. 2011).

The final section of my paper focuses on the role of Korean migrants operating restaurants and grocery markets in Malaysia in the globalizing *hansik* campaign.

Gastrodiplomacy and Korean restaurant operators in Malaysia

Away from the state's strategies and top-down elitist forms of culture, Korean migrants in Malaysia practice everyday diplomacy through producing and sharing Korean food with non-Koreans. Most of the restaurant operators do not migrate to Malaysia with the sole intention of opening and managing a restaurant or running the food business. Instead, they may be education migrants wanting to put their children in English or Chinese medium schools (Kim H. 2007). Many do not have prior professional experience in the industry (Kuznetsova 2014: 51). Rather, they may be Koreans who have studied or worked in Malaysia for some years, perhaps in

a Korean company or some other transnational corporation, or who are education migrants who run the food business as a way to support their children's international schooling (Abaya Gomez, Jr. 2013). One food operator explained frankly that for Koreans who did not have many skills, the food business offered the easiest entry. One or two of the earliest restaurants opened in the mid to late 1980s but the majority started up in the mid-2000s, perhaps spurred by the popularity of the Korean drama series *Dae Jang Geum* or *Jewel in the Palace* 2003 that made *hansik* look so delectable.

Everyday, gastrodiplomacy involves ongoing negotiations between Korean managers with their Malaysian or expatriate customers. Linguistic competency matters in this regard. Koreans who have lived in Malaysia for a few years prior to setting up their business who have contacts with Malaysians directly or through cultural intermediaries[15] and who can speak English and Malay are better able to negotiate the multicultural landscape than those who arrive directly from Korea without English skills. For many Koreans in the food business, the lack of English fluency is a major obstacle for them to move beyond basic communication, though they get by using body language and a mixture of Korean, English and Malay words. In Kota Kinabalu in the East Malaysian state of Sabah, Korean migrants pick up Malay instead of English, as fluency in Malay is more practical for communicating with locals. Long hours at work also lessen opportunities to take English lessons and only the most diligent are able to rise above this situation in order to be competent. However, this then means that the owners have to try harder to appeal to their customers, unlike in Korea where waiters' service is reputably only about delivering food quickly to the table rather than making recommendations and offering a warm friendly atmosphere (MacPherson 2011).

The market is no longer only Korean the way it had been perhaps twenty years ago. Today, most Korean restaurant operators would say that their customers are either all local or local and Korean, depending on the location. In some outlets, the ratio of local to Korean customers is 70:30. Thus, trying harder includes being open to suggestions from customers, and incorporating a certain degree of customization and localization. For example, a Korean diner located in an old downtown mall in Kota Kinabalu offers *roti canai*-sized *pajeon* [16] (the *roti* being a recognizable Indian flatbread but also easier to pick up with Korean metal chopsticks) and has added items to its menu based on customer feedback. The owner of the 11-year-old café is fluent in Malay and so well-integrated that he has earned the nickname "Sabah Kim." Mr. Kim and numerous Korean interlocutors explained that local Korean restaurants localize by making their dishes sweeter, whereas authentic Korean food would encompass a range of tastes including bitterness. Nevertheless, one chef admitted that some well-travelled Malaysian customers are getting more sophisticated as they become familiar with and demand authentic Korean tastes.

Cultural differences that Koreans pointed out about Malaysians provoked a sense of self-reflexivity and a need to modify expectations, habits and attitudes in order to fit in. Frequently, when asked what Koreans liked about Malaysia, they pointed out that people were "very kind" and friendly; Malaysians smiled more, and were more open to strangers, unlike Koreans. One said that coming from a *ppali-ppali* (literally hurry-hurry) society that was highly disciplined, it was sometimes frustrating that Malaysians were not efficient or timely workers, but they made up for it by being more patient with someone like himself who was not fluent in English. Koreans, my interlocutors admitted, were an impatient lot raised in a competitive environment that prized speedy efficiency. All these noticeable differences cultivate a sense of pressure to adapt to a more relaxed environment by projecting a friendly warm attitude towards customers, for example, by greeting customers when they entered, smiling more and thanking them when they leave, habits they also inculcate in their non-Korean servers. In small family-run outlets, the service is known to be friendly and hospitable and customers write about getting a personal touch as they were taught by the owners how to wrap the barbequed meat in the lettuce leaves served. Food bloggers and reviewers comment on well-trained staff[17] that barbecue the meat or fry the *dakgalbi* for the customers. Therefore, even though Korean food is generally more expensive than other Asian food choices, there are immeasurable or non-quantifiable values such as good service and expensive high-quality ingredients that may compel return visits and elicit positive reviews and recommendations.[18]

