The Hansik Globalization Campaign: A Malaysian Critique

Abstract: This article critiques the South Korean government’s strategies to globalize Korean cuisine (hansik) for its first World bias and for overlooking important dynamics that are 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 on par with Japan. Based on interviews with Korean restaurant owners in Malaysia and a survey of Malaysian diners, I argue for an emphasis on the role that Korean migrants play in inadvertently promoting hansik as part of the gastrodiploatic negotiations in line with their processes of adaptation and settlement in Malaysia.

Keywords: hansik globalization campaign, Korean cuisine, halalization, Malaysia, Korean restaurants, Korean diaspora, everyday gastrodiplomacy

The Hansik Globalization Campaign

Since 2010, the South Korean government has been actively promoting its cuisine globally, with the initial ambitious aim of propelling hansik (traditional Korean cuisine) to the world’s top five cuisines by 2017. In May 2009, the government-funded Hansik Foundation Act was enacted, inaugurating the Hansik Globalization Development Agency composed of thirty-six members from relevant government departments, academic institutions, and food industry CEOs (Pham 2013: 7). Formed under the umbrella of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MFAFF) and with 700 million won (approx. USD620,000) in funding, the Korean Food Foundation (KFF) was charged with promoting and expanding hansik (Jung 2010). According to the KFF’s 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 on the global stage. This point reflects explicitly that the hansik globalization campaign was about soft power and nation branding and ultimately about expanding trade overseas and improving the overall national economy.

Multipronged strategies include awarding scholarships to South Korean students to train overseas in culinary schools, training foreign chefs in the art of Korean cuisine, providing incentives to hotels to open Korean restaurants, operating a food truck in New York City and giving out free lunches, recruiting Korean celebrities as ambassadors, publishing a Korean Menu Guide in 2012, and providing support to overseas Korean restaurants and food businesses by giving government grants for consultation on overseas expansion (Pham 2013: 14). Critics of the hansik globalization campaign cite, among other things, bureaucratic inefficiency, lack of coordination and communication between ministries, and wrong-headed marketing strategies. The South Korean National Assembly Budget Office pointed out that 21.9 billion won was spent in 2012 on the hansik globalization 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). Suffice it to say, by 2018 hansik is still nowhere near the top five popular cuisines in the world, which usually includes Italy, France, Mexico, India, Japan and China, although Korean barbecue and Korean food’s bold flavors may be trending as fusion food in restaurant menus in big American cities.

This article argues that in order to reap success, the hansik globalization campaign should rely on Korean migrants overseas, whose localized knowledge and experience automatically qualify them as on-the-ground cultural intermediaries and ambassadors. Rather than state-to-state diplomacy, this article is interested in the more banal everyday individual interactions between Koreans and non-Koreans in these food spaces (the Korean restaurant, the Korean grocery mart), spaces that by default use Korean food or provisions as an excuse to bring about interethnic (or international) cultural encounters. By analyzing the Korean Food Foundation publication, Guide to Korean Restaurants in Indonesia and Malaysia, I will show how the top-down campaign guided from Seoul has proven to be
Studies of Hansik Abroad

But first, what is hansik? It refers to traditional Korean food, centered around rice, served with a bowl of soup and a variety of side dishes known as banchan. Most foods use moderate amounts of meat and primarily vegetables as the main ingredients and are soaked in brine or water rather than fried in oil, giving hansik its reputation as a healthy cuisine. Fermentation is one of its striking features that is thought to have preventative properties and to aid digestion. Representative fermented foods such as kimchi (fermented cabbage), ganjang (soy sauce), doenjang (soybean paste), and gochujang (Korean chili paste) are part of the main repertoire of the national cuisine and are key aspects of the hansik globalization campaign. However, Korean food is much more diverse than this and not all of it would be considered healthy or uninfluenced by outside historical forces and cultures (Pettid 2008; Ku 2014; Ryang 2015). Korean fried chicken and beer (chimaek), for example, has become very popular in Malaysia ever since it was featured in a romantic Korean drama, My Love from the Star. But the main “dish” that Malaysians expect to see on a menu is Korean barbeque; hence many Korean restaurants in Malaysia first and foremost feature barbeque as their main item. Other common Korean dishes such as soups, stews, noodles (japchae), rice cakes (ttok), and pancakes are also present in Malaysia.

