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THE STORY OF KIMCHI: IDENTITY AND DIASPORA OF ZAINICHI KOREANS IN JAPAN

ABSTRACT

The article examines kimchi's transformation from a stigmatised "immigrant food" to become Japan's most popular preserved vegetable, highlighting its role in identity negotiation among Zainichi Koreans living in Japan. Methods include ethnographic field work in Kyoto, interviews, examination of a book and website produced by a kimchi store, along with a literature review on diaspora foods with emphasis placed on the life history of Lee Yeon Soon as a central case study. The results show that kimchi is a cultural anchor and performative symbol/portrayal of Korean identity. Even as kimchi becomes ever more mainstream, indicating Korea's growing multiculturalism, Korean residents use it to stake a claim for identity and resist assimilation. It is concluded that food acts as a means of communication, which constructs identities and social relationships.

KEYWORDS: Korean diaspora, ethnic food, identity, kimchi, Japan

Zgodba o kimčiju: identita in diaspora Zainichi Korejcev na Japonskem

IZVLEČEK

Ta članek raziskuje preobrazbo kimčija iz stigmatizirane »hrane priseljencev« v najbolj priljubljeno konzervirano zelenjavo na Japonskem, pri čemer poudarja njegovo vlogo pri oblikovanju identitete med Zainichi Korejci. Metode vključujejo etnografsko terensko delo v Kjotu, intervjuje, analizo knjige in spletne strani trgovine s kimčijem ter pregled literature o hrani diaspore s posebnim poudarkom na biografski zgodbi Lee Yeon Soon. Ugotovitve kažejo, da kimči deluje kot kulturno sidro in performativni simbol korejske dediščine. Medtem ko njegova priljubljenost v glavnem toku nakazuje naraščajoči multikulturalizem, korejski

prebivalci kimči še naprej uporabljajo za uveljavljanje identitete in upiranje asimilaciji. Zaključki poudarjajo vlogo hrane kot komunikacijskega sistema, ki oblikuje identitete in socialne odnose.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: korejska diaspora, etnična hrana, identiteta, kimči, Japonska

1 Introduction

Kimchi has become so popular in Japan that it is today the most popular preserved vegetable on the market, which reveals a considerable shift in culinary preferences and cultural attitudes. This trend stands out while considering the historical background, context and experiences of Zainichi Koreans, a multigenerational Korean minority in Japan. As the consumption of traditional Japanese pickles was declining in the 1990s, kimchi rose in popularity and prominence among Japanese consumers. By the 2000s, kimchi had become known as a "healthy food" in Japanese households, suggesting a general acceptance, re-evaluation and appreciation of Korean cuisine. The described transformation of gastronomic tastes may be understood by looking at broader social shifts in Japan with respect to increased globalisation and multiculturalism, together with stronger interest in diverse culinary experiences.

Japan's adoption of kimchi shows that intercultural exchange and acceptance are a two-way street. Zainichi Koreans have experienced multiple forms of discrimination and marginalisation in Japanese society for generations, from stigmatisation to prejudice seen in immigration restrictions and cultural and social barriers. Nevertheless, the rising popularity of Korean cuisine, particularly kimchi, suggests these barriers are softening and there is greater openness to Korean cultural influences. This culinary trend is also part of a global trend of local diets including ever more international tastes and ingredients. The kimchi phenomenon in Japan is arguably one aspect of the broader trend of accepting diversity and difference in food culture, which may lead to the appreciation and understanding of cultures different from one's own. In addition, the incorporation of kimchi into Japanese gastronomy may be seen as a form of cultural reconciliation between the two nations. Such a development signifies not just the acceptance of particular foreign food, but also recognition of the contributions made by the Zainichi Korean community to Japanese society. Once again, food is shown to be able to bridge gaps between cultures. Nevertheless, this change has not been achieved overnight. It is the result of the struggles and resistance of the Zainichi Korean community.