In time, this general emphasis on good service and quality ingredients will become part of the cultural package that comes from eating at a Korean restaurant or buying from a Korean grocery mart. By cultural, I mean the characteristics that give Korean cuisine its distinctiveness as different from Japanese and Chinese, while maintaining cultural proximity with some Chinese foodways in preservation methods and ingredients. Survey results about the first impression Malaysians receive from their dining experience in a Korean restaurant suggest that they gain a better understanding of the diversity of *hansik* ("there's more than kimchi"); that it is spicy but healthy and well-balanced. Korean migrants see themselves as cultural ambassadors, whether they are international students bringing their Malaysian friends to a Korean restaurant or Korean restaurant owners who are self-conscious about projecting a positive image of Korea overseas; who out of a sense of cultural pride regard it as part of their responsibility to introduce Malaysians to the healthy cuisine of their homeland. While the aim of restaurant and grocery mart owners is to make a profit, they may also be unconsciously aiding the globalizing *hansik* campaign. In an interview with *The Star* newspaper, Galaxy Korean Mart owner, Hwang Seung-Sang explained that his plans to expand his supermarket business to other states in Malaysia include partnerships and franchising. Moreover, "He would also love to work together with locals to take the promotion of Korean food to a higher level" (Foong 2013). Likewise, the founder of the largest Korean restaurant food chain Daorae is said to be "a Korean chef who is determined to bring the finest food" to Malaysia.

Gastrodiplomacy works not only through Korean food but also through the mutual love for food between Koreans and Malaysians. Some restaurant operators have developed friendships with their Malaysian customers who recommend good seafood places for them to eat. Sometimes they even go out to these Malaysian Chinese restaurants together to have a meal. Longtime domiciled Koreans develop Malaysian ways of speaking, adding *lah* to the back of sentences, *aiyoh* for exclamations and inserting Malay words like *makan* (meaning to eat or have a meal) into their English speech. One owner, Mr. Lee, developed a friendship with his Chinese Malaysian neighboring stall owner in the food court where his business is located. This man helped him with recommending provisions of local and cheaper ingredients like Malaysian sesame oil, ordering things by bulk, and helping him save money. This friend and another who often comes to his stall became his drinking buddies. Unlike his college-age daughter who bonded over food with her Malaysian friends, Mr. Lee bonded over drinking. He became quite emotional and eloquent when talking about this intimate circle of drinking buddies. For him, drinking together offered a form of bonding that did not necessitate much linguistic communication (since his English was poor and the Malaysians could not speak Korean). In drinking, he explained, you get to see what the other person is really like as they loosen up and let down their guard. Perhaps drinking alcohol together helps create a sense of *jeong*, (정) as noted by the editor of the KFF Facebook page, Kate Jee-hyung Kim. *Jeong* is fostered in the act of eating and drinking together, as one Korean is supposed to pour the other his drink, a gesture that implies a sentimental attitude that goes beyond affection or loyalty, one that is uniquely Korean, difficult to translate and that suggests love, sympathy and bonding.[19]

Lastly, the online survey and perusal of food blogs and reviews suggests that Malaysians like Korean food primarily for its taste rather than its healthy quality, which is heavily emphasized by the globalizing *hansik* campaign. The health aspect is secondary, and is usually mentioned as a "by the way."[20] Korean and Japanese cuisine are at par in terms of price and both are easily available choices for Malaysians who eat out. But for those who prefer more vegetables in their diet or something spicier that more closely resembles their taste palate, Korean cuisine wins out. While Malaysians are less concerned about the health aspect, Korean food operators worry about providing high quality ingredients and healthy food. A restaurant operator told me that, as a mother who cooks for her children at home, she would not want less for her customers; hence, she prefers to buy and use canola oil instead of palm oil for her fried chicken business. Health-conscious Koreans point out that Malaysian food just like Indian food, is oily.

As the number of Korean restaurants increase, there is a stronger need to distinguish oneself from the competition. Thus, the *hansik* industry is also becoming more diverse in Kuala Lumpur with the introduction of regional cuisine, such as barbecue-skewered lamb, currently trending in Korea, but which originally hails from Yanbian China, bordering North Korea (Hwang

Hae). There is also ethnic Chinese-Korean cuisine (Buldojang), *dakgalbi,* which originated from Chuncheon, Gangwon Province (Mr. Jang and Mr. Dalgalbi). Others are smoked barbecue (which has less cholesterol, and therefore healthier), Korean fried chicken, noodles and more hip and concept-fueled restaurants like Palsaik and Crazy Fish for the more adventurous. These places source certain ingredients locally, like vegetables and seafood but import beef and lamb from Australia and cow's intestines from Daegu, an area famous for this specialty (*gopchang*). A newer trend is *bingsu* (Korean shaved ice dessert) featured at Korean cafes and specialty dessert outlets.[21]