The appearance of Korean restaurants on the Malaysian foodscape is a relatively recent development, although diplomatic relations were established between Malaysia and South Korea back in 1960. Relations grew stronger in the 1980s when direct Korean investments poured into Malaysia under then prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad’s “Look East Policy.” State-to-state relations between South Korea and Malaysia remain positive and continue to grow, with discussions about bilateral trade agreements in the works, and increased tourist flows and trade between the two countries. The hansik globalization campaign builds on the recent success of the Korean government’s strategies such as the Korean Wave (hallyu) to command soft power and brand itself on the international stage. Much has been written about the effectivenss of Korean pop music and television dramas as Korea exercises soft power overseas (Chung 2015; Kim and Choe 2014; Hong 2014; Chintia 2013; Duong 2016; Harris Fajar Buchori 2016; Lee 2009), and more specifically the K-wave in Southeast Asia (Suh, Cho, and Kwon 2005; Lim and Ainslie 2013; Cho 2013; Siti Fatihah Yahya and Shafiah Nursyahidah Syed Annuar 2018). Indeed many Korean restaurant owners I interviewed in Malaysia explained that they had the Korean dramas, especially the historical drama series Dae Jang Geum [Jewel in the Palace 2005], and Korean pop stars to thank for introducing Malaysians to particular Korean dishes.

Comparatively, the soft power of Korean cuisine and the capability of Korean restaurants abroad in promoting Korean culture receive less academic attention. Notably this literature is growing in countries where there are large Korean populations—the United States, Australia, and Indonesia (Pham 2013; Kuznetsova 2014; Ciwetka 2014; Min and Lee 2014; Ongkowidjaja and Hikam 2015; Wang Medina 2015; Ingerson and Kim 2016). In Australia, which purportedly has the sixth largest Korean community outside of South Korea (Collins and Shin 2012: 10), Min and Lee (2014) surveyed customer satisfaction with Korean restaurants’ role as ambassadors for tourism marketing in Queensland and Ingerson and Kim (2016) discovered that Korean restaurant customers in Adelaide placed more value on hansik’s gastronomic elements (its taste and the variety of food) and health dimensions than on its cultural attributes such as experiencing Korean music, royal cuisine or religious Buddhist Korean food, and cultural decorations as part of the decor. In America, food anthropology doctoral student Chi-Hoon Kim critiques the hansik globalization campaign with regard to its efforts to popularize kimchi in the United States. She suggests that “the most effective gastrodiplomats so far are enterprising Korean Americans who believe the answer lays [sic] in local ingredients, small or homemade batches and fusion with favourite American dishes” (Kim 2012). Writing about Korean-Mexican fusion cuisine, Rockower (2010) too makes a point that one of the central components of public diplomacy is listening: “When public diplomacy actors pay attention to local and global public opinion rather than glibly engaging in advocacy, they are more adept at taking advantage of unorthodox openings created by authentic cultural innovations to carry out enhanced public diplomacy.” Korean migrants and transnationals ultimately practice a kind of everyday gastrodiplomacy that may be more impactful and long-lasting due to the 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.

Back in South Korea itself, Kuznetsova (2014), acknowledging the campaign’s criticisms, mostly embraced suggestions from Korea-based expatriate bloggers with regard to improving foreigners’ experience of hansik domestically, since the push to globalize hansik is motivated ultimately by the goal of improving the national economy and boosting tourism. This included the use of standardized romanized spellings of Korean foods; making menus more accessible via translation and annotation; advocating for overall better service in restaurants; promoting gastro tourism; and increasing “collaboration with foreigners” so as to improve its marketing strategies and in particular to upgrade those publications that contained grammatical mistakes and awkward 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 of the campaign, and among those who had, few had any direct involvement in it.

**From Food Nationalism to Gastrodiplomacy**

Food is a highly symbolic substance and can be used to mark national boundaries and market identities tied to cultures and geographical spaces. Gastronationalism functions through the ways in which food production, distribution, and consumption can demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment (DeSoucey 2020). DeSoucey gives the example of how the politics of *foie gras* protect certain foods and industries because it is considered as representative of French national cultural traditions. Koreans are no stranger to gastronationalism. Efforts to establish kimchi as a national dish began in the mid-1980s with the government introducing it to the world during the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics. Much of the construction of this identity is a response to the colonial disgust evinced by kimchi’s strong odor, with Koreans embracing it as a form of what Michael Herzfeld calls “cultural intimacy” (Kim 2016). Chi-Hoon Kim (2016: 43) suggests that kimchi solidified Koreanness during the volatile 1980s when Koreans faced aggressive state-led industrialization and urbanization policies. Kimchi nationalism also prompted Korea to scramble to officially register the kimchi standard at the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) in 2001 ahead of Japan and China and to have kimchi and the art of kimchi making (*kimjang*) certified as a UNESCO Intangible Heritage in 2013 (Cho 2006: 222; Kim 2016). While these events were state-driven, nationalism (or patriotism) is deeply embedded in Korean society. For Koreans living overseas, food is one way of connecting with home and cooking, and eating it becomes the most representative yet banal form of cultural nationalism. As food patriots, Korean nationals overseas, rather than food-loving white foreigners living in Korea, make the likeliest candidates to promote hansik.