In this article, the complex processes of cultural diplomacy and identity negotiation among Korean residents in Japan is addressed, stressing the role of

kimchi as a cultural symbol and form of expression for Koreans. The way Korean residents in Japan utilise this traditional Korean food to navigate their identities in a society where their ethnic heritage intersects with a perceived homogenous Japanese national identity is considered. Once reviled as a symbol of ethnic marginalisation, kimchi in Japan has transformed, moving from an “immigrant food” to a valued comfort food. Even though some in the Korean community see Japan’s current kimchi snack boom as a sign of less antagonism and stronger acceptance of Korean identity, for many others kimchi is a way to express their identity as Koreans while negotiating their status as an ethnic minority when Japan is perceived to be homogeneous. The debate surrounding the production and consumption kimchi in Japan illustrates that the negotiations regarding claims to Koreanness by Koreans in Japan, who are in the minority, are complex.

The presented study employed a multi-methods qualitative research design that integrates ethnographic fieldwork, life-story narrative analysis, and digital ethnography. Fieldwork was carried out in Kyoto-based Korean migrant communities in 2012 under the coordination of Professor Ogura Kizo from Kyoto University, with follow-ups in 2014 and 2016, involving participant observation at kimchi-making workshops. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with kimchi producers, including Lee Yeon Soon (李連順), an author of *Kimchi Monogatari*, and her son Hoshiyama Kou (星山耕), who currently manages their kimchi business, as well as several other employees and customers that buy kimchi at Kimchi no Hoshiyama store. These interviews were supplemented with an in-depth narrative analysis of Lee’s memoir, exemplifying life-story narrative methodology. The analysis focused on how personal biography intersects with collective memory and identity construction within diaspora contexts. The study also included analysis of the Kimchi no Hoshiyama website, examining visual representation, branding, and discourse (Kyōto Kimchi no Hoshiyama 2026). Digital material was interpreted as an extension of identity performance in contemporary diasporic contexts. Together, these methods allow for triangulation between personal narratives, embodied practices, and mediated representations, strengthening the interpretative validity of the study.

The analysis followed Brannen’s framework that stresses the narrative aspects of chronology, thematic unity, and “narrative achievements”, namely, how people use life stories to claim an identity and sustain cultural repetition (Brannen 2020: 60–65). Further, as part of digital ethnography the website of the mentioned family-run kimchi store is examined where its brand, graphics, pictures and narrative around culture are investigated due to their ability to shape identity online (Kyōto Kimchi no Hoshiyama 2026). Finally, a review of literature on diasporic food studies provided the conceptual framework. The above-mentioned focus

of the article is based on the idea that cuisine establishes identity from within and holds the potential to facilitate inter-cultural communication (De St. Maurice 2022; Demelius 2023).

The findings reveal that kimchi plays a key role in maintaining the cultural identity of members of the Korean community in Japan, providing continuity in migration experiences and adding to their sense of belonging. It is a performative sign of daily practices, rituals, and public ways of life, and mobilises resistance to assimilation. For instance, Lee Yeon Soon's life story exemplifies kimchi-making's role in transmitting cultural knowledge and pride across generations, linking it to entrepreneurial resilience and heritage preservation. Kimchi is also shown to be a symbol of both the continuity and performative assertion of Koreanness. Whereas kimchi previously symbolised marginalisation and otherness, its current widespread presence on Japanese plates reflects the growing multiculturalism and appreciation of diversity in the country. Despite its great popularity, Korean communities emphasise authenticity, using kimchi to resist assimilation and foster cross-cultural understanding.

2 The Korean Diaspora and Changing Identities

"Diaspora" is a heavily contested concept in modern social and cultural theory. Originally referring to the scattering of peoples, notably the ancient Jewish exile from Judah, the word comes from the Greek *dia speirein*, meaning "to sow over", and implies spreading and scattering over territories. Alongside its traditional use, the term is now seen as having a more transcultural sense, describing all displaced and migrating communities that form on the basis of shared identity, memories, or transnational links (Kenny 2013: 3; Grossman 2019: 1264).