Conclusion

So far, the globalizing *hansik* rhetoric betrays a deep anxiety in a state ideology as it considers its place as a major player on the world stage. This self-conscious desire to project a positive national image propels the globalizing *hansik* discourse, with descriptions of Korean food as "excellent" and "truly blessed cuisine" (Kim S.S. 2014). The campaign seeks legitimacy by resorting to pseudo-scientific tests, such as a 2008 study carried out by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The study supposedly proves that eating *hansik* can lead to a higher sperm count as opposed to eating hamburgers and pork cutlets (Hall 2013). It may also attempt to exceed Mediterranean cuisine as "the king of all healthy diets!"[22] The use of European, Western chefs or West-trained chefs as spokespersons also shows that winning over Europeans means solidifying one's cuisine in world standing. South Korea's aspirations, embodied in the global *hansik* campaign, and fuelled by nationalist economic goals, are based upon emulating the standards set by the cultural and economic powerhouses of the world. These are Japan and America which are former colonial forces and occupiers; a rising China, and Europe, which have all set modern norms of what constitutes haute cuisine and fine dining (for example, through the awarding of Michelin stars). This allure of the West is pointed out by renowned *sous* chef Seo Byung-ho of Ondal, a Korean restaurant in the Sheraton Grande Walkerhill Hotel. Seo advised that targeting China, Vietnam and other Asian nations first in its *hansik* globalization campaign is the proper way. *The Korea Times* quoted him saying, "We tend to first target the United States and Europe. But this is not a good strategy. Korea should first make inroads into neighboring nations, which share a similar dining culture." (Lee H.S. 2012).

A vein of nationalism undergirds the discourse about the globalizing *hansik* campaign, as it does the academic efforts that are anxious to assure the continual success of the *hallyu* economy. Such emotional or ideological discourse exemplifies the connection between banal and outright nationalism. Michael Billig (1995) explains that banal nationalism is not a latent or repressed form of nationalism but one that has become part and parcel of the taken-for-granted landscape. It is treated, at least in advanced democracies, as an empty signifier and an

embarrassing, rather kitschy expression of nationalism. Banal nationalism is necessary in order for nationalism proper to work its magic. So what is the impact of cultural imperialism (or cultural nationalism) abroad in the dissemination of *hallyu* and *hansik*? The kitsch effect is noted by Western commentators on Steve Miller's blog, "Why Korea Sucks at Marketing Itself."[23] State-to-state relations between South Korea and Malaysia are positive and growing, with discussions about bilateral trade agreements in the works,[24] and increased tourist flows and trade between the two countries. *Hansik* can play a role in fostering gastrodiplomacy or become a form of soft power in the nation's branding exercise. In Malaysia where the impact of the state discourse is disputable, the kind of low-key cultural pride that drives the success of everyday gastrodiplomacy by Korean restaurant operators is notable. These intercultural gestures are repeated and enacted on a daily basis in the interactions with customers and workers, not only at annual food festivals or expensive special hotel promotions or cooking classes.

However, as a new generation of young Koreans get educated overseas and become accustomed to living and eating in diversity, what can they contribute to the globalizing *hansik* campaign? How do they retain food nationalism? One Korean university student I interviewed who self-identifies as a "Third Culture Kid" frankly said that he was "not a big fan of Korean food." A cosmopolitan eater who would try a new food without comparing it or judging it against something he is familiar with, he elaborated that the Korean palate does not usually have that much of a variety of flavors, saying "It's either going to be soya sauce, salt, bean paste or chili paste. The area does not go further." He had studied at an American school in Malaysia at 16, enjoyed Malaysian food for its diversity, and particularly favored Chinese stir-fry. Unlike the more traditional Korean palate, his taste palate was wide enough to accept and appreciate herbs like coriander that are not found in traditional Korean cooking, and aromatic Indian spices, two types of food that Korean migrants had to adapt to or develop a taste for. He explained that he adapts to any culture he encounters, but on the other hand, he might feel he does not belong anywhere:

> So when I'm in Malaysia, I'm a Korean immigrant. When I'm back in my home country, I'm like an international student, a guy from Malaysia. There are some parts I do not fit in but what can I do about it? I grew up here. It was most of my adolescence, it was pretty big for me, a huge impact for me. I like the difference, the variety."