The hansik globalization campaign taps into gastronationalist sentiments as governments like South Korea recognize the potential role of national food in marketing its image and brand internationally and thereby use food as a form of cultural negotiation for diplomatic purposes (Ichijo and Ranta 2016). The term gastrodiplomacy “can be understood to encompass three important elements: cultural diplomacy, soft power and nation branding” (Ichijo and Ranta 2016: 8), all of which are at play in the hansik globalization campaign. Korean state officials express the hope that hansik can play a role in fostering gastrodiplomacy or become a form of soft power in the nation’s branding exercise. Indeed, former South Korean First Lady Kim Yoon-ok, wife of President Lee Myung-bak, who cooked and served *pajeon* (pancakes) to American war veterans of the Korean War in Great Neck, New York, on September 21, 2009, in her mission to promote hansik to the world (Moskin 2009), is one such example of gastrodiplomacy, defined by Paul Rockower (2010) as “the act of winning hearts and minds through stomachs.”

Other successful examples of states using their national cuisine as a soft power include Thailand’s “Global Thai”—the promotion of Thai cuisine overseas “to increase the appeal and desirability of its culture, people, values and ideals”—which resulted in increased tourist numbers (Ichijo and Ranta 2016: 108). On the other hand, ordinary citizens rather than the nation-state can also enact “gastromediation” over food that both sides claim as their own, such as when Israeli activists and Palestinian villagers came together to make a record-breaking hummus (Aviel 2016). The general idea in these cases is that food can be a way to negotiate commonalities and resolve or smoothen real-life tensions between political or ethnic groups/nations.

But away from the nation-state’s idea of gastrodiplomacy (deepening state-to-state relations and promoting economic growth and trade while marketing the nation), gastrodiplomacy can also include engagement “on a cultural and personal level with everyday diners” (Pham 2013: 5). 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 interactions with customers and workers, not
merely at annual food festivals or expensive special hotel promotions or cooking classes.

**Halal in the Malaysian Dining Scene**

For Malaysians, the experience of eating Korean food is usually mediated through Korean restaurants, the majority of which began to open up when more Koreans arrived as education migrants. One or two of the earliest restaurants opened in the mid-1980s, but the majority opened in the mid-2000s and more recently in the mid-2010s. Malaysians dine out a lot but only the middle- and upper-middle-income earners can afford to eat at Korean restaurants (if we exclude affordable Korean food found at food courts that can cost below RM20, or about USD4.80). Malaysia is a multiethnic society consisting of a 61% Muslim majority, with about 50% being ethnic Malays who are constitutionally defined as Muslims; ethnic minorities, such as the Chinese (24%), who are mainly Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians; Indians (7%), who are mostly Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and some Muslims; and other ethnic and indigenous groups. Thus, Korean food businesses have to be attuned to the cultural sensitivities (specifically food prohibition) and taste palates of the population.

The main prohibition would be for the Muslim majority, who can only eat halal food (that is lawful according to Islam). To appease majority Muslim consumers, the state initiated processes of halalization beginning in the 1980s. A state body—JAKIM or the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia—oversees and regulates halal products, spaces, and work processes (Fischer 2017: 200). Halalization is achieved by ensuring that meat has undergone ritual slaughter, and that food does not contain any porcine or alcohol traces, as well as the strict observance of purity and hygiene in the process of food production, which some Muslims feel can only be undertaken by other fellow Muslims in order to be halal (Fischer 2008: 83). Due to these strict rules, halal certification issued by the Islamic authorities (JAKIM) is not easily obtained. But some Korean food outlets, such as Kyochon Chicken, attempt to do so. While waiting for their halal certification to arrive, the company demonstrates its cultural awareness about halal, noting in an email:

> However, our management is fully aware of the dietary needs of our Muslim friends; as such, our ingredients and chickens are sourced solely from JAKIM certified suppliers. No alcohol or pork is used in our kitchens or food served to customers. In fact, 99% of our ingredients are already halal certified by JAKIM and IFANCA, an association recognised by JAKIM. The balance of ingredients which have not been certified are plant-based products imported from Korea, and hence need more time to get certified. We have also streamlined all our business practices according to halal guidelines.

The fried-chicken company also notes that in the three of their premises where alcohol is served, the alcohol is “prepared in a separate bar area, using different glassware and washed in a separate area away from all the plates and utensils we use to serve our food. This is permissible by JAKIM and is similar to the operation of hotels in Malaysia where the food served is halal or pork and alcohol-free, but they also serve alcohol on the premises.”

Such a minutely detailed explanation demonstrates cultural awareness about the strict regulation of halal and belies the local understanding that is missing from the Korean Food Foundation restaurant guide.

