THINK PIECE: Diaspora, Exclusion and Appropriation: The Cuisine of the Korean Minority in Japan

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Abstract

Zainichi Koreans are descendants of Koreans that immigrated to Japan during the colonialization of the Korean peninsula. Although most are born in Japan and speak better Japanese than Korean, they remain marginalized in a society striving to remain homogenous. This essay places the cuisine of Zainichi Koreans in its broader social context. A number of scholars recognize the contribution of Koreans and their food to Japanese cuisine. However, while Koreans living in Japan are relegated to subaltern status, their food is expropriated and celebrated as part of Japanese society. This essay examines the power structure that frames the Japanization of Korean food. The theoretical implication is to reframe culinary erasure and appropriation as part of an integrated system that includes ethnic economy, minority marginalization and systemic discrimination. More broadly, it argues that the structures of domination that have been well documented in the Western context also exist in East Asia.

Keywords: Zainichi Koreans, Japanese colonialism, Japanese cuisine, yakiniku, culinary appropriation
Stepping off the train at Tsuruhashi station—the stop for Osaka’s Koreatown—it is immediately clear you have arrived in a different part of the city. A maze of narrow alleyways twists and turn under the train tracks. Smells of grilled meat and brightly lit signs pull you into an alien world of sights and smells. Ethnic Korean residents carrying on their daily business brush shoulders with excited Japanese sightseers, tourists in their own land. Most outsiders come to this historically Korean neighborhood to experience a bit of the Korean wave: K-pop, Korean dramas and a burgeoning food culture emanating from South Korea. Here, one finds grandmothers hawking all forms of kimchi made from rock seaweed, shallots and even tomatoes competing with each other for creativity. Outside barbecue joints, colorful posters displaying selections of organ meat remain a lasting symbol of how the community has adapted to survive. Today, few Japanese consumers need to make the trip to this ethnic neighborhood as grilled meat, kimchi and savory pancakes are readily available outside these cultural enclaves in the frozen food aisles of grocery stores or popular restaurant chains. Although these specialties emerged in places like Tsuruhashi, they have become an integral part of the Japanese foodscape and are now considered by many to be native to the island nation. What process enabled the domestication of Korean food in Japan and why is this issue relevant to contemporary Korean residents in Japan?

Studies on the historical development of Japanese cuisine recognize the place of Koreans and their food in Japan. However, these analyses have stayed neutral, silencing some of the greater injustices. While Koreans living in Japan are relegated to subaltern status, their food is expropriated and celebrated as part of Japanese society. This essay seeks to rectify this omission by paying close attention to the power structure that frames the domestication of Korean food in Japan. The idea for this think piece first emerged in 2018.

while doing ethnographic fieldwork that examined the state of anti-Korean discrimination in Osaka, Japan. Participant observation and informal discussions with ethnic Koreans made clear the importance of food culture in their lives engendering a number of reflections on the assimilation of Korean cuisine in Japan. This essay aims to first frame the historical context to better understand the contemporary predicament of Koreans that immigrated to Japan during the colonization of the peninsula. Second, it will argue that their cuisine is distinct from the cuisine of South Korea and the cuisine of Japan. Finally, it will broaden the discussion on culinary appropriation to assess what is at stake for marginalized communities. The theoretical implication is to reframe culinary erasure and appropriation as part of an integrated system that includes ethnic economy, minority marginalization and systemic discrimination. More broadly, this article argues that the structures of domination that have been well documented in the Western context also exist in East Asia.