Grossman's (2019) inductive exploration of diaspora definitions identifies a set of characteristics they share: separation from the home country; a community structure giving a basis for solidarity; some degree of orientation to the homeland; existence over time without complete assimilation; and transnational links. Whether voluntary or not, these characteristics reveal a diaspora to be spatial, relational, and grounded in shared memories and ongoing social relationships (Grossman 2019: 1265). These robust theoretical definitions recognise a variety of diasporic experiences away from home.

Nonetheless, "diaspora" refers not simply to population movements and also relates to the forming of identity and practice of politics. Brubaker (2005: 5) cautions against essentialist readings of diaspora as permanent ethnic collectives. Instead, he construes diaspora as an idiom of identity – a position adopted and expressed in particular social contexts. Diaspora becomes a claim and an

argument for negotiation in transnational settings rather than a fixed category.

Adamson's (2008: 25) investigation of diasporic identity politics elaborates on these findings by treating diaspora as a category that emerges from transnational social movements. Identity is constructed and enacted by the political entrepreneurship of mobilising diasporic communities around collective memories, cultural narratives and homeland links. This also means that diaspora identity is not innate, but constructed and contested in sociopolitical arenas (Adamson 2008).

Hall (1990: 225) considers how cultural identity in a diaspora shows little evidence in support of this dynamic. For Hall, a diaspora is not monolithic or static and is instead fluid, fragmented, and in a state of constant change. Cultural identity is a construction – a process (Hall 1990) – always mediated via representation, memory and position. Hall regards it as lying between a “shared culture”, based on common ancestry, and the specifics of the less familiar socio-cultural spaces of the “new” home. The tensions and ambivalences experienced outside of what Hall mentions are the focus of a different subject: migration.

Constructing identity in a diaspora is thus multilayered and interconnected. First, there is communal memory and cultural reproduction: a shared repertoire of traditions, languages and symbols able to connect people to a mythical/historical homeland (Grossman 2019: 1270; Adamson 2008: 26). Second, transnational engagement involves cross-border communication, media, and political activism, which inform diasporic subjectivities (Bula 2023: 45; Adamson 2008). Third, diasporic identity entails performance and representation such as narratives and practices that negotiate belonging and difference in relation to the host society (Hall 1990; Brubaker 2005).

Diaspora may be understood in two ways, as a: spatial diaspora of communities distant from the motherland, or a social construct shaped by memory, transnational interaction, and political activism. Although Grossman (2019) identifies base attributes, scholars like Brubaker (2005), Adamson (2008) and Hall (1990) point out the active creation, storytelling and enactment of diasporic identities. Diasporic identity is fluid, contested, and fundamental to a diaspora's belonging to the host society in a globalising world.

2.1 Korean Diaspora around the World

The Korean diaspora are communities of Koreans and their descendants who live outside of the Korean Peninsula, which have been shaped by both voluntary and coerced migration. Large-scale migration began in the late 19th century when economic hardship prompted Koreans to move to neighbouring regions like China and the Russian Far East. These movements intensified under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), a time when Koreans were incorporated into

imperial labour systems. Many were brought to Japan to work in industrial and wartime sectors in coercive circumstances, reflecting a system of colonial labour mobilisation more than purely voluntary migration (Kwon 2010: 15).

Migration trajectories diverged further in the 20th century, especially under authoritarian regimes. A good example is the Korean population in Central Asia (the *Koryo-saram*) whose presence is the outcome of forced deportations carried out by Stalin in 1937. Around 170,000 Koreans were relocated from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia as part of state security policies, constituting a clear case of coerced migration (Kim 2017: 42).

The described historical processes show the Korean diaspora in Japan cannot be understood solely in terms of economic mobility. Instead, it reflects the intertwining histories of colonial exploitation by that country and forced displacement in the Soviet Union, with coercion being a central feature of how it formed.

Today, the Korean diaspora includes over 7 million people worldwide, creating transnational networks that resist assimilation yet also adapt to host cultures (Grossman 2019: 1265). Koreans can also be found in Europe. The largest community (nearly 50,000 people) is in Germany, followed by around 39,000 in the United Kingdom, 27,000 in France, Sweden and Ukraine around 13,000 etc. to more than 2,000–3,000 in the Republic of Hungary¹ (Brilliant Maps 2025).