The *Korean Restaurant Guide to Indonesia/Malaysia* 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. 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 truly consider local habits and the identity of local customers. The index included factors that Malaysians are not duly concerned about, such as whether takeout and reservations are allowed and whether “delivery” is available. Unlike in Seoul, where timeliness and quick delivery is assured and not hampered by bad traffic conditions, Malaysian food businesses rarely do deliveries, although this is changing due to the introduction of mobile phone delivery apps in the last couple of years. 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 the sharing of bountiful food with family and friends are as important as the food itself. After all, the common discourse about Korean food is that it is meant to be shared (Y.J. Kim 2014; Sean in Masak-masak 2009). Seeing the spread of *banchan* on the table in their serving bowls, having these side dishes refilled repeatedly, seeing the hot pot arrive while still boiling, eating barbequed meat that is cooked right in front of you, taking photos with one’s mobile phone and posting them instantly on social media or on one’s blog to share with friends—all 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 listening to K-pop music and/or watching videos on the screens.
One of the key omissions in the index is the halal sign: the restaurant guide did not indicate whether the particular restaurant was halal, which means that although it was presented in Malay and English, it was not actually targeted at ethnic Malay 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 are halal but that the processes are also halal. All except one of the Korean restaurants I interviewed were not halal, and proprietors acknowledged that their Malaysian customers were mostly ethnic Chinese. In the guide, only Sweettree in Ampang is mentioned as “one of the few Korean cafes with a halal status” (although the halal status of the oldest upscale establishment in town, Koyowon, and the more affordable Kolyang, 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 in English or Chinese). Hence, despite the desire to appeal to both local and international readerships, 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 grasp. The use of Malay suggests that it is catering to the majority Malays or that Chinese Malaysians would also prefer to read in Malay, yet there is no halal indicator that would assure Muslim Malays that it is a place where they could eat knowing that it has received a religious endorsement.

Although the majority of Korean restaurants are not halal, as pork is an integral part of the Korean diet, there is no shortage of interest in hansik among ethnic Malays, as they have been following hallyu and K-pop since the trend hit Malaysia. The 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. Blogs and comments posted online ask 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. Korean restaurant owners have not really explored this market, as they are reluctant to remove pork from their menus. It also depends on where the restaurant is located, as Malaysian suburbs tend to be racialized: Korean owners in expensive areas like Mont Kiara (full of expatriates, Japanese, Koreans, and wealthy Chinese) do not feel compelled to make their restaurants halal as their market is mainly Chinese and Korean. 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 (Kolyang) 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, and 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’s goal to “keep the traditions of Korean food” while at the same time trying to “satisfy the tastes of everyone in the world.” In fact, halalization is already underway when it comes to marketing Korean food products (not necessarily traditional hansik alone) in Malaysia. There is less publicity around the gradual awareness and exploitation of halal consumption and the untapped Muslim market potential in countries where hallyu has made a mark: 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 in 2014 that included food sampling and building awareness about halal Korean food products among the majority Muslims (Lee 2014). Thirty out of 150 food products were said to be halal. This comes after the news that giant food conglomerates like CJ and Pulmoune rushed to get halal logos on their export products after Nongshim led the way (Park 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. Between 2014 and 2016, more halal Korean food and restaurants have emerged, according to a Muslim K-pop fan, Afnul Farahana Mustapa: “A few years ago, it was hard to find halal restaurants, but now it’s easy since so many Muslims are into everything Korean now. I guess it’s because Korean food is spicy, and it suits our taste buds. I try cooking Korean food once in a while. I usually go to little Korea town in Ampang or the K Market in Mont Kiara to get ingredients” (Zuliantie 2016). 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 give much consideration to 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 among Malaysians. To the open-ended question “What got you interested in Korean food?” thirty out of 101 responses cited Korean films, dramas, variety shows, and cooking programs as well as K-pop, while thirty-three 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 about the hype and new trend, or are foodies interested in trying new cuisines (thirteen); those motivated by friends and family (fifteen); and those who have traveled to or lived in Korea or were introduced to hansik by a Korean contact (six). Four were “accidental tourists” for whom the Korean restaurant was merely conveniently located or accessible due to its ubiquity in malls, or who had ended up there due to a lack of choice and had no previous interest in Korean food.

Globalization, Franchising, and Chain Restaurants

The hansik globalization campaign straddles a fine line between gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy. How does one share and promote one’s national cuisine to others without appearing to sound chauvinistic? Whether due to poor translation or lack of cultural awareness about how its message will be received by foreigners, the KFF deploys superlatives like “excellent” to describe its own cuisine on its website, thus leaving itself open to critiques of making exaggerated, self-serving claims. News articles and magazine coverage of hansik on the website all tout its benefits. Critics may read the unabashed self-praise coupled with the desire to promote and globalize its “excellent” food as an imperialist venture (regardless of whether hansik is a form of soft or hard power): a “globalizing” (Ritzer 2003) spatial dissemination of a five-thousand-year-old cuisine, although conceding that some national traditions were invented throughout more recent periods of history. However, in Malaysia there has not been vocal resistance against the craze for Korean food and restaurants since the local dining scene is a pluralistic one in any case. This is in contrast to criticisms from a moral minority against the Korean boy band craze among Muslim female fans, in particular a case where three Muslim girls faced arrest for hugging their Korean idol on stage and thus acting inappropriately. Rather, the imperialistic goals of the campaign emerge in statements made by the Korean Food Foundation promotion and communications division director Dr. Suh Soo-yon. He explains how introducing Korean ingredients into Italian cooking “can also help Korean food companies expand their presence across the world and continue to see an increase of exports of Korean ingredients” (in Lee 2017).