The Invisible Minority

According to the Japanese Ministry of Justice, 479,193 North and South Korean inhabitants live in Japan, constituting the second-largest minority in a nation otherwise perceived as homogeneous. About two-thirds of these Korean inhabitants living in Japan are classified as special permanent residents that are born in Japan and speak better Japanese than Korean. The current predicament of this population is tied to the Korean Peninsula’s thirty-five years as a colony of Japan (1910-1945) when large numbers of Koreans migrated to Japan often coerced into forced labor. Although some scholars question the use of the term “coerced conscription” (kyōsei renkō), it remains a topic of contention between Korean and Japanese politicians especially in the case of comfort women. Still, Japanese colonial rule in Korea was devised as a system of exploitation that pushed millions of Koreans to immigrate to Japan. It is worth noting that Japanese colonialism was explicitly modeled on European colonialism. Thus, contemporary structures that are a legacy of colonialism in Japanese society resemble the ones present in Western societies. The Japanese colonial project took great care to reproduce strategies of subjugation, colonial administration and racial hierarchy within their empire. This hierarchy, with Japanese at its apex, helped promulgate stereotypes that

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justified Korean's inferior status. For example, after the 1923 great Kanto earthquake, rumors of Koreans poisoning wells prompted the massacre of thousands of Korean civilians living in the Tokyo area.\footnote{Sonia Ryang, “The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Massacre of Koreans in 1923: Notes on Japan’s Modern National Sovereignty,” \textit{Anthropological Quarterly} 76, no. 4 (2003): 731–48.} These stereotypes—Koreans as unruly and prone to criminality—endure today in Japan’s popular imagination.

After peace was ratified with the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951, Japan was forced to surrender its colonies. Out of the 2 million Korean laborers in Japan at the end of World War II, about 600,000 remained in Japan after the Second World War.\footnote{Edward W. Wagner, \textit{The Korean Minority in Japan, 1904-1950} (New York: International Secretariat, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1951), 27.} Although Koreans were located at the bottom of the social ladder, many opted to stay in Japan in the hope that the political and economic situation would soon improve in Korea. Few ended up making it back home and their descendants constitute the basis of the Korean population living in Japan. Although these Korean residents were regarded as Japanese nationals, the independence of Korea meant that they were stripped of their nationality as Japanese imperial subjects, effectively becoming stateless. While some Koreans were able to naturalize as Japanese citizens, most remained non-Japanese citizens in a country that sought to exclude them.

Why did so few Korean residents in Japan choose to naturalize? The reasons are diverse, ranging from the lack of resources necessary for such a complex process to the fact that Japan proscribes dual citizenship. As they were excluded from desirable occupations, Korean laborers were relegated to unwanted jobs like scrap collectors, gambling hall owners and employees at hole in the wall restaurants. Unable to rent property from Japanese landowners, Koreans were relegated to living in ethnic ghettos and shantytowns where they could afford to live.

Over time, Koreans remaining in Japan inherited the ambiguous status of \textit{Zainichi} granting them long-term residency without giving them the same rights as Japanese nationals. They became outsiders living inside Japanese society. Still today, a significant number of \textit{Zainichi} Koreans live in ethnic neighborhoods, occupy similar work sectors and have access to limited educational opportunities.\footnote{Suzuki Kazuko, \textit{Divided Fates: The State, Race, and Korean Immigrants’ Adaptation in Japan and the United States} (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 124-130.} The situation of the descendants of people who came during colonial times should, however, be contrasted with recent immigrants from South Korea or, “newcomers,” who arrive in Japan with more economic and educational capital. In contrast to South Korean “newcomers,” \textit{Zainichi} Koreans today remain a disenfranchised population having suffered from historic discrimination for generations. To escape discrimination, many \textit{Zainichi} Koreans will attempt to pass as Japanese. For example, the vast majority of \textit{Zainichi} Koreans today do not use their Korean names in public life opting instead to use a Japanese pseudonym.\footnote{Kawai Yuko, “Deracialised Race, Obscured Racism: Japaneseness, Western and Japanese Concepts of Race, and Modalities of Racism,” \textit{Japanese Studies} 35, no. 1 (2015): 23–47.} As most \textit{Zainichi} Koreans are born and raised in Japan, they are culturally, linguistically and physically nearly indistinguishable from
Japanese people.\textsuperscript{11} Since most are not Japanese citizens, they are not protected by the same civil rights like access to social welfare or voting rights. To make matters worse, most \textit{Zainichi} Koreans were initially affiliated with North Korea, a regime hostile to Japan.\textsuperscript{12} Unlike South Korea, North Korea was proactive in protecting \textit{Zainichi} Korean interests in Japan, building schools, providing business loan schemes and encouraging civil rights activism within Japan. Although today the majority of Koreans in Japan have shifted their nationality to South Korea, they remain perceived as infiltrators by Japanese far-right activists. As for the Korean residents that remain politically affiliated with the North, they continue to suffer the most severe forms of discrimination in education and work opportunities.\textsuperscript{13}