Perhaps while the globalizing *hansik* campaign is underway abroad, Korean food in Korea is also starting to change as more international foods begin to infiltrate the domestic market and alter the taste palate of Koreans themselves (Kim Y.J. 2014). Not only that, the transnational Korean population who return to Korea is likely to bring back a more adventurous sense of taste with them. During a Tesco-sponsored Taste of Malaysia food sampling at Homeplus, Korea, a 35-year old Korean woman said, "This is delicious. It reminds me of my holidays in Malaysia which I

have visited three times and I miss the food. I am glad we can now get it here" (Menon 2013). Some of the Koreans I interviewed who have left Malaysia after several years express the same sentiments about its food, with some even cooking Malaysian food at home after they return to Korea or move to other countries. At this juncture, perhaps corporate and statist ambition, together with the diversifying food scene in Seoul over the past decade, can be credited for fuelling the anxiety to preserve and promote traditional Korean cuisine. Notably, changing food trends from Korea are also reflected in the overseas expansion of Western-style Korean franchises such as the yoghurt phenomenon, cafés, and the return of burgers and pizzas in an increasingly "glocalizing" and "grobalizing" environment.

My research on the globalizing *hansik* campaign from a Southeast Asian perspective illustrates that existing Korean restaurants in Malaysia receive little or no support to globalize *hansik*. The published restaurant guide provides free publicity for the 20 restaurants featured but where these guides are distributed and how wide its circulation to merit an impact remains to be seen. The traffic on the KFF website is relatively low with not many downloads or visitors, despite it being in six languages, including English. The news uploaded on the website is also heavily focused on the major players in the world of international cuisine. Thus, stories about interest in Korean culture and food in Southeast Asia are neglected, giving the impression that not much is happening in Southeast Asia with regards to the globalization of *hansik*. News about trade flows, cultural exchange, the signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Korean and Malaysian companies to promote each other's products or have joint ventures and franchises are not reported on the website. For example, in December 2013, a private university college, UCSI University Sarawak Campus, signed a memorandum of agreement with the Korea Agro-Fisheries and Food Trade Corporation to be the first university to offer a course on Korean cuisine in the country (Heng 2013).

It might take more time for awareness of the website to spread and for the claims it makes to be fully realized. The "Korean Food Globalization Virtuous Cycle System" on the KFF website displays sound strategies, advocating procedures such as "identifying customer demands and needs in real time and reflecting them in the business plan." It also wants to conduct "foreign information research" such as identifying the status of local Korean food businesses, the barriers that hinder the development of competitive local Korean restaurants, and identifying the consumer demands according to local policies, among others. But in practice, the most evident strategy that has been achieved would be the creation of opportunities for the advancement of franchises and other businesses.

As noted by Pham and Kuznetsova, the campaign has achieved some success in promoting Korean cuisine with media news coverage. Tie-ins with Korean pop stars have proven to be less effective in the US but more effective in other parts of Asia where K-dramas and K-pop

are popular and in making it visible on the world stage. However, much more still needs to be done with regards to giving autonomy to local agents, whether Korean or Malaysian. I propose stronger linkages between the KFF and the Korea Trade Investment Agency (KOTRA) in Malaysia. KOTRA's agenda as written on its website is to undertake foreign market research, hold presentation meetings and consulting services for customers in foreign markets and support overseas investments. Rather than targeting customers, these presentation meetings and consultation services should target Koreans who want to open businesses in Malaysia. The presenters and consultants should be Malaysians and longtime domiciled Koreans who are experienced and knowledgeable about the local food and beverage sector and who are familiar with Malaysian tastes. Although one of KOTRA's stated goals is to foster "overseas expansion of leading companies in the service industry," I would suggest that the government pay attention to small and medium Korean enterprises based overseas and not underestimate their ability to expand as a diasporic Korean food franchise (e.g. Daorae Restaurant) while simultaneously promoting *hansik* and Korean culture. This is if the primary goal is to promote *hansik* that migrants are already doing on their own and not merely to broaden the market for Korean products. Lastly, I am reluctant to advise that the government build on the everyday gastrodiplomacy that migrants enact and perform mainly because these face-to-face interactions are of a personal and intimate nature far removed from the blunt force of the state and its ideological imperative. While most Korean nationals may be happy to oblige (since nationalism is unconsciously ingrained), sometimes the state's attempts to draw on these organic links that such cultural intermediaries possess may backfire. For example, in the case of a Danish man of Korean descent, his experience as an adoptee produced mixed feelings about the Embassy invitation extended to Korean adoptees to volunteer at the Copenhagen Kimchi Festival in 2015. While he encouraged me to attend the festival, he himself was reluctant to go as he did not want to meet the organizers whose request he had turned down.