Identity in a diaspora is not fixed; it is produced by way of cultural reproduction, recollection, and negotiation. A diaspora is “always in process” (Hall 1990: 225), with identity being mediated via difference rather than fixed essence. For diasporic Koreans, languages, Confucian practices, and symbols act as cultural ballasts, with language being the critical link between family ties and community (Kim 2017: 45). It is through these that continuity with the homeland is established and adaptation to new sociocultural places is achieved.

2.2 Koreans in Japan (“Zainichi Koreans”)

“Zainichi Koreans” are ethnic Koreans living in Japan and among the most well-examined groups in the Korean diaspora (Visočnik 2013). The Korean presence in Japan must be understood not only as a diaspora phenomenon but also within a broader postcolonial framework. A significant number of the Zainichi Korean population are descendants of migrants who arrived in the period of Japanese colonial rule over Korea (1910–1945) when migration was influenced by imperial economic structures, labour demands, and varying levels of coercion (Ryang 2014; Chapman 2008). This means the Korean diaspora in Japan cannot

1 Many research studies have focused on the Korean diaspora in Europe (see Kim and Ahn 2023; Jung and Lee 2019; Kovács 2025).

be adequately explained with voluntary migration models alone, and must be analysed as part of the historical legacy of colonialism and its continuing social inequalities. Even after decades of living in Japan, Zainichi Koreans are still victims of institutional discrimination, legal marginalisation and social exclusion, which have characterised their identity politics (Chapman 2008: 12).

The identity construction of Zainichi Koreans is imbued with counter-assimilation strategies and ethnic uniqueness. These include retaining Korean names, attending ethnic schools, and participating in cultural groups and activities (Chapman 2008: 18). Such practices serve as symbolic borders for Koreans, with their identities based on Japan's narrative of being a homogeneous nation (Brubaker 2005: 5). Meanwhile, identity is formed in hybrid ways – for instance, adopting elements of Japanese culture while maintaining Korean practices – reflecting Hall's (1990: 228) description of identity as shifting and split.

Today, the Zainichi Korean population in Japan is estimated at around 400,000–500,000 individuals. In Kyoto, Higashi Kujō (東九条) south of Kyoto Station remains a historically significant settlement area where Korean cultural presence is visible in shops, restaurants, and community institutions. Many Koreans moved to the area in the 1920s and 1930s to work in textile factories and on city development projects, and remained there through post-war reconstruction, adding diversity to the area's labour force and culture. Districts such as Higashi Kujō (in Kyoto's Southern District (Minami-ku)) have witnessed dramatic shifts in the past few decades as civil society movements have spread widely across the country. This district is home to the majority of Zainichi Koreans in Kyoto. Minami-ku has the biggest working-class population of any district in Kyoto after a large number of people have moved to rural areas for work over time. However, some land along the Kamo River is dotted with factories and industrial buildings rather than restaurants and clubs. Residential zones consist of typical houses and apartments, together with the occasional government-subsidised condominium block for residents with disabilities. Due to the large Zainichi Korean population, the district is occasionally referred to as "Kyoto's sole international town" (Visočnik 2019: 218–219).

3 Diaspora Identity and Food

In an increasingly globalised world, food is both a medium and symptom of acculturation and transculturation. For people in diaspora communities, everyday culinary practice offers a tangible means of negotiating a sense of belonging. Through the food they cook, share, refuse or adapt, people can create spaces in which identities can be formed, experienced and expressed. From a cultural

perspective, food is never simply sustenance. It carries sentiment and memory, connects people via exchange and commensality, fosters community boundaries, and can serve religious or ritual purposes. Since food is so ordinary and bodily, it also becomes politically charged – an arena where difference is marked and contested, and people are categorised based on assumptions about taste and habit. In this sense, ethnic cuisines are one of the easiest ways in which group identities can be seen, recognised and maintained (Caplan 1997; Counihan 1999).