To achieve this goal, the KFF funds Korean food conglomerates expanding abroad, not all of which sell traditional hansik: franchised restaurants like Mr. Pizza, Crazeburger, and Kyocho Fried Chicken (Chung 2011) and CJ Foodville (Pham 2013), which opened up Bibigo in Singapore and Indonesia, in addition to Los Angeles and London. Bibigo food products can be found on supermarket shelves, but Bibigo has not opened any restaurants in Malaysia. CJ Foodville has instead opened two branches of a French-style bakery, Tous les Jours in Malaysia, hardly representing “the root of the country’s philosophy and traditional culture that bears [the Korean] culture, spirit, and a 5,000-year history” (former head of the MFAFF in Pham 2013: 6–7). To be fair, Tous les Jours may not benefit directly from the hansik globalization campaign because the former does not promote traditional Korean food. But as a subsidiary of a Korean food giant, its overseas expansion does fulfill the KFF mandate of commercialization and globalization.

These instances suggest that the hansik globalization campaign’s effectiveness will be measured more by the expansion of markets abroad for all sorts of Korean food products and Korean food businesses than by the narrow promotion of a traditional cuisine that can increase global health. There is a strong pro–Big Business component about Korean expansion into overseas markets that takes the form of franchise restaurants and cafes. They differ from the local chain restaurants established by Korean migrants in Malaysia like the very successful Daorae Korean Barbeque Restaurant (est. 2008) that has sixteen outlets at last count and Uncle Jang, which has eleven and specializes in dakgalbi. Apart from global chain restaurants like Bibigo, others are expanding into China and Southeast Asia: Palsaik Samgyupsal Korean BBQ and Korean fried chicken (Kyocho, 77 chicken, Bunchon), cafes (Caffe Bene, Coffee Coffee), bakeries (Tous les Jours and soon, Paris Baguette) and ice cream (MilkCow), Western-style fastfood restaurants selling steaks and burgers (Lotteria) and even pizza parlors like Mr. Pizza (Lee 2011; Park 2014). These businesses 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
hands that they have under contract. 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 and Chae 2014) and the domestic market reaching saturation point (Lee 2011). At the heart of the campaign to develop and modernize the cuisine lies an inherent contradiction: accepting that food is not static and tastes and preferences change over time and space, while at the same time attempting to preserve tradition (and authenticity). This plays out in the decisions to make food sweeter as a process of adaptation (see later) and in the creation of fusion food. Separately, the KFF tries to regulate the standards by certifying recommended restaurants, the ones that “have strong points in historic value and industry value.” But arguably being the self-appointed arbiter of standards becomes a source of criticism. All in all, the campaign’s strategies might be too broad and all-encompassing for the institute to fully manage. For South Korea, globalization in the form of cultural, media, and human flows across national borders giving rise to hybridization and glocalization are processes that have been underway since President Kim Young-Sam’s segyehwa (globalization) policy in the 1990s (Wang Medina 2015:1). So, while state-driven hallyu helped popularized Korean cuisine in Malaysia, it is also Korean migrant-entrepreneurs who opened up Korean restaurants and enabled Malaysian fans to taste the kinds of food and dishes they could only see their idols eat on Korean shows: for example, a young male customer would order tteok-bokki every week at Mr. SJK’s shop because he was a Girls’ Generation fan and saw them eating this dish (interview, November 22, 2014).

Yet, although migrant-entrepreneurs contribute to globalizing Korean cuisine overseas and despite the KFF’s avowed goals of “supporting financially existing Korean restaurants abroad,” the Korean government has either attempted to compete with existing restaurants (having aborted a plan of opening a state-run Korean restaurant in New York City) or taken credit for the success of Michelin Star Korean restaurants (McPherson 2014). 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 benefit the Korean franchised restaurants. However, rather than capital support, these individual entrepreneurs would have preferred to have contact with local experts who could assist them with operational information regarding new locations so as to help them target the local market.

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 gastrodiplomacy 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 a food business. Instead they may be education migrants who moved in order to enter their children in English or Chinese middle schools (Kim 2007; Abaya Gomez, Jr. 2013), graduates of Malaysian universities, or retirees, some with previous work and living experience in Malaysia, who do not have prior professional experience in the industry (Kuznetsova 2014: 51). One food operator explained frankly that for Koreans who did not have many skills, the food business offered the easiest entry.