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[1] Much has been written on the effectiveness of Korean pop music and television dramas as Korea exercising soft power overseas (Chung 2013; Kim and Choe 2014; Hong 2014), and more specifically the K-wave in Southeast Asia (Suh, Cho and Kwon 2013; Lim and Ainslie 2014).

[2] Respondents were asked why they were interested in *hansik*, what motivated their interest in the cuisine and what they liked about it. The survey also aimed to discover if their experience of *hansik* spurred desires to travel to Korea or interest in other products like Korean television dramas and pop music.

[3] The Korean Food Foundation website: http://www.hansik.org/en/article.do?cmd=html&menu=PEN6010100&lang=en

[4] European Commission, 2014, "[2013] European Union, Trade in goods with South Korea," Directorate of Trade, 27 August, p9.

[5] *My Little Kitchen* is a program on Arirang TV channel where Lee teaches foreigners (in English) how to cook Korean dishes. Goldby 2014, My 48 Hours in Seoul. South China Morning Post. 6 November. http://www.scmp.com/magazines/48hrs/article/1632133/my-48-hours-seoul The second season is hosted by French actor, Fabien.

[6] Senior executive *sous* chef at the Abu Dhabi Burj al Arab Hotel, Edward Kwon's program is an outdoor cooking show, "Edward's Live Kitchen," for Asia Heartbeat Arirang, Korea's public broadcasting world service.

[7] Available at: http://www.hansik.org/en/article.do?cmd=html&menu=PEN1030000&lang=en

[8] This number includes different outlets of the same franchise and increased by 38 between January and October 2015. See "Malaysia Most Wanted Food": http://food.malaysiamostwanted.com/cuisines/korean (accessed on October 13, 2015).

[9] In Indonesia, it is available for free at Gramedia bookstores during a promotional period or for download. Simanjuntak 2015. Korean Food Gives Jakarta Food for Thought. The Jakarta Post. 1 February. Available at: http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/02/01/korean-food-gives-jakarta-food-for-thought.html#sthash.xR4Pz3IF.dpuf. In Malaysia, it is available at the KL Malaysia Tourism Center (MATIC), major hotel concierges, the Korean Embassy, Korea Plaza, and Korean restaurants, according to this blogger, Annna: http://annna.net/south-east-asian-edition-of-korean-restaurant-guidebook-picks-best-korean-food-in-malaysia-indonesia/ (accessed on February 12, 2015).

[10] Available at: http://www.maangchi.com/talk/forum/malaysia (accessed on October 20, 2015).

[11] Available at: http://www.hansik.org/en/article.do?cmd=html&menu=PEN6010100&lang=en

[12] The survey can be accessed at: https://nottinghammy.asia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_dhDct0butV9KwaF

[13] This is stated as the third point here: http://www.hansik.org/en/article.do?cmd=html&menu=PEN6010100&lang=en

[14] The Singapore outlet is not *halal* and the Indonesian one does not serve pork, but it is not clear if it is certified *halal* or not.

[15] Sometimes a family member fulfilled this role.

[16] *Pajeon* is a green onion pancake. *Roti canai* in Malaysia is a flaky flatbread introduced by Indian migrants.

[17] These are mainly foreign workers from Bangladesh, Nepal or Myanmar (or sometimes Indonesia or the Philippines).

[18] This does not negate existing reviews of bad service and rude Korean owners.

[19] Anonymous 2013. "What is Jeong (정)?* Notes by Hansik: The Taste of Korea. Facebook. 2 January. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/notes/hansik-the-taste-of-korea/what-is-jeong-%EC%A0%95/441743625893418 Daniel Tudor, Economist journalist and author of Korea The Impossible Country (2012) describes jeong as "the invisible hug."

[20] Question #5 "What do you like about Korean food?" asked respondents to number their priority if they had more than one. They were provided with four choices: taste, healthy, trendy and "familiar to me, similar to the food I'm

used to." 24 out of 69 picked "taste" as their first choice while 17 picked "trendy" and 13 picked "healthy" for their first priority. Fewer respondents selected their first choice (only 69 marked their first priority whereas their second, third and last choices were 76, 79 and 80 respectively). The puzzling thing is that even though 24 people chose "taste" as their first choice, even more (28 out of 80) people selected it as the fourth preference.

[21] Yoong 2014. Six Cool Korean Cafes for Bingsu in KL and Selangor. 27 November. Available at: http://www.eatdrink.my/kl/2014/11/27/6-cool-korean-cafes-bingsu-kl-selangor/

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