In diaspora settings, food practices often become more explicitly “about identity” than in the homeland. Migrants and their descendants may discuss authenticity, ingredients and “proper” tastes quite intensely, partly because diaspora food is produced in constrained circumstances such as limited ingredient availability, challenging workplace schedules, public stigma, legal vulnerability, and pressure to assimilate (Duru 2017: 15). Diasporic food can function as a bridge to the homeland by providing a stable reference point for cultural continuity and loyalty. Yet it simultaneously draws an imagined boundary between the minority community and the host society. These boundaries hold sociopolitical significance: culinary distinctiveness can form the basis of group identity, mutual support and assertion of rights, particularly when restrictions or moral judgements of the host society communicate that migrants are not fully welcome. In such circumstances, establishing one’s “own space” through food is not merely a matter of preference, but a response to exclusion (Cohen 2000). Cooking and eating patterns therefore cannot be separated from social organisation; they embody hygienic, cultural and symbolic meanings that shape identity formation, social classification, and everyday coexistence (Counihan 1999).

Still, at the same time modernisation and global consumer culture have transformed the conditions in which “ethnic food” signifies ethnicity. Rather than being transmitted primarily through kinship and neighbourhood networks, everyday recipes now circulate more widely through cookbooks, magazines, restaurants and on the Internet. Once limited by access and social boundaries, ethnic cuisines have become widely available as commodities in cities, altering how people relate to “tradition” and weakening the social networks that previously anchored ethnic culinary continuity (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). This does not indicate the loss of ethnic identity, but its reconfiguration by way of new attitudes of consumption.

Japan is a useful case study while considering how national and minority cuisines are constructed and categorised. The term “national food” (*washoku*) refers to a standardised culinary tradition that symbolises Japanese identity. However, it is better understood as a comprehensive system of practices, knowledge and values covering preparation, sharing, seasonality, and social rituals more than

a fixed list of dishes (UNESCO 2013). Although often presented as a timeless tradition, *washoku* emerged historically in modern contexts and is continually influenced via discourse, the media, and institutional frameworks.² Importantly, narratives of national cuisine tend to marginalise minority contributions: “Ethnic foods” in Japan, such as those of the Ainu, Okinawan, Burakumin, Korean, Japanese Brazilian and other communities, might influence what is served on Japanese plates yet remain overlooked in mainstream frameworks that accentuate regional (geographic) diversity over ethnic diversity (De St. Maurice 2022: 205–209). This is important analytically given that the distinction between “national” and “ethnic” cuisines is also a boundary of recognition and power.

Food is central to the construction of a diasporic identity precisely since it is produced through routine practices. As Hall (1990: 228) argues, cultural identity is enacted in everyday life, and food is becoming a symbolic site of belonging. Among Zainichi Koreans, kimchi illustrates this well. Although once scorned in Japan as an “immigrant food” and a symbol of otherness (Walraven 2002: 96), kimchi has become ever more common in mainstream consumption. Nevertheless, its popularity does not erase its diasporic meanings. For Koreans in Japan, kimchi continues to signify heritage, resourcefulness and continuity. Kimchi-making, or *kimjang*,³ functions as an intergenerational knowledge practice through which Koreanness is performed and reproduced (Kim 2017: 48). In this way, kimchi is both a material food and a cultural technology of memory and identity.

It is therefore crucial to make an analytical distinction between Korean *kimchi* 김치 and Japanese *kimuchi* キムチ since, although historically connected, they are not the same. Korean kimchi is a fermented dish typically made with a complex blend of seasonings (*yangnyeom*) and frequently includes fermented seafood (*jeotgal*), which gives it its distinct flavour and fermentation profile (Cwierka 2012; Walraven 2002; Kim 1987). Japanese *kimuchi*, in contrast, reflects local adaptation within the diaspora and host society. It is often milder and sweeter and omits fermented seafood in response to Japanese consumer preferences that prioritise freshness and accessibility over prolonged fermentation (Cwierka 2012).

2 De St. Maurice (2022: 210) criticises simplified understandings of Japanese cuisine (e.g., reducing it to sushi, umami, or a few ingredients). According to him, *washoku* should be understood not merely as a set of dishes or a national cuisine, but as a multi-dimensional, socially constructed system of taste and meaning.