Everyday gastrodiplomacy involves ongoing negotiations between Korean managers and 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, 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 to moving beyond basic communication, although they can get by to some extent 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 because 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 to gain English competency. This means that most owners have to try harder to appeal to their customers, unlike in Korea where waiters’ service is reputedly only about delivering food quickly to the table rather than making recommendations and offering a warm, friendly atmosphere (MacPherson 2011).

Unlike Malaysians, Koreans are not known to be friendly, as pointed out by Korean interviewees themselves. Such cultural differences provoke a sense of self-reflexivity and a need to modify expectations, habits, and attitudes in order to fit in. Koreans, my interlocutors admitted, were an impatient lot raised in a competitive environment that prized speedy efficiency and where the expression “pali-pali” is commonly heard (lit. hurry-hurry 빨리, 빨리). All of these noticeable differences cultivate a sense of pressure to adapt to a more
relaxed environment by projecting a cheerful, accommodating attitude toward customers, for example, greeting customers when they enter, 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 receiving the personal touch, such as when the owners teach them how to wrap the barbequed meat in lettuce leaves. Food bloggers and reviewers comment on well-trained staff who barbecue the meat or fry the dakgalbi for the customers. So 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.

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”), and 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; in both cases, with a sense of cultural pride they regard it as their responsibility to introduce Malaysians to the healthy cuisine of their homeland. For while the aim of restaurant and grocery mart owners is to make a profit, they are also consciously or unconsciously aiding the hansik of restaurant and grocery mart owners is to make a profit, 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.

Another culinary innovation in the café is the roti canai-sized kimchi pancake: “Normally, Korean pancake is very big and one big round of one… and then, people here, you don’t really use chopsticks as what we use in Korea, the thin ones. So, they had difficulties… for the Malays, it’s harder because they don’t use chopsticks, right? So, one of the customers asked me, ‘Why don’t you make a smaller piece, it’s easier for us to eat.’ So, now the pancake shape is like that,” he explains, laughing. These gastropolitical instances illustrate the conviviality, cultural adaptation, and integration that have earned the café owner the nickname “Sabah Lee” from his Malaysian friends. Eighty percent of his clientele are Chinese Malaysians. He notes that although his current café serves pork, if he were to open another shop he would make it halal “so that every religion and every race can come and eat the food” (interview, August 25, 2015). His experiential knowledge about the cultural differences among his Malaysian customers, their taste palates, and behavior provide valuable insights for Korean food businesses opening up in East Malaysia.

Mr. Lee has heard of the Hansik globalization campaign, and friends urged him to apply for the grant. However, there were conditions of culinary authenticity he would need to fulfill in order to qualify, such as offering many side dishes and serving a proper Korean meal. Also, he thought that the food he and his wife cooked and ate at home “are not authentic Korean foods.” He felt that they did not necessarily have the skills to open an authentic Korean restaurant and might even have to hire a chef from Korea in order to have that contract with the Korean government (interview, August 25, 2015). This question of the KFF regulation of “authentic” hansik clearly does not impede the kinds of Korean cooking that are actually practiced and shared in Malaysian Korean restaurants.

Authenticity becomes a point of debate, especially with regard to adapting to local taste. Mr. Lee and numerous Korean interlocutors explained that local Korean restaurants
localize by making their dishes sweeter, whereas more authentic Korean food would encompass a range of tastes including bitterness. One other restaurant manager, Mr. P, exclaims, “Actually Korean food is not sweet but my [Myanmar] worker thinks Malaysians like sugar so they put sugar” (interview, December 17, 2017). He explained that the clientele of the franchised restaurant he manages are mostly Chinese Malaysians, as discriminating Koreans only eat at restaurants where there is a Korean chef. Another said that although he does not alter his food to suit the Malaysian palate, he described the local taste as “sweeter, more ajinomoto and oilier” (Mr. OL, interview, December 4, 2014). This is in line with the belief that Koreans have about Malaysian food being sweeter, saltier, and oilier. Nevertheless, Mr. OL admitted that some well-traveled Malaysian customers are getting more sophisticated as they become familiar with and demand more authentic Korean tastes (interview, December 4, 2014).

Insofar as the restaurant or Korean kitchen becomes a space of food production that brings together the Korean “boss” (or his wife) who acts as chef or manager and the kitchen and wait staff who are usually migrant workers from Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia, or the Philippines, the close proximity and everyday interactions that rely on trust between employer and employees also foster a kind of cultural understanding. This intercultural relationship occurs over food, although not necessarily hansik alone. Mr. P explains that it is a two-way feeling: “Burmese like kimchi—they will buy it even though it is expensive,” and “I like Burmese food. My workers invited me over for Burmese New Year and cooked crab, Myanmar style” (interview, December 14, 2017). He thinks perhaps there are similarities between Burmese and Korean food (or in the styles of cooking, which may explain why the Burmese learn how to cook Korean food very quickly). Similarly, fifty-something Mr. SJK shared a strong bond with his Myanmarese workers, considering them
his “family” since he himself had been an orphan at the age of twenty. He planned to close for Korean New Year so he could take them out for dinner. Sympathetic with their precarious situation as refugees and migrant workers, he sees his “company” not as a hierarchical organization but as one that works together like a car: the engine may be the thing that runs the car, he explains, but the windshield wipers, the tires, each has its part to play in making the car run smoothly (interview, November 22, 2014).

Whether or not one would call these intercultural encounters instances of gastrodiplomacy, the conditions shaped by the global and domestic economy whereby Malaysia relies heavily on imported low-skilled labor enable Korean restaurant and grocery store owners to have deeper interactions with their migrant workers on a daily basis than with Malaysian customers, notwithstanding language limitations. For example, at one dakgalbi outlet, the Korean manager who spoke no English relied on his Nepali or Bangladeshi server to translate or mediate my questions. He obviously entrusted the latter with the power to negotiate and interpret, even though, as I quickly discovered, the server did not speak Korean and merely repeated my question back to him. As for deepening understanding between the Korean restaurant managers and their Malaysian customers, busy peak periods leave little room for conversation and socializing. Alternatively, they form stronger connections with their Malaysian food suppliers (Mr. BDJ, interview, November 28, 2018) or neighboring food stalls (Mr. SJK, interview, November 22, 2014), people with whom they have a regular relationship. As for Malaysian consumers, eating at Korean restaurants does little to further in-depth knowledge or understanding of Korean culture due to the superficial nature of the relationship. While respondents on my survey may find that there is a lot that Korean cuisine shares with Chinese cuisine—in cooking methods, ingredients, and flavors and in its family-style serving that encourages commensality—unless they are regulars who have struck up a relationship with the Korean proprietors, there is little or no time for them to get acquainted with the proprietors during busy mealtimes.

Evaluating the Korean Food Foundation’s Success

The hansik globalization campaign, if left in the hands of state officials, would not be as effective as the groundwork already laid by hallyu for hansik’s popularity in Malaysia, and in the bonding over food that Korean migrants, students, and food operators share with their Malaysian friends, clientele, or their Burmese workers. These simple everyday interactions over food (preparing food, serving it, tasting it) may not influence the overall politics of nation-states but do serve to develop a taste for Korean cuisine and advance further consumption of Korean food products and culture. So much so, in fact, that savvy Korean food outlets have had to diversify beyond barbecue to provide regional cuisine like barbecue skewered lamb—trendy in Korea but originally hailing from Yanbian, China, bordering North Korea (Hwang Hae Restaurant); ethnic Chinese-Korean cuisine; dakgalbi that originated from Chuncheon, Gangwon Province (Mr. Jang and Mr. Dalgalbi); smoked barbecue (less cholesterol, healthier) (AppleSamgyupsal); Korean fried chicken and noodles; and hipper, concept-fueled restaurants like Palsaik and Crazy Fish for the more adventurous. Increasingly perhaps something more genuinely Korean, in the form of one-dish specialty restaurants, will open up.

After all, the interest in hansik and Korean cuisine is broadening as more Malaysians are becoming familiar with the taste, ways of eating it, and names of the dishes. With the intense competition among different Korean restaurants, some dishes are becoming more affordable.

My research on the hansik globalization campaign from a Malaysian perspective has shown that existing Korean restaurants in Malaysia receive little to no support to globalize hansik. While the published KFF restaurant guide provides free publicity for the twenty featured restaurants, its limited distribution and circulation undermines its effectiveness. Traffic on the KFF website is relatively low (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 regard to the globalization of hansik. News about trade flows, cultural exchange, the signing of MOUs (memoranda of understanding) between Korean and Malaysian companies to promote each other’s products or have joint ventures/franchises, is 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). Although the KFF has undergone a name change and redefined its field of control to avoid overlapping tasks across ministries, it continues to target “major” countries on its website, although this time, it includes Indonesia (due to its population size).

The hansik globalization rhetoric betrays the deep anxiety of a middling power with a developmentalist mindset that wants badly to be considered a major player on the world stage.
This self-conscious desire to project a positive national image propels the hansik globalization discourse, as often descriptions of Korean food are accompanied by superlatives such as “excellent” and “truly blessed cuisine” (S.S. Kim 2014). The campaign, in seeking legitimacy, sometimes resorts to pseudo-scientific tests like a 2008 study carried out by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries “proving” that eating hansik can lead to a higher sperm count as opposed to eating hamburgers and pork cutlets (Hall 2013); or in a nonscientific way, to best Mediterranean cuisine by proclaiming hansik as “the king of all healthy diets” (ibid.). In fact, one of the criticisms of the hansik globalization campaign has been its tendency to construct and shape “a sentimental and idealized past of high and low culinary traditions that are mined for their commercial potential and sold back to citizens, co-ethnics in the diaspora, and ‘foreigners’” through “state-sponsored scientific research [focusing on the health benefits of hansik], tourism campaigns, commercial advertising, lifestyle television, and in fictional narratives in literature, film, and television” (Wang Medina 2015: 198). All this is done in order to elevate itself as “a culinary culture that is coterminous with other culinary cultures with distinction” (ibid.).

The legitimacy of international cuisines and world standing is perceived to lie with Europeans, as testified by the use of European/ Western chefs or Western-trained chefs. South Korea’s global culinary aspirations fueled by nationalist economic goals are based upon emulating the standards set by the cultural and economic powerhouses of the world: Japan and the United States (former colonial forces and occupiers), a rising China, and the old-world charms of Europe for setting 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, at Ondal, a Korean restaurant in the Sheraton Grande Walkerhill Hotel who advised first targeting China, Vietnam, and other Asian nations in the hansik globalization campaign. The Korea Times quoted him: “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 2012).

Originally the KFF strategies included, among others: “identifying customer demands and needs in real-time and reflecting them in the business plan”; conducting “foreign information research” such as identifying the status of local Korean food businesses and the barriers that hinder the development of competitive local Korean restaurants; and identifying consumer demands according to local policies. But in practice, the most evident successful strategy has been the creation of opportunities for the advancement of franchises and other businesses. Over the span of three years since I first conducted research on the KFF, some improvements have been made. Posted on the Korean Food Promotion website today is a SmartPhone App, “Halal Korea,” which has been developed for Muslims living or traveling in Korea (www.hansik.org/en/article.do?cmd=html&menu=PEN4050300&lang=en).

Further, Korean restaurant guides to other parts of Southeast Asia were published: Vietnam and Thailand in 2014 and Singapore in 2016. And some suggestions made by MacPherson and other foreign expatriates living in Seoul about standardizing the romanized spelling of Korean words were adopted.

As noted by Pham and Kuznetsova, the ongoing campaign has achieved some success in promoting Korean cuisine through the use of media news coverage, tie-ins with Korean pop stars (less effective in the United States but more effective in other parts of Asia where K-dramas and K-pop are popular), and making it visible on the world stage. However, much more still needs to be done with regard to surrendering a certain level of trust and autonomy to local agents, whether Korean or Malaysian.

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NOTES
1. Under pressure to increase transparency and allow for greater public scrutiny, the Korean Food Foundation has changed its name to the Korean Food Promotion Institute in late 2017. Since my critique and interviews were conducted before the name change, this article uses the original name.
2. A mixed methodology is deployed combining textual analysis of the Korean Food Foundation’s Korean Restaurant Guide to Indonesia/Malaysia, an online search on Korean food and restaurants in Malaysia, interviews with Korean subjects, and an online survey of about a hundred Malaysian responses to Korean food and their dining experiences in Korean restaurants. Out of forty-two Koreans I interviewed, twelve 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 August 18–30, 2015. Supplemental interviews were conducted more recently in 2017.


6. With heavy state backing to develop the culture industry, the Korean Wave or hallyu took off in the early 2000s with Winter Sonata (2002) and Dae Jang Geum (2005)—both television series were popular in Malaysia. Winter Sonata sparked curiosity about Korean culture and in 2013 drew 44,000 Malaysian tourists to one of its locations, beautiful Nami Island (Malaysian Times 2013).

7. There are 1,865,057 people who identify as Korean in the United States (2015), 123,000 in Australia (2016), and 41,000 in Indonesia (2015).


12. My Korean interviewees reveal awareness about Malaysian racialization policies, particularly the affirmative action for Malays that discriminated against ethnic Chinese. Coming from a meritocratic society, they felt the policy was highly unjust. A few of those I interviewed held racist views of Malays as lazy, with one even telling me that this view was formed out of his experience with Malay workers. Sometimes a family member fulfilled this role.


14. Bulgogi Brothers in Malaysia opened in 2006 and closed in 2017. Not all Muslims rely on halal logos and signs like “pork free” or “alcohol free” may appease those who are less strict about halal observations.


16. The survey can be accessed at https://nottinghamhammy.asia. qualities.com/SE/?SID=SV_dhDcetebtuV6qKwaFm.


18. Bibigo opened up in the UK, Los Angeles and San Diego, Japan, Singapore, and Jakarta with the tagline “Healthy and Fresh Korean Food,” modernizing and localizing the traditional bibimbap wherever it went. While it has expanded in China, it suffered losses in Singapore and Jakarta, and withdrew altogether from Southeast Asia by 2017. This is a far cry from CJ Foodville’s initial announcement about opening four hundred outlets in Southeast Asia by 2015, when it hoped to take advantage of the popularity of the Korean Wave in the region (see Jae-Young Kim, “CJ’s Bibigo Withdraws from Singapore,” Korea Times, August 17, 2016, www. koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2016/08/123_212151.html).

19. A few of those I interviewed held racist views of Malays as lazy, with one even telling me that this view was formed out of his experience with Malay workers.


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