



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University
**Montclair State University Digital
Commons**

Department of Nutrition and Food Studies
Scholarship and Creative Works

Department of Nutrition and Food Studies

5-1-2019

Negotiating Trans-Ethno Space: An Inductive Investigation of Kimchi's Ability to Bound Korean-American Transnational Identity

Charles Feldman

Montclair State University, feldmanc@mail.montclair.edu

Yeon Bai

Montclair State University, baiy@montclair.edu

Ki Keys

Montclair State University

Dana Schules

Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nutr-foodstudies-facpubs>



Part of the [Food Science Commons](#), and the [Nutrition Commons](#)

MSU Digital Commons Citation

Feldman, Charles; Bai, Yeon; Keys, Ki; and Schules, Dana, "Negotiating Trans-Ethno Space: An Inductive Investigation of Kimchi's Ability to Bound Korean-American Transnational Identity" (2019). *Department of Nutrition and Food Studies Scholarship and Creative Works*. 77.

<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nutr-foodstudies-facpubs/77>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Nutrition and Food Studies Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.



Negotiating *trans-ethno space*: An inductive investigation of kimchi's ability to bound Korean-American transnational identity



Charles Feldman*, Yeon Bai, Ki Keys, Dana Schules

Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue Montclair, NJ, 07043, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Kimchi
Transnational
Immigrant
Culinary
Culture

ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that the linkages among the sensory, memorial and social aspects of culinary symbolism for transnationals are pronounced by particular food preparations. By using direct evidence, the present investigation tests this postulate by seeking to understand the connectivity of kimchi to Korean-American identity and if so, how this functions above and below the surface. Five focus groups were conducted comprised of 35 Korean-American adults. The research was designed around a grounded theory approach with an open-ended grand tour question: How does kimchi affect your sense of identity? Seven themes were uncovered: Recreating Memories – Collectivity, Connectivity and Family; Affirmation of Family Structure; Kimchi Is Love; Territorial Space; Acquired Taste; Cheating Memories - Shame and Sadness; and Female Kitchen Agency and Power Relations. Kimchi has held on through space and time to provide a shared sense of connectivity to the Korean-American informants, perhaps more intensely and more democratically than in Korea, their ethnic homeland. Reported kimchi taste acquisition followed a trajectory from aversion to familiarity to longing. The re-negotiation of kimchi's ethno-space in America has led to feelings of shame, guilt and sadness to some. Concessions have been made. Manufactured kimchi provided a common generic bridge to the trans-Korean-American community. However, the move away from home-prepared kimchi has taken a toll on family's historic and structural connectivity, emotions, the deliverance of cultural capital and has affected the distribution of household agency.

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that food practices carry an extra significance for transnational immigrants living in a foreign country. Food's apparent worth as a conveyor of cultural capital diametrically increases as distance and time fray an immigrant's links to the motherland. This presumably happens when tangible ties to an indigenous culture diminish, such as religion, dress and language. (Walraven, 2002; D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Collins, 2008; Gabaccia, 1998; Lee, 2000; Choo, 2004). For transnationals in this untethered alien environment, culinary commodities serve as a cohesive and stabilizing force (Gabaccia, 1998; Harbottle, 2006; Law, 2001). Or, as Heldke (2003) suggests, a subtle resistance to a dominant culture. While transnational diets may modify as the nuances of a new food culture are negotiated, some traditional food artifacts have remained resistant to transformation. These particular culinary preparations have been reported to impart layers of signification, meanings and affect upon transplanted migrants. They include, *Satay babi* (a spicy pork dish) for Malaysians in Australia (Choo, 2004); *Chicken Adobo* for Philippine women in Hong Kong (Law,

2001); *Sorpotel*, made with pork for Goans in Canada (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011); and in America, pasta and tomatoes for Italians; collard greens for Southern blacks; crawfish for Cajuns (Ray, 2004); and, Kimchi for Koreans (Collins, 2008; Han, 2010; Walraven, 2002; World Institute of Kimchi, 2015). The present study focuses on the last, with the overall goal to uncover how Kimchi interconnects with Korean-American identity.

Kimchi refers to a pungent, fermented, fiery preparation composed primarily of cabbage or a substituted vegetable and seasonings including a considerable amount of red chili pepper, salt and sometimes garlic. The fermentation process typically takes two or more weeks. The final product yields a spicy, tangy taste and a distinctive aroma. Kimchi also has some importance as a healthy food, rich in vitamins, minerals and probiotics (Kim, 2005). It is considered an essential and ubiquitous side-dish accompanying steamed rice, a main staple, and other dishes. Kimchi has been a part of the Korean diet since antiquity. Before modernity and western influence stepped in, kimchi networks comprised of an extended female kinship (called *kimjang*), would prepare vast amounts of kimchi for winter storage (Collins, 2008). More

* Corresponding author. Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, University Hall 4016, Montclair, NJ, 07043, USA.
E-mail addresses: feldmanc@montclair.edu (C. Feldman), bai@montclair.edu (Y. Bai), keys1@montclair.edu (K. Keys), schulesd1@montclair.edu (D. Schules).

recently as a result of the 20th century diaspora, kimchi has been touted as a robust symbol of Korean transnational identity (World Institute of Kimchi, 2015; Collins, 2008; Walraven, 2002; Cho, 2006; Han, 2000; Han, 2010). According to the literature, kimchi's taste and odor were and still are clear markers of shared Korean collectivity (Collins, 2008; Walraven, 2002).

Empirical investigations on the semiotic properties underlying Korean-Americans' relationship to kimchi are sparse and the overall literature has been generally speculative. Though, a structural understanding of the importance of culinary pathways to the individual and collective psyche has been explored by a number of scholars. Cooking preparations constitute distinct cultural processes that become apparent as raw ingredients transform into cooked commodities. Cooking is a shared, universal form of group activity, much as language uniquely connects individuals among various cultures (Levi-Strauss, 1978).

There are aesthetic dimensions to the enjoyment of food and its taste, as Korsmeyer (1999) argues, and what she describes as the "logic" of aesthetic judgements, which is connected to the underlying meanings of eating practices. The way food is prepared and the conviviality of the meal itself reflects and communicates patterns of social relationships (Douglas, 1975; Lalonde, 1992). Nothing is simply cooked; rather, it must be cooked in a certain style or fashion. (Collins, 2008; Harbottle, 2006). A set of guidelines structuring group allegiance frame every ingredient that is processed and every procedure incorporated into a meal: its expected taste, texture and all the other elements of a particular culinary culture (Geertz, 1973; Levi-Strauss, 1978; Parasecoli, 2014). Then, these culinary practices are embodied in recipes that are replicated then transmitted across generations and distance. In this sense, like any other cultural phenomenon that can be interpreted and understood, food can be considered an "ensemble of texts," mnemonically fitted within an encoded system of guidelines. The transformation of food ingredients into culinary commodities, the acceptance of these properties and the attendant commensality, are among the manifest characteristics of cultural identity.

Fischer (1988) wrote that this system of eating preferences, tastes and practices are learned behaviors that guide individuals as they negotiate their place in the world (Lee, 2000). The recursive nature of culture and in particular cuisine, is theoretically embodied in a system of dispositions or "habitus," as offered by Bourdieu. An embedded set of characteristics emerges from a collective memory shared by people with common backgrounds. This latently informs an individual's tastes, or in the present case, food preferences, without being overtly declared (Bourdieu, 1984). Following Bourdieu, Cantwell's (1999) "ethnomimesis" suggests a shared habitus composed, more-or-less, of conformity to traditions of group affiliation. These practices are memorialized and incorporated into physiological dispositions that are "phantoms" in the subconscious minds of collective consumers (Bourdieu, 1984; Seremetakis, 1994). Then, they are "sedimented" as Connerton (1989) puts it, into the bodily practice of eating.

A transnational may feel a need to reach into this well of memories, as the blurring of traditional signifiers often leads to feelings of dislocation. The meal potentially assuages this anxiety by shortening the perceived distance from the homeland (D'Sylva, 2011; Walraven, 2002; Collins, 2008). Through the venue of a meal, past memories could be reprocessed in "ephemeral space," as feelings of belonging and comfort have the potential to be enabled at almost any time through the venue of a culinary story (Christou, 2011; Collins, 2008; Seremetakis, 1994). The meal stands available to reprocess past memories, and hence provide sociological and psychological comfort. There is also an "imagined community," Sutton (2001) suggests, that is brought together when disparate emigres symbolically connect by eating the same food "from home." All this helps the transnational "regain touch" as it were (Christou, 2011; Seremetakis, 1994; Vasquez-Medina, 2015).

It is not so easy to the separate symbolic elements from food's organoleptic profile (Lalonde, 1992). Humans have been biologically and socially constructed by the foods they choose, or rather, the foods that

are provided. While humans digest the corporal sensuality of food's properties: the smells, sights, and the flavors, they also cognitively ingest familiar memories of the near and distant past. You not only eat food, you consume it, you digest it, you ingest it, it becomes part of you, along with its attendant messages. You are what you eat. Or rather, you eat what you are. In addition, food taste or cravings are manifestly connected to the significant meanings underlying a meal, which may be the predominant element for the acquisition of flavor preferences (Collins, 2008; Douglas, 1975; Lalonde, 1992; Rozin & Fallon, 1981). For example, research has demonstrated that affinities for adverse tastes found in ingredients such as chili peppers are often conditioned through cultural exposure. Individuals develop a "taste" for these products through a repetitive indoctrination and obedience to a cultural ideology. Familiarity is induced by persistent exposure to particular foods by creating a pervasive reliance on these products for mental and physical satiety. This enables an affective switch over time, from aversion to longing (Rozin & Fallon, 1981). Conversely, the oral zone, as Spiro (1955) reminded, is the first to be socialized, so it is the most resilient to transformation. This makes food a particularly powerful medium for transmission of immutable values (Lalonde, 1992).

It has been implied that the linkages among the sensory and social aspects of culinary symbolism in a transnational context apply to kimchi (Cho, 2006; Han, 2000). By using direct evidence, the present investigation tests this postulate by seeking to understand the connectivity of kimchi to Korean-American identity and if so, how this functions above and below the surface. Research into the connection of food to the transnational psyche may help in the development of new food products that are attuned to consumer needs. Particularly, an investigation into kimchi's desirability is relevant to the recent efforts to promote healthy meals through traditional foodways (Hongu et al., 2017; Laudan, 2015).

2. Methods

Five focus groups were conducted comprising 35 Korean-American adults (14-males and 21 females) from March to June 2018. The informants were conveniently selected from the relationships the investigators had with the Korean community. Interviews were conducted at Montclair State University and at a local Korean church. The inclusion criteria were limited to adults of Korean descent and living in the US. The investigation was approved by the Montclair State University, Institutional Review Board.

The research was designed around a grounded theory approach (Feldman, Harwell, & Brusca, 2013). To encourage an open dialogue, facilitators stressed the confidentiality of responses, and that there were no right or wrong answers. A two-part structured broad questioning process was used that is consistent with Spradley's qualitative research approach (1979). The first part of each focus group consisted an open-ended "Grand Tour" question to enable the group to broadly describe the dynamics behind their relationship to kimchi: How does kimchi effect your sense of identity? To evolve the conceptual model, the researchers presented analyzed findings from the previous session to each successive focus group for commentary and refinement (Birks, 2009). The researchers confirmed their findings with the informants at every step and across the focus groups. A process of iteration was used from the inception of the ideological concept in the first focus group, through the theoretical saturation of ideas during the final session (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The focus group data was discursively refined across the groups to get a confirmatory model. No attempt was made by the researchers to embellish or influence the informant's responses. The researchers considered the possibility of their subjective bias. Specifically, the American and Korean-American investigators addressed the potential of assigning more, or lessor weight to the findings based on their own experiences, or lack thereof. As such, the investigators of this study had agreed (and made every effort) to bracket their personal feelings, opinions and experiences. All the sessions were audio taped,

transcribed verbatim and re-read several times as soon as possible in order to preserve the full meaning of the informants' words (Charmaz, 2006).

The transcripts were analyzed using deductive content analysis, which involved assigning codes to text passages (Charmaz, 2006). The researchers were simultaneously involved in data collection and analysis; the analytic codes were constructed manually from the data, not from pre-conceived hypothesis; the data was constantly compared between and across the focus groups; the theory was advanced during each step of data collection and analysis; relationships were elaborated and an independent analysis was constructed before the literature review was conducted. Concepts and meanings were culled inductively from the thematic texts. Two Korean-American investigators and an American (non-Korean) researcher analyzed and triangulated the data from multi-rater, etic and emic perspectives (Jones, 2009; Webb & Kevern, 2001).

3. Results

Thirty-five Korean-Americans participated in this study, including 14 male and 21 female informants. Six males and 6 females were born in the US, 8 males and 17 females were born in Korea. Twenty of these participants were married, 15 were single, the mean age was 38.66 years and the mean time in the US was 27.18 years. The code number of each informant in the thematic narrative below has been assigned to their corresponding demographic details in Table 1. A number of themes were purged from the focus group data: Recreating Memories – Collectivity, Connectivity and Family; Affirmation of Family Structure; Kimchi Is Love; Territorial Space; Acquired Taste; Cheating Memories - Shame and Sadness; and Female Kitchen Agency and Power Relations, as follows:

Table 1
Informant codes and demographic data.

Informant Code #	Gender	Marital Status	Age	Years in the US
1	Female	Single	28	Born in US
2	Male	Married	39	36
3	Female	Married	55	30
4	Female	Single	37	34
5	Female	Married	35	9
6	Female	Single	29	2
7	Male	Single	26	0.5
8	Female	Single	29	18
9	Female	Married	54	26
10	Female	Single	20	1
11	Female	Married	43	30
12	Female	Married	48	44
13	Female	Married	48	34
14	Female	Single	41	Born in US
15	Female	Married	45	42
16	Female	Married	42	17
17	Female	Married	49	23
18	Female	Married	47	26
19	Female	Single	47	17
20	Male	Married	36	Born in US
21	Female	Single	20	Born in US
22	Female	Married	50	40
23	Female	Married	49	36
24	Male	Single	24	Born in US
25	Male	Single	26	Born in US
26	Male	Married	25	Born in US
27	Male	Single	22	Born in US
28	Female	Single	26	Born in US
29	Male	Single	25	Born in US
30	Male	Single	27	18
31	Male	Married	53	35
32	Male	Married	54	44
33	Male	Married	49	39
34	Male	Married	57	43
35	Male	Married	48	34

3.1. Recreating memories – collectivity, connectivity & family

A general consensus across the focus groups was that kimchi is strongly connected to memories of self, family and recent ancestral history, as this was reiterated in multiple discussions. To the participants, being Korean as a local or national identity, implies adherence to familial traditions generated from Korea. Memory attribution was the most common reference to kimchi's collective and connective properties.

One informant put it this way:

I think it [Kimchi] does bring people back to a memory, because even just asking other themed questions [to the focus group] based on kimchi, everyone brought up a memory from the past...My mom would always tell me memories of when she was back in Korea and she would make it with her sisters, or with her mom, with her extended family [Informant #30].

Reaching back, both first-generation males and females recalled the ability of kimchi-making to connect family and others, as expressed by another participant:

I do believe that kimchi does keep the family together because I grew up watching my grandma, my mom, my aunts, my whatever; all the women in my family just going at it for hours [#18].

The first-generation participants generally remembered their mothers and grandmothers fermenting kimchi in Korea by putting it in clay pots and burying them in the ground. The family gatherings at *kimjang* (a kimchi-making festival) was a potent memory for many of them, particularly the women. Recollections from these first-generation Korean-Americans include: “*Kimjang is festive because everyone gets together...there is something special about that time,*” (#15). The collectivity of this event as reported was clear, “*They all come together, family, community, whatever and they make kimchi for a year...it's a social thing*” [#15]. These informants sentimentally missed these “*fond memories,*” though whether they missed Korea, their families overseas or the past was, not clearly elucidated. One female [#18] was not sure, “*Maybe because I miss kimchi or maybe I miss my family,*” she deliberated. A younger male did not have those memories, not even from a second-hand perspective, “*cause*” he pointed out, “*My parents never made it [Kimchi]. We've only ever eaten store bought*” [#27]. A female informant [#24] countered: “*My mom and grandmother makes kimchi. Store-bought kinda doesn't have [a memory or family connection].*” A younger male [#25], thought this line of conversation was too abstract. He did not believe kimchi had a function in familial relations. “*Absolutely not,*” he stated, referring to kimchi's ability to connect the family, though he then modified his position to “*I don't know.*”

Generally, the informants tied kimchi to local transnational and national Korean identity among a number of statements. Examples are as follows:

When I eat kimchi I feel like I am connected with my Korean culture [#17]. I cannot live without kimchi [#16].

Korean without kimchi is a desert without an oasis [#32].

Man, I really miss Korea, or my grandmother's kimchi. I am able to connect it to that memory [#30].

3.2. Affirmation of family structure

Making kimchi is labor intensive and, to a certain extent, an organizational structure is required to create this commodity in community or family environs. The younger children have menial jobs and the top job goes to the elder in the family, in one participant's words:

You know, if you are unskilled like me, you are going to just peel all the garlics for hours and hours. If you are a little bit skilled, like my cousin

who is a little older than me, she's going to chop the scallions, so that is a little move up. And if you are a little bit more skilled like my oldest cousin, then she's going to chop the radish...and my aunt of course, she is like the king, ...she is going to put the final touches on the kimchi... [#18].

As with all meals, once kimchi was ready for consumption the family elders, the consensus of participants agreed, were always served first.

3.3. Kimchi is love

Thinking about kimchi as a food made from love, was mentioned by a number of participants. Examples from their responses are as follows:

It's, it's love....it is about love, it is about family [#13].

...like I grew up with my aunts and my grandmothers. I got an acquired taste from them cause they knew exactly what I want. The exact level of spiciness, the exact level of saltiness...and I know through that way, I feel very much loved [#15].

Though, this feeling of love is qualified by whether or not the kimchi was made at home, as one participant clarified:

[Korean-Americans] feel more loved "cause if you know it's homemade, not coming out of a plastic bag [#13].

Or, if you were or were not involved in the creative process, as another informant reported:

I think somebody who has never watched our mothers really turn that [kimchi-making] into a communal event, we like it, we miss it, but I do not attach love to kimchi [#23].

3.4. Territorial space

Still, kimchi distinguished familial space and history, as generally agreed among many of the informants in the focus groups. Most agreed that the recipes for making kimchi at home are somewhat varied, dependent originally on conditions in Korea and the availability of ingredients in America. The informants mentioned regional and socio-economic access to ingredients; climatic differentiation, which necessitates the addition of more salt for preservation in warmer regions; historic family recipe variations, that are often replicated (and preferred) across generations; and the ability to procure equivalent ingredients in America. As generally agreed across the focus groups, a particular balance of combustible and savory properties marks each Korean household's recipe, and thus familial identity and wellness. A legend offered by three participants described how kimchi saved the motherland by providing a nutritional barrier from an invasion of Chinese SARS.

The most recurrent indicator of Korean territorial space mentioned was kimchi's olfactory properties: The distinctive smell. In a consensus of responses, you are not Korean or you are not in a Korean neighborhood, if the smell of kimchi is not omnipresent. For example, you can even tell if garbage belongs to Koreans as male informant [#25] explained, "It always has a smell of kimchi in it...Then, when you smell kimchi-infused garbage, he stated, "It's like oh, I am in a Korean neighborhood." Some American husbands reportedly banished this pungent marker from the house, to the garage in one case. To another female informant [#11], her husband's learned tolerance of the kimchi smell was an indicator of his acceptance into the Korean culture. She recounted her husband's remarks on the odor: "Oh my God, that [kimchi] really smells!" However, "He's also accepting it," she defended, "He's also acquired a taste for it. I understand he hasn't grown up with it." Kimchi's smell is so revealing of Korean-American identity a female informant [#19] stated that it overshadows its sensory taste, as she reported, "It's not necessarily the taste. The smell brings up all this imagery in my mind."

3.5. Acquired taste

Learning or acquiring a taste for kimchi was mentioned frequently as a necessary undertaking for kimchi appreciation. This generally was accomplished, more-or-less, through the following textual sequence of taste acquisition, as reported:

Taste Aversion

When I was young, I didn't, I didn't like it the first time I ate it because it was too spicy, too sour and too strong of a taste. I used to dip my kimchi in water to bland it down a little before I ate it but yeah, my taste definitely developed [#29].

It's probably a taste [my second-generation son] is going to develop...So I gave it [kimchi] to him and he said "Hmm, salty and spicy" and he would wash it and then eat it. So, I don't think... he is rejecting me or the culture...he is too young to do that [#23].

Exposure, Familiarity & Adaption

So, it is a habit, more than a choice... Eventually getting used to it and you get trained to the kimchi taste [#32].

It's been always there as part of our meal, so when you know, when you grow up with something, it's a taste that you've grown adapted to [#13].

Love

There's mother's taste there, based on what mother made. It doesn't matter how tasty it is. Just mother made it for me. So, I guess it is love, mother's love....It's not about the kimchi itself, but it's just about how I interact with my mom [#17].

Aging, Nostalgia

I wouldn't say I need [kimchi], but the appreciation for it has increased as I've gotten older [#23].

I want something old, that I, when I was young ate [#32].

As you get older, you are more comfortable with who you are and you identify yourself with the fact that you grew up with certain kinds of food. [Kimchi is] going to bring you back to your childhood memory and you think about good times [#15].

Is it just taste like nostalgia...it just taste like nostalgia [#34].

Disconnection and Longing (to some)

You miss it if you don't have it for a long time [#13].

I never craved kimchi...But when I came to study in the US, I started to look for kimchi whenever I eat something [#17].

3.6. Cheating memories - shame and sadness

Mostly due to background and lifestyle changes, some of the informants were never involved in or had no memories of making kimchi. While one female informant commented on kimchi's general capacity to evoke "good feeling and good emotions" [#16], a general consensus was that the new modern reality and the necessity to purchase manufactured kimchi for their families had garnered feelings not only of loss of memory, cultural capital and connectivity, but guilt, shame and anger as well, as follows:

Loss of Memory and Cultural Capital: ...there's this sense of loss in our minds and our hearts, that if you buy this manufactured [kimchi], it is not as fulfilling as if it were homemade [#3].

My daughter never learned how to make kimchi and now she grown up, she'll never know how to make kimchi and the fact that it can't be passed on to her children, then there's a sense of loss there....The same item [store-bought kimchi] may not have the same tangible value... So, I feel sorry for my daughter because my daughter never see [sic] her mother

Taste Acquisition



making kimchi for her [#17].

Loss of Connectivity for Family and Community: [My kids] would ask “how come we don't do that [make kimchi like their friends] and I felt some shame, guilt yeah, a little bit of both [#19].

[With store-bought] the gatherings is lost. The tradition: the same thing, but the gatherings!...Yeah, and the connection to your parents cooking, your roots [#31]!

Guilt: If you buy [ready-made] kimchi for your family or your child, you feel bad because you are not having that making it together connection... and I feel sorry too and I feel, I feel guilty that not really making that for her [#17].

Shame: It's kinda like shameful [buying kimchi] [#28].

Anger: My wife got pissed off. There is no [home-made] kimchi in my brother's house [#31].

A younger male tried to make sense of why Koreans are enveloped in a kimchi culture:

I guess people would feel sad because they feel their child, they're rejecting their heritage [for not eating kimchi]...Yeah, they are very judgmental if you don't like it [kimchi, the elders say] “oh you don't like kimchi? Then you're not Korean” [#27].

3.7. Female kitchen agency and power relations

While kitchen space was described as female territory, the men described being disconnected from the cookery area. To a degree, the men felt positioned emotionally and socially above the kimchi preparation and the attached meanings. They affirmed a delineation of gender production and consumption practices in Korea, which has carried over to the trans-nationals living in America. Women, predominantly controlled the kitchen domain and kimchi preparation, as reported. “Ya know, the daughters, mothers, aunts. It is a very women community thing...,” one male informant [#30] explained. “Don't come in the kitchen,” is a quote reported [#32] and iterated verbatim by three men [#s 31, 32, 34], as well as another who reported zero tolerance for men in the kitchen [#35], when recollecting their mother's and grandmother's admonitions when they crossed the kimchi-preparation space. This demarcation was not only about territory but status as well. “You've got something bigger to think about,” a grandmother reportedly explained to one male [#32], when he recollecting his attempt to get involved in the process. The following discourse among two male informants highlighted lingering gender divisions about the service of food and kimchi in home kitchens the US.

Well, man is the center of the household, right? You call it boss. Whenever there is meat, or anything, or any kind of protein, all things animal, this goes first to the father. Father eats first, because he is the head of the house and this is the best, usually protein is the most expensive [#32].

That is not generally followed nowadays [#31].

No, I am just mentioning that meat is related to the more masculine thing [#32].

Kimchi is emotionally more attached to the ladies [#31].

We didn't. The men didn't...I don't have more attachment [to the kimchi] [#32].

4. Discussion

For the majority of the female participants of the focus groups, both the preparation and consumption of kimchi brought them fond memories of making kimchi with their extended and generational female

families. These memories mostly connected the first-generation participants with their mothers and/or grandmothers in Korea, the mother country. Family gatherings and *kimjang*, brought these participants together with their extended families and the broader Korean communities. This shared production model reinforced communal gender relations that allowed for the transmission of the culinary artifact: kimchi, and reinforced the social structure of the concurring female participants (Collins, 2008). Though, these practices did not entirely carry over to the trans-ethnic community in America. For the second-generation male and female Korean-Americans who were not generally part of the production processes, the long-lasting memories and connective properties of kimchi were abstracted. This particularly happened when parents brought home manufactured kimchi products. It was generally clear that kimchi in any form provided a strong link to Korean culture, and indirectly to Korea. However, the “trans-ethno” space that the informants straddled required adjustments to modern time constraints and taste (Collins, 2008; Lee, 2000).

Store-bought kimchi provided a bridge that connected past kimchi practices with the demands of western modernity. The advantage of purchasing this product included time savings and common generic taste, free of the status and regional connotations. This allowed for a trans-ethnic and a trans-geographic (as some relatives visited from far away) expression of cultural unity. A stronger need to consume kimchi after coming to America was expressed by a number of first-generation participants, expressly when they felt nostalgic (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Parasecoli, 2014). A choice among the binary paradigm of homemade and manufactured kimchi had effects on memories, love, family structure and gender. Homemade kimchi affirmed family status. However, the structure behind the meal, the connection to family space, the community, the embedded rituals surrounding home-cooked meals, was essentially lost to the participant consumers of manufactured kimchi (Clark, 1980; Collins, 2008). The move towards a manufactured product also diminished female connectivity and agency in the kitchen, and the love and the comforting feelings homemade kimchi produced (Vasquez-Medina, 2015). In addition, feelings of guilt, sadness and shame were testified by participants who were unable to provide homemade kimchi to their families or include their children in the culinary processing. Still kimchi, whether home-prepared or store-bought, functioned to identify Korean-American territory. Kimchi's smell, was reported to be a distinct olfactory boundary that was needed to mark a separate space from competing American cultures.

Interestingly, the informants of the study did not elaborate about kimchi's preferred flavor attributes. Rather, they generically discussed the aforementioned memorial, collective and olfactory attributes, or the need to learn, adapt, or “acquire” a taste for this product through exposure. These associations ascribed to the models of habitus and distinction proffered by Bourdieu (1984) and others (Appadurai, 1996; Harbottle, 2006; Rozin & Fallon, 1981). The informants learned to like kimchi, then they could not live without it, though necessary accommodations were made contingent on their new lifestyle.

The relationship of cookery and the transmission of culture through feminine channels has been established in the literature (Walraven, 2002; Han, 2010; D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). Appadurai (1981) following Marriott (1978) suggested a diametric relationship between intimacy and rank. The more unequal the relationship, the more likely the food transactions would be intimate. Some of the male participants spoke diminutively about the importance of women's roles in kitchen work. This perspective as reported, may be changing. On the other hand, the preparation and service of kimchi gave the female participants a feeling of authority and control over cultural transmission of culinary memories and family structure. This was affirmed through expressed feelings of love and the emotional delivery of the kimchi product. The kitchen was also described as a space where females could bond with female relatives and others (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). The findings of the present study refute literature inferences that kimchi's fiery properties exude masculinity (Han, 2000; Walraven, 2002). Kimchi clearly fell

under the realm of femininity to both the female and male study participants in this investigation.

5. Conclusion

Through the practice of eating kimchi, the informants of this study found a refuge where reconnections with families, heritage and relationships were enabled and a return to a “cultural whole” were invigorated, as Sutton (2001) has it. Traditional ethnic food practices were transferred, as it were, to a new aesthetic geography where the informants could find a measure of safety and comfort. This was a “trans-ethno” zone between here and there, where ethnic, cultural and modern identities were collected and redefined. A comparison with the travails of Bengali Americans helps define the culinary locus of our informants. Bengali-American identity, as Ray (2004) reports, is positioned uncomfortably among a number of polarities including race, religion, science and progress. They have to carefully balance their Bengali identifiers while slipping into the American cultural mainstream. At home, “ornamental,” private consumption affirms their “inside” identity, while public eating practices are often Americanized. From this perspective, trans-ethno space could be understood as the transference of the ethnic “other,” as Ray sees it, to more mainstream applications. These “insider-outsider” relations take on a more insidious dimension when food is considered not only as a venue for cultural connectivity but as an instrument of internal control or resistance (i.e. “anticolonialist eating” – Heldke, 2003). Hints of conflict are manifest during our informant’s ruminations, though not overtly mentioned (Choi, 2013). It is fodder for further investigation.

While our informant’s relationship with Kimchi has changed as it had to transverse geography, cultural borders, modernity and time, still kimchi has held on to provide a shared sense of connectivity to the informants. Perhaps more intensely and more democratically than in Korea, their ethnic homeland (Collins, 2008; Vasquez-Medina, 2015; Walraven, 2002). The acquisition of kimchi taste, as reported, followed a trajectory from aversion, to familiarity to longing. The re-negotiation of kimchi’s ethno-space in America has led to feelings of shame, guilt and sadness to some. The move away from home-prepared kimchi has taken a toll on the family’s specific historic and structural identity, emotions, the deliverance of cultural capital and it has effected the distribution of household agency. However, before casting our informants as overly nostalgic or “culinary Luddites” as Laudan (2015) puts it, before we conclude that they are regretful or wistful, we should not rule out their option to redefine their culinary language. Concessions have been made: manufactured kimchi offered a generic bridge for this trans-Korean-American community. It provided an agreed upon, common “taste” and links to the homeland and the future. It was the “new normal” for our informants and the new baseline for future trans-ethno culinary modifications.

The findings of this study have relevance for researchers involved in food product development and marketing, nutrition professionals and those seeing to provide support services to migrant populations. Consumption of kimchi has been promoted in the literature for its healthy properties and this product has become more conveniently accessible through its mass production by food manufacturers. While nutrition, convenience and sensory acceptance are important, innovative changes to traditional products (and kimchi in particular) must be considerate of the meanings food has to trans-ethnic and broader consumer populations. The findings of the present study demonstrated that kimchi provided a level of comfort to the informants. While these local findings may not be generalized to other regions, they indicate the potential of particular foods to facilitate cultural acclimation for other trans-ethnic populations. Though, the general acceptance of kimchi (or other specialized ethnic food products) by a broad-base of consumers may not be optimized if food professionals do not consider or address underlying culinary meanings (Kim, 2005; Hongu et al., 2017; Kü;hne et al., 2005). More specifically, the acceptance of food

products is contingent not only on their flavor, but also their connectivity to social and psychological relationships (Kelder, Hoelscher, & Perry, 2015).

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1981). Gastro-politics in hindu South Asia. *American Ethnologist*, 8(3), 496–511. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/644298>.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Birks, M. (2009). Seeking knowledge, discovering learning: Uncovering the impetus for baccalaureate nursing studies in Malaysian Borneo. *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, 15, 164–171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-172X.2009.01741.x>.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cantwell, R. (1999). Habitus, ethnomimesis: A note on the logic of practice. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 36(2/3), 219–234 In Special Double Issue: Cultural brokerage: Forms of intellectual practice in society.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Cho, H. S. (2006). Food and nationalism: Kimchi and Korean national identity*. *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, 46(5), 207–229. <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2006.12.46.5.207>.
- Choi, G. D. (2013). *Loss and meaning: Food and ethnic identity*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, New York University9781303764233.
- Choo, S., 1 (2004). Eating satay babi: Sensory perception of transnational movement. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 25(3), 203–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0725686042000315722>.
- Christou, A. (2011). Narrating lives in (e)motion: Embodiment, belongingness and displacement, in diasporic spaces of home and return. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 4(4), 249–257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2011.06.007>.
- Clark, C. M. (1980). Land and food, women and power in nineteenth century Kikuyu. *Africa*, 50(4), 357–370. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1158428>.
- Collins, F. L. (2008). Of kimchi and coffee: Globalization, transnationalism and familiarity in culinary consumption. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 9(2), 151–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360701856094>.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Douglas, M. (1975). Deciphering a meal. In M. Douglas (Ed.). *Implicit meanings: Essays in anthropology* (pp. 249–275). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- D’Sylva, A., & Beagan, B. (2011). ‘Food is culture, but it’s also power’: The role of food in ethnic and gender identity construction among Goan Canadian women. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 20(3), 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2011.593326>.
- Feldman, C., Harwell, H., & Brusca, J. (2013). Using student opinion and design inputs to develop an informed university foodservice menu. *Appetite*, 69, 80–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2013.05.009>.
- Fischer, C. (1988). Food, self and identity. *Social Science Information*, 27, 275–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901888027002005>.
- Gabaccia, D. R. (1998). *We are what we eat: Ethnic food and the making of Americans*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>.
- Han, K. K. (2000). Some foods are good to think: Kimchi and the epitomization of national character. *Korean Social Science Journal*, 27(1), 221–235.
- Han, K. K. (2010). The kimchi “wars” in globalizing East Asia: Consuming class, gender, health, and national identity. In L. Kendall (Ed.). *Consuming Korean tradition in early and late modernity* (pp. 149–166). Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Harbottle, L. (2006). Taste and embodiment: The food preferences of Iranians in Britain. In H. Macbeth (Ed.). *Food preferences and taste* (pp. 175–186). New York: Berghahn Books.
- Heldke, L. (2003). *Exotic appetites: Ruminations of a food adventurer*. New York: Routledge.
- Hongu, N., Kim, A. S., Suzuki, A., Wilson, H., Tsui, K. C., & Park, S. (2017). Korean kimchi: Promoting healthy meals through cultural tradition. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 4(3), 172–180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jef.2017.08.005>.
- Jones, C. (2009). Taking up space? How customers react to health information and health icons on restaurant menus. *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*, 12, 344–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15378020903344299>.
- Kelder, S., Hoelscher, D., & Perry, C. L. (2015). How individuals, environments, and health behaviors interact. In K. Glanz, B. K. Rimer, & K. Viswanath (Eds.). *Health behavior: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 159–182). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Kim, S. J. (2005). Potential probiotic properties of lactic acid bacteria isolated from kimchi. *Food Science and Biotechnology*, 14(4), 547–550.
- Korsmeyer, C. (1999). *Making sense of taste: Food and philosophy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Kühne, B., Vanhonacker, F., Gellynck, X., & Verbeke, W. (2010). Innovation in traditional

- food products in Europe: Do sector innovation activities match consumers' acceptance? *Food Quality and Preference*, 21(6), 629–638. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2010.03.013>.
- Lalonde, M. P. (1992). Deciphering a meal again, or the anthropology of taste. *Anthropology of Taste*, 31(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901892031001003>.
- Laudan, R. (2015). A plea for culinary modernism: Why we should love new, fast, processed food. *Gastronomica*, 1(1), 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2001.1.1.36>.
- Law, L. (2001). Home cooking: Filipino women and geographies of the senses. *Ecumene*, 8(3), 264–283. <https://doi.org/10.1191/096746001701557020>.
- Lee, S. S. J. (2000). Dys-appearing tongues and bodily memories: The aging of first-generation resident Koreans in Japan. *Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, 28(2), 198–223. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2000.28.2.198>.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1978). *The origin of table manners*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Marriott, M. (1978, December). *Intimacy and rank in food*. New Delhi: Presented at the Xth International Conference of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences.
- Parasecoli, F. (2014). Food, identity, and cultural reproduction in immigrant communities. *Social Research: International Quarterly*, 81(2), 415–439. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2014.0015>.
- Ray, K. (2004). *The migrant's table: Meals and memories in Bengali-American households*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Rozin, P., & Fallon, A. E. (1981). The acquisition of likes and dislikes for foods. In J. Solms, & R. L. Hall (Eds.). *Criteria of food acceptance: How man chooses what he eats. A symposium* (pp. 35–48). Zurich: Forster.
- Seremetakis, C. N. (1994). The memory of the senses, part I: Marks of the transitory. In C. N. Seremetakis (Ed.). *The senses still: Perception and memory as material culture in modernity*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Spiro, M. E. (1955). The acculturation of American ethnic groups. *American Anthropologist*, 57(6), 1240–1252. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1955.57.6.02a00140>.
- Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Thomson Learning 1979.
- Sutton, D. E. (2001). *Remembrance of repasts: An anthropology of food and memory (materializing culture)*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Vázquez-Medina, J. A., & Medina, F. X. (2015). Migration, nostalgia and the building of a food imaginary: Mexican migrants at “La Pulga” market in San Joaquin valley, California. *Essachess: Journal for Communication Studies*, 8(2), 133–146.
- Walraven, B. C. A. (2002). Bardot soup and confucians' meat. In K. J. Cwiertka, & B. C. A. Walraven (Eds.). *Asian food: The global and the local* (pp. 95–115). Richmond: Curzon.
- Webb, C., & Kevern, J. (2001). Focus group as a research method. A critique of some aspects of their use in nursing research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 33(6), 798–805. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01720.x>.
- World Institute of Kimchi (2015). *The science and culture of kimchi: Journey into healthy kimchi*. World Institute of Kimchi: Korea Foundation for the Advancement of Science and Creativity.