3 *Kimjang* (also spelled *gimjang* 김장) is the traditional Korean practice of preparing kimchi, particularly in late autumn and winter. It is a communal activity involving families and communities, combining practical food preservation with strong social and cultural significance. It fosters cooperation, knowledge transmission, and a shared sense of identity and mutual support (Kim 2017: 49).

This distinction is essential for avoiding conceptual conflation and interpreting the transformation of kimchi as a diasporic food which is continually negotiated relative to the tastes of the host society.

The Korean diaspora thus exemplifies how identity is constructed by way of cultural replication, transnational interaction and routine performance. The mainstreaming of kimchi in Japan signals cultural diffusion and changing attitudes. Yet, for Zainichi Koreans, it remains a boundary marker and a resource for identity politics, linking homeland memories to local adaptation while resisting complete assimilation (Grossman 2019: 1270). Finally, food practices also reveal household power relations. As Duru (2017: 20) notes, the family is often the core unit of food production and transmission, meaning that culinary practice can reflect economic status and gendered labour. This is evident in Mrs Lee's case where kimchi-making was intertwined with care work, domestic responsibility, and entrepreneurship (Lee 2002).

4 Life story of Lee Yeon Soon

Life history theory is a qualitative research approach that harnesses personal narratives to understand individual and collective experiences within social, cultural and historical contexts. Ethnographic research complements this approach by emphasising immersive engagement and the interpretation of cultural meanings from an "insider" perspective, using methods such as participant observation, interviews, and artefact analysis. As part of this framework, life story methodology involves collecting in-depth narratives to examine how individuals interpret their life trajectories and major events over time (Dhunpath 2000: 545). Rooted in anthropology and interpretivist paradigms, the approach prioritises emic perspectives, enabling participants to articulate their own meanings and experiences. Data are typically gathered in semi-structured interviews, many times supported by personal materials like diaries, photographs and letters. Analysis focuses on narrative structures, including turning points, themes, and memory, alongside a reflexive consideration of the researcher's role (Dhunpath 2000: 546). Together, these methods reveal how personal identity and broader social histories intersect in lived experience, as shown in the life story of Mrs Lee Yeon Soon.

4.1 Lee Yeon Soon's Story

Lee Yeon Soon (李連順) is renowned in Japan as a pioneering kimchi artisan, entrepreneur and, author. Born in 1934 as the second of eight siblings in a Korean family, she grew up immersed in Korean culinary traditions, learning home-style kimchi-making techniques passed down over generations. After marrying, she

moved to Japan and, together with her husband, started to produce and distribute kimchi wholesale. Motivated by the goal of supporting their growing family, they expanded into retail, selling kimchi directly to consumers.

After moving to Kyoto's Rakusei (Umezuh) district, her early investment of just ¥500 in napa cabbage marks the beginning of her journey as an independent entrepreneur in Japan's postwar era. In 1958, she first founded "Kyojo Foods", which evolved into "Korean Foods", and also targeted supermarkets. By 1981, she had opened her first retail outlet, "Korean Foods Sanei", and in 1985 had rebranded it as "Kimchi no Hoshiyama" (Mindan 2008; Kyōto Kimchi no Hoshiyama 2026).

Affectionately known as "Hoshiyama Ōbāchan" ("Grandma Hoshiyama"), she started selling kimchi made with meticulous care using seasonal, locally sourced Japanese ingredients. Lee emphasised variety and taste adaptability: her product line encompassed several styles, such as light, spicy, rich and additive-free kimchis, as well as seasonal varieties.

In 2003, the business was formally incorporated as "Kimchi Star Co.", Ltd., with Lee Yeon Soon becoming president. Under her leadership, the company established a nationwide retail presence, including physical stores in Kyoto and Shiga, as well as growing e-commerce accounts. Lee is recognised for her rigorous selection of ingredients: Japanese cabbage, sun-dried Korean chillies, Okinawan sea salt, multi-origin garlic, and white peaches from Fukushima. Concentrating on freshness and seasonality, she blends these ingredients to create a variety of kimchi products, such as e-kimchi, GABA kimchi, and additive-free options (Mindan 2013; Kyōto Kimchi no Hoshiyama 2026).