This historical overview aims to contextualize the current struggles of \textit{Zainichi} Koreans. Although Japanese colonialism is over, the legacy of this system endures within Japanese society. \textit{Zainichi} Koreans in Japan have been far from passive in resisting oppression and have obtained some victories. For instance, \textit{Zainichi} Korean activists won important lawsuits enabling them to work in Japanese companies, repealed fingerprinting laws reserved for criminals in Japan and managed to gain minimal reparations for their exploitation. Yet, by many measures, they still endure systemic discrimination.\textsuperscript{14} In fact, with each hard-won victory (e.g. limited voting rights in local elections, access to pension plans), there has been a considerable backlash. The Japanese far-right has systematically portrayed \textit{Zainichi} Koreans as abusing the welfare system, targeting Korean residents in violent demonstrations and calling to expel them out of the country or exterminate them.\textsuperscript{15} In the last few years, hate speech and online bullying against Koreans have drastically increased.\textsuperscript{16} In this context, the food culture of Koreans has been a potent symbol of resistance and an economic resource. In \textit{Zainichi} Korean households, simple dishes like \textit{kimchi} stew (\textit{kimchi tchigae}) endure the test of time as a reminder that after three generations in Japan they will not be completely assimilated. In Osaka’s Koreatown, restaurants selling \textit{Zainichi} Korean specialties are impossible to miss as they are at the center of the social and economic life of the community.

\textsuperscript{13}According to one North Korean citizen interviewed, the decrease in public funding of North Korean-affiliated schools is the most important source of contemporary discrimination in Japan. See Adam Beije, “The Changing Contours of Discrimination in Japan: The Treatment of Applicants from North Korea-Affiliated Schools in Japan to National Universities,” \textit{New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies} 11, no. 2 (2009): 118.
\textsuperscript{14}The influential study by Kim Myenong-su and Tadashi Inazuki, “\textit{Zainichi} kankokujin no shakai idō [The Social Mobility of \textit{Zainichi} Koreans],” in \textit{Kaisô shakai kara atarashii shimin shakai e [From a Class Society to a Society for New Citizens]}, ed. K. Kosaka, 181-198 (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppansha, 2000), is often cited as proof of the social mobility of \textit{Zainichi} Koreans. However, this study only takes working men of South Korean nationality into account, excluding most of the \textit{Zainichi} Korean population from its calculations.
\textsuperscript{15}Robillard-Martel and Laurent, “From Colonization to Zaitokukai,” 1-20.
Food of the Disenfranchised

The vast majority of ingredients and food processing techniques that make Japanese cuisine what it is today came from continental Asia via the Korean Peninsula.\(^{17}\) For example, the predecessor of emblematic Japanese foods like miso and soya sauce both emerged in China.\(^{18}\) These foreign elements were transformed—some might claim refined—and adopted as uniquely Japanese. As the Japanese Empire began to expand in the early 20\(^{th}\) century, Japan began to swallow up the human, economic and culinary resources of its growing empire. For example, Chinese migrant laborers brought ramen noodle soups to Japan.\(^ {19}\) Additionally, a Taiwanese entrepreneur that immigrated to Japan during the colonial period developed instant ramen, a processing technique that played a crucial role in spreading this dish from Japan to the rest of the world.\(^{20}\) Korean migrant laborers also played a significant role immigrating in large numbers to cities with the closest links to the Korean Peninsula. Today, cities like Osaka that have large Zainichi Korean communities have made Zainichi Korean dishes an integral part of their local cuisines. More recently, South Korea’s growing economic and cultural importance across East Asia has helped fuel considerable interest in South Korea’s popular cuisine. Although Zainichi Koreans have had some measure of success riding this wave of popularity, it is important to remember that Zainichi Korean cuisine is significantly different from the contemporary cuisine of South Korea as both cuisines evolved in different directions.

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\(^{17}\) Ishige Naomichi and Paul Kegan, *The History and Culture of Japanese Food* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 47.


During the colonization of the Korean Peninsula, Korean laborers migrated to Japan fleeing poverty in search of employment in a country in need of an inexpensive workforce. This exploited workforce was relegated to dangerous and undesirable occupations like working in mines and factories. After World War II, these laborers had two options: go back to a country ravaged by colonialism and civil war, or stay in a country that had few opportunities for its own citizens. To survive their exclusion from the labor market, a large number of Korean residents turned to entrepreneurship. Restaurants, born out of large cities’ ethnic ghettos, have shaped Japan’s palate and foodscape. This phenomenon is not unique, as throughout the world, immigrant communities have turned to food entrepreneurship as a form of economic survival. Although restaurants can offer a means to generate income for immigrants, it is a risky endeavor requiring a lot of work with little initial return. Zainichi Korean entrepreneurs have had to be frugal to stay afloat. Restaurants are more often than not family businesses with family members working for little or no money. When owners have too many overhead costs, they save wherever possible on ingredients and preparation time. Economic constraints can be limiting but they can also be the source of tremendous culinary creativity. Although few would credit them for such entrepreneurial genius, Zainichi Koreans in Japan have created a popular cuisine from the leftover scraps of Japanese consumers.

During and shortly after World War II, Koreans were notorious for illegally brewing unfiltered rice wine known as makkoli in Korean and doburoku in Japanese. Although for many Koreans this strategy was a means of survival, illegal brewing was met with violent repression by the Japanese authorities. The dismantlement of illegal Korean breweries would periodically lead to lethal confrontations between Korean residents and the Japanese police. Although these events are all but erased from Japanese historical consciousness, moonshine is experiencing a revival among the Japanese working classes. Zainichi Koreans have had to operate on the margins of legality to survive their exclusion. Although participation in the illegal economy of US-occupied Japan was beyond a doubt exaggerated, many Koreans had little recourse but to depend on the black market, as they were not eligible for food rationing. Koreans had to contend with chronic food shortages for key ingredients like rice and had to come up with creative dishes to sell in order to make a living. The resulting Zainichi cuisine blends Korean and Japanese influences using the resources available to this disenfranchised community. Such necessity fueled culinary creativity, an attitude that is still very much alive in the contemporary Korean food stalls of Osaka’s Koreatown that sell kimchi made from ingredients ranging from rock seaweed (iwa nori) to tomatoes.

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The Japanese consumer’s fondness for *kimchi* encapsulates Japan’s relationship with the food of the *Zainichi* community. In Japan, *kimchi* was originally known as Korean pickles (*chōsenzuke*). And until the 1980s, ethnic Koreans in Japan were the main consumers of this ethnicized food, as it remained stigmatized by Japanese.\(^{24}\) Several factors contributed to the Japanese consumer’s adoption of *kimchi*. As traditional Japanese pickles decreased in popularity, Japanese producers began to make their version of *kimchi*, competing with each other.\(^{25}\) In addition, the explosion in popularity of *kimchi* was also linked to the rise of the ethnic and health food trends in the 1990s in Japan. In particular, women consumers shifted from a dislike for pungent foods towards a craving for food with many health benefits.\(^{26}\) The popularity of *kimchi* in Japan transformed it into a side dish staple and a main ingredient in stir-fries and hotpots.\(^{27}\) To respond to increasing demand, Japan’s domestic production increased tenfold from 1980 to 2000.\(^{28}\) Japanese producers would eventually seek to export the Japanese variety of unfermented *kimchi* (*kimuchi*) to South Korea, their former imperial subject. When Japan nominated *kimuchi* as its official Olympic food, this trade conflict with South Korea would morph in the so-called “Kimchi Wars.”\(^{29}\) In response, South Korea would

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\(^{26}\) Sasaki, “*Nihon no kimuchi (5) [Japanese Kimchi (5)]*,” 16-18.


\(^{28}\) Chong, *Yakiniku, kimuchi to Nihonjin [Yakiniku, Kimchi and the Japanese]*, 127.

\(^{29}\) Han Kyung-Koo, ‘The ‘Kimchi Wars’ in Globalizing East Asia: Consuming Class, Gender, Health, and National...
file a claim with the UNFAO that later became the international standard for *kimchi*-making.\(^{30}\) The international standardization of *kimchi* was only possible because South Korea has at its disposal a state apparatus that minorities like the *Zainichi* Koreans do not possess.

Cities with historically large Korean populations have also adopted the cuisine of Korean residents as their own. The city of Fukuoka’s proximity to the Korean Peninsula made it an ideal settling point for many Koreans. One of the city’s specialties, spicy cod row (*karashi mentaiko*), is now considered a Japanese dish. Also, the city of Osaka has by far the largest population of *Zainichi* Koreans and their influence on the local cuisine can hardly be ignored. Savory scallion and seafood pancakes called *chidjimi* are common street food in the city and a likely precursor to Japanese *okonomiyaki*, a dish that is the pride and joy of Osaka residents.\(^{31}\) Many of Osaka’s Korean residents hail from Jeju Island which still influences the city’s foodways. For example, the Jeju regional dish of abalone porridge (*jeonbok-juk*) is sold in many *Zainichi* Korean restaurants under the Japanese name *awabi gayu*. Additionally, Tokyo’s Shin-Okubo neighborhood continues to have a lasting impact on the capital’s foodscape. Tokyoites visit Shin-Okubo for a taste of Korea’s most recent food craze born out of South Korea’s vibrant consumer market. In the last few years, cheese spicy chicken stir-fry (*chīzu takkarubi*) has been a popular dish most restaurants will serve to consumers in search of novelty. Worth noting, most Koreans living in Tokyo’s Koreatown are recent immigrants from South Korea. These “newcomers” tend to have more economic resources and better knowledge of South Korean culinary trends. *Zainichi* Koreans have been less successful capitalizing on the South Korean cultural wave that has swept throughout Asia. However, unlike recent South Korean immigrants, *Zainichi* Koreans receive little recognition for their contribution to the Japanese food scene.


Taking Koreans Out of *Yakiniku*

*Yakiniku*, or grilled meat, restaurants are by far the most emblematic culinary contribution of the Zainichi Koreans. These restaurants occupy a privileged place in the formation of Zainichi Korean identity, which is illustrated in a recent movie.\(^{32}\) Facing marginalization, Zainichi Korean immigrants opened eateries that were the precursors of these grilled meat restaurants. The only significant difference between these Korean owned businesses and contemporary *yakiniku* restaurants is the amount and the caliber of the meat served.\(^{33}\) *Yakiniku* restaurants became extremely popular during the years of Japan’s rapid economic growth. Between 1963 and 1979 in Tokyo alone, the number of restaurants rose from 17 to 1,118.\(^{34}\) In restaurants, the invention of the smokeless grill (*muen rōsutā*), a device that would draw smoke away from customers, was a revolutionary innovation. It would transform *yakiniku* restaurants from smoke-filled dens to places where the whole family could eat. Customers, especially women, would now be able to leave without smelling of smoke, paving the way to the wider acceptance of *yakiniku*.\(^{35}\) At home, consumers also began to consume grilled meat, purchasing an increasing amount of Zainichi Korean branded *yakiniku* sauce.\(^{36}\) Most importantly, *yakiniku* would encourage the practice of preparing and eating food around the same table — something common in Korea but not practiced as widely in Japan.\(^{37}\)

Today, *yakiniku* has become one of the most popular meat dishes in Japan. In the early days of the colonization of Korea, Korean beef was a central component of Japan’s imperial expansion and a transformative ingredient in the attempt to modernize the Japanese diet at home.\(^{38}\) Meat-eating in Japan was also popularized in great part through Korean owned *yakiniku* restaurants. These restaurants serve small pieces of meat grilled by customers at the table. Grilling your meat at the table became a way to save on labor costs in the kitchen and provided an entertaining activity for patrons. Scholars unanimously agree that Zainichi Koreans started these restaurants.\(^{39}\) As few Zainichi Koreans could afford more than leftover scraps they developed *horumon yaki* (grilled organ meat), which would later morph into *yakiniku* (grilled meat); a food adapted to Japanese tastes.\(^{40}\) Each restaurant developed its blend of dipping sauces that would, if the restaurant became famous enough, be an additional stream of revenue.\(^{41}\) Originally, these restaurants were classified as cuisine from

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34 Asakura, *Nihon no yakiniku, Kankoku no sashimi* [Japanese Barbecue - Korean Sashimi], 44-46.
36 Chong, *Yakiniku, Kimuchi to Nihonjin* [Yakiniku, Kimchi and the Japanese], 74-78.
37 Nomura, *Korian Sekai no Tabi* [Koreans’ World Journey], 62.
40 During the 1930s, female factory workers began to collect discarded organ meat from butchers, marinate and grill them. See Kim Chan-jeong, *Chōsenjin jokōna uta: 1930 nen kishiwada bōseki sōgi* [Songs of Korean female factory workers: The 1930 labor dispute in Kishiwada textile industry] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1982).
41 Nomura, *Korian Sekai no Tabi* [Koreans’ World Journey], 74-75.
the Korean Peninsula (chōsen ryōri).\textsuperscript{42} To distance themselves from the negative connotation, Zainichi Korean restaurants changed the name of their cuisine to yakiniku, which literally means grilled meat in Japanese.\textsuperscript{43} The drawback of this permutation is that it concealed its Korean origins. The erasure of Korean culinary contributions to Japan operates in a similar way to Zainichi Koreans adopting Japanese names to avoid discrimination.

Today, yakiniku is celebrated as part of a growing fascination with popular Japanese eateries (b-kyū gurume). Although some consumers will recognize its Korean roots, yakiniku has been adopted and transformed in Japan becoming one of its most beloved dishes.\textsuperscript{44} Although Korean ethnic neighborhoods still rely on yakiniku restaurants to make a living, an increasing amount of yakiniku restaurants outside these enclaves are Japanese owned. Remaining traces of Koreanness are slowly erased from menus with few restaurants classifying themselves as foreign cuisine any longer. Moreover, yakiniku restaurants are becoming increasingly popular outside of Japan. Abroad, yakiniku restaurants are classified as Japanese-style barbecue with no mention of their Korean origins.\textsuperscript{45} The strategic deletion of Korean influence allows the restaurants to add value to its food thanks to a global hierarchy of cuisine where Japan reigns supreme. This tactic allows the restaurants to charge

\textsuperscript{42} The term is fraught with negative meaning has it was the colonial name for the Korean peninsula, is still used in Japan to refer to North Korean and is a common slur directed towards Zainichi Koreans.


\textsuperscript{44} Asakura, Nihon no yakiniku, konkoku no sashimi, [Japanese Barbecue - Korean Sashimi], 18-39.

\textsuperscript{45} For example, the popular chain “Gyu-Kaku” across North America https://www.gyu-kaku.com/
more than what it would as Korean barbecue. With the Japanization of *yakiniku* two different yet interrelated processes take place. Economically, Japanese chain restaurants like Gyu-Kaku have tapped into this lucrative market taking away an essential resource from a group with few opportunities in Japan. Culturally, it erases the contribution and the presence of *Zainichi* Koreans validating the narrative that Koreans have not contributed to Japanese culture.

**Discussion: The Dynamics of Appropriation**

The cuisine of *Zainichi* Koreans is part of a larger system of cultural exploitation. Yet, how does culture fit into global patterns of economic marginalization, erasure of disenfranchised communities and social hierarchies? Food entrepreneurship is one of the few resources excluded groups can exploit, explaining why these communities are sources of tremendous culinary creativity. However, in order not to undo the myth of national homogeneity, the dominant group must expropriate these contributions to make them part of the nation. This process of erasure and plagiarism, often presented as cultural borrowing, is not an accident as it follows similar patterns of dominance and power in societies that continue to internally exploit minority groups. The Japanization of the cuisine of Korean residents in Japan operates similar dynamics to the Britishization of the cuisine of South Asian residents in the United Kingdom. Although marginalized communities developed these dishes, they have become so familiar to those countries that some consider them native. This process of domestication would not be problematic if the communities that developed this food were not concurrently marginalized.

This process of culinary appropriation follows similar patterns in former colonial societies that prevent minorities from capitalizing on their cultural production and erasing their contributions to the national culture. Systemic racism and discrimination not only affect social welfare and economic opportunities, but also shape culinary production. The discussion over culinary appropriation, and more generally cultural appropriation, is one that is gaining traction but has garnered far less attention than other forms of discrimination. As we closely examine who champions the concept of appropriation and who undermines it, one notices that the marginalized are often very much aware of this problem while the more privileged defend the status quo. Critics of culinary appropriation, which often happen to be part of the dominant group, argue that one cannot prevent culinary exchange from happening. That culinary poaching is simply homage to a cultural group and that it increases acceptance of marginalized minorities. However, few ask themselves why the dominant group is systematically benefiting from this transaction. In many cases, the process of domestication of outside elements is so seamless that few in the dominant group are cognizant of its existence. In Japan, younger generations of consumers are not readily

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aware that some of their favorite foods were developed in marginalized communities. For example, few ramen aficionados know of the Chinese immigrant laborer that toiled to introduce the noodle soup to Japan.\(^\text{48}\)

It is worth recognizing that culinary appropriation does not apply to every form of culinary exchange. Power, more precisely the imbalance of power, between two groups is essential to contextualize what constitutes culinary appropriation. The adoption of Zainichi Korean food in Japan certainly constitutes a success story for this disenfranchised minority. Yet, as their food becomes mainstream, Zainichi Koreans remain excluded from Japanese society. When a group has the power to exploit, discriminate, belittle and prevent upward mobility, taking the food culture of a marginalized group and making it the food of the dominant, this amounts to more than mere cultural borrowing. Culinary appropriation is a system that transforms the foreign into the native, contributes to the economic marginalization of disenfranchised groups and erases minority contributions from the so-called national culture. This system is embedded within a pre-existing framework of ethnic and racial oppression that operates within the confines of most nation-states. Food culture does not evade this framework as it is subject to similar dynamics of exclusion, discrimination and racism. The forces that push people to the margins, that maintain racial hierarchies in place and present minorities as a burden on society need to be examined to understand the overarching framework that enables culinary appropriation. Thus, appropriation can be better apprehended as an integral part of this broader system of oppression that maneuvers on different axes. Other dimensions of this system like racial discrimination or economic marginalization are well studied and documented. However, few have articulated how culinary culture is subjected to the same power struggle than the ones that determine opportunities and inclusiveness. Food, a salient marker of national culture, is a battleground between various neighboring states where ownership is at stake.\(^\text{49}\)

As disenfranchised minorities are not supported by a state, it is easier to lay claim to their culinary heritage. Societies like Japan that strive to remain homogenous are particularly prone to erase, assimilate and appropriate internal cultural diversity.\(^\text{50}\)

**Conclusion: The Significance of Cultural Erasure**

This essay sets out to reframe Zainichi Korean cuisine in the social and historical context in which it emerged. Although Zainichi Koreans speak fluent Japanese, understand Japanese cultural norms and are physically indistinguishable from their Japanese counterparts, they still do not hold the same rights as Japanese citizens. As a minority that came to Japan

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\(^{49}\) See Ari Ariel, “The Hummus Wars,” *Gastronomica* 12, no. 1 (2012): 34-42, for an example of confrontation over food ownership.

during the colonial occupation of Korea, they continue to suffer from prejudice and systemic discrimination in a society that seeks to erase or exclude them. When one considers these elements, the Japanization of Zainichi Korean cuisine appears problematic. The transformation of this cuisine into something Japanese exists within a system of oppression that predates the invention of dishes like yakiniku and is in continuity with historical trends of making food of marginalized communities part of the national repertoire. Patterns of subjugation that were devised during colonial times persist today in Japanese society erasing the presence of Koreans and pushing them to the margins. Zainichi Koreans have been far from passive in response to this oppression, forging grass-roots resistance movements to better their condition in society and militating for Japan to recognize their existence. As members of the Korean community are increasingly visible in the public sphere, one can hope that Japan will have no choice but to acknowledge their presence and contributions.

The patterns of cultural erasure and economic marginalization described in this essay are not unique to Japan. They operate using similar mechanisms in postcolonial societies. Different marginalized groups can experience similar forms of oppression in societies that are structured under racial hierarchies devised during colonialism. Korean barbecue constitutes a poignant example of how food developed by marginalized groups becomes celebrated as the cuisine of the dominant group. Culinary appropriation is often presented as benign borrowing, homage or a way to provide visibility for the marginalized but this would be ignoring the structure of power that exists in society. When the dominant group has the power to erase the culinary presence and contribution of a minority group, one must consider a more critical approach to culinary diffusion. This approach acknowledges that although food culture is fluid, adapting to various settings, it remains a resource that can be monopolized by the most powerful in society. Members of the dominant group make a fortune with resources developed by marginalized groups, while the same group struggles to make a living from these same resources. When examining cases of culinary appropriation, one must take into account the relative status of each group to grasp the larger implications of this one-way exchange.

Zainichi Koreans I spoke with were proud of the popularity of their cuisine in Japan not so much because it confirms their acceptance in Japanese society but because it is a story of resilience and innovation. Zainichi Koreans managed to make a living turning unwanted organ meat into a taste Japanese consumers desire. Still, the Japanization of Zainichi Korean cuisine remains a process that needs to be critically examined. This ongoing process is more than name substitution of, for example, yakiniku for bulgogi or kimuchi for kimchi. It is a slow process of transformation of the foreign into the native. The power that one group or one person holds in relation to the other party becomes a reliable arbiter, or at least a good benchmark, to distinguish between what is culinary appropriation and what is not. Following this standard, Zainichi Koreans adopting Japanese elements in their cuisine was a necessity of survival. Whereas, claiming that yakiniku is Japanese barbecue fits squarely within the dynamics of appropriation. Members of the group profiting from culinary appropriation have attempted to undermine the concept, their voices amplified by the status they occupy in society. This is no accident as it is part of the overarching framework of a system that
excludes, exploits and erases. Culture, more specifically food culture, does not transcend this system. The cuisine of Zainichi Koreans is subject to the same social dynamics turning food that is the product of creativity and survival into an instrument of Japanese cultural nationalism.

Author Bio

Christopher Laurent is a cultural anthropologist who researches the social construction of taste in rural Japan. Born in France, he studied in the United States and Canada. He also lived in Japan for 3 years to teach and do research. He received his PhD from the University of Montreal and his MA from the University of California, Santa Barbara. His postdoctoral research examines the discrimination and resistance of young ethnic Koreans living in Japan. His current research project focuses on culinary appropriation as part of a larger system of oppression. You can follow his research on his blog: www.christopherlaurent.com.

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