Around 2010, Lee and her company established the Hoshiyama Research Institute to examine the health benefits of kimchi, such as supporting the immune system, detoxification, and enhancing metabolism. These efforts led to the development of functional product lines like GABA kimchi and e-kimchi. Lee's products encompassed several different flavours, ranging from the light Kyoto style to the richer, more Korean-inspired varieties. These included eight cabbage kimchi variants, targeting individual consumer preferences through mindful flavour profiles. As demand rose, Lee transformed the business into Kimchi Star Co. Ltd., where she served as chairperson. Even after stepping down from day-to-day management, she remains a senior advisor, passing on her philosophy and tradition. The brand has prospered for over five decades, earning recognition for its premium quality and nationwide shipping (Kyōto Kimchi no Hoshiyama 2026; Kyotopi 2025).

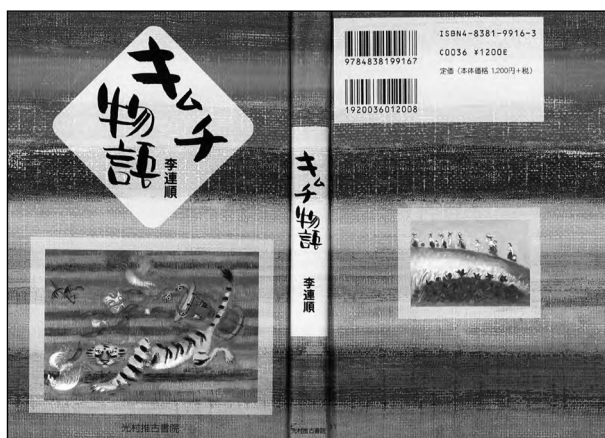
4.2 Memoir: *Kimchi Monogatari*

In 2002, Lee published *Kimuchi Monogatari* (A Kimchi Story), a book that blends a personal biography with a collection of recipes. The book recounts her

journey from a home kitchen to becoming an entrepreneur, alongside reflections on kimchi culture and manufacturing insights. Through her creations and writing, Lee Yeon Soon played a significant role in introducing kimchi to Japanese households, thereby bridging Korean tradition with the local culinary culture. Her stress on authenticity, quality of ingredients, and respect for the seasons set a Japanese benchmark for artisanal kimchi. Hoshiyama kimchi is renowned for its variety and long history.

Lee Yeon Soon's life encapsulates a powerful narrative of cultural transmission, entrepreneurial spirit, and culinary legacy, shaping the future of kimchi in Japan with a commitment to quality and storytelling. This 159-page memoir comprises essays that recount her experiences in kimchi production and retail entrepreneurship, as well as her encounters with first-generation Zainichi Koreans and Japanese customers. The book includes themes of resilience, cultural exchange, community, and small-business adaptation.

Figure 1: Cover of the book *Kimuchi monogatari* (李連順:キムチ物語), 2002 by Lee Yeon Soon.



The mentioned book falls into the genres of kimchi-making, entrepreneurship, and Zainichi Korean life in Japan. Structured as short essays, it interweaves biography, craft and community.

Lee begins by recounting the origins of her relationship with kimchi: her childhood tastes, her migration, and the first decision to sell what she knew best. This chapter presents kimchi as both a livelihood and a lifeline, setting the scene for a memoir of a craft born out of necessity and memory. The second chapter humorously relays an adventure in which, amid postwar recovery, she nearly

sold an unrelated item, only to return to kimchi – a product that is genuinely in line with her skills and community. The anecdote underlines the nature of entrepreneurial trial and error. The next chapter is a statement of vocation. Lee explains why kimchi became her calling: it was familiar and evoked the flavours of home. She links taste memory to identity, recounting how the first regular customers sought familiarity in a foreign land. In the fourth chapter, she is faced with a pivotal reboot: with just 500 yen, she buys some napa cabbages and starts again. The tale details the process of sourcing ingredients, hand-mixing *yangnyeom*, and selling products directly to customers, an ethic that would later define “Kyōto Kimuchi no Hoshiyama”. This is the classic bootstrap moment in the brand’s history. The following chapter shows how the public markets acted as her classroom where she learned to price by feel, recognise freshness cycles, and establish bonds with shopkeepers and elders. The market is also where Zainichi stories gather, forming a node of mutual aid, gossip, and gentle competition. In the sixth chapter, Lee describes the hardships she faced with money. The first contract fell through before a stranger offered her a stall. These vignettes depict a moral economy in which reputation and reciprocity are as important as cash flow. The next chapter is a light and memorable episode centred on the scent of garlic and the etiquette of serving kimchi in Japan. The book’s tone is captured here: it is intimate and humorous, and builds cultural bridges by using food to approach delicate social boundaries with grace. In the eighth chapter, Lee also writes about borrowing time, labour and small sums, and repaying them with meals, care and reliability. Here, women (mothers and aunts) are portrayed as the unsung financiers of immigrant resilience. The chapter also illustrates how the Korean community comes together to help her overcome financial difficulties through “Mother’s Bank”, whereas the official bank turns her away. In the next chapter, she describes how her efforts to expand her business increased after two decades, and how she had to scale up, switching from all handmade processes to semi-systematised ones, training staff (including family members), and negotiating with wholesalers and retailers. The essay reads like a founder’s note on maintaining authenticity while Kimchi Star Co., Ltd. grows (Kimchi Star Co., Ltd.). In the final chapter, she discusses how her shop has become a meeting point for old friends, former customers and new neighbours. This “reunion” is a metaphorical place where Zainichi elders can reminisce and Japanese regulars can discover new tastes – precisely the social role that she cherishes for kimchi (see Lee 2002).

The book is important for several reasons. First, it is significant in the fields of culinary and cultural studies as Lee’s career is an example of Korean fermentation traditions merging with Kyoto’s established pickling culture. Her leadership

has established kimchi as a functional food and normalised it as an everyday dish in Japanese households. Scholars of Japanese food culture regard her as a prominent example of post-war ethnic cuisine integration and women-driven entrepreneurship in the food industry. Her focus on ingredient integrity, fermentation methods, and product development tailored to specific markets has become a model in academic discourse on food hybridity and dietary innovation.

The company also has a small restaurant where one can taste various soups and dishes with kimchi, and a store with fresh kimchi, spices, and other packed Korean food products.

Figures 2 and 3: The Hoshiyama kimchi store, Kyoto. Photo by the author, 2012.



4.3 The Story of Kimchi in Japan

Various types of Korean restaurant can be found in urban areas in Japan, especially those specialising in grilled offal (*horumon yaki*). In Kyoto, many of these restaurants are small establishments located beneath overhead train tracks, with smoke-stained interiors after years of barbecuing. Historical accounts suggest the consumption of meat in Japan was limited before the colonial annexation of Korea. Yet, this changed when Korean migrants introduced new methods for preparing meat, such as Korean barbecue (*yakiniku*), using beef produced on the peninsula (see Cwiertka 2012). These practices often began with lesser-known cuts, such as offal, which were not typically consumed by Japanese customers. As many employment sectors were closed to them, Korean migrants often turned to self-employment in the food industry. The grilled meat sector remains significant, with around 90% of Korean barbecue restaurants being owned today by Korean descendants. Members of Kyoto's Korean community note that food can be a stronger indicator of ethnicity than language, and Zainichi Koreans continue to eat kimchi alongside Japanese cuisine as a symbol of their identity.

Figures 4 and 5: A Korean restaurant in Kyoto and yakiniku (Korean barbecue). Photo by the author, 2012.



Beyond barbecue establishments and well-known producers such as Kimchi no Hoshiyama, Kyoto has a modest, albeit stable Korean food economy centred in historically Korean neighbourhoods like Higashi Kujō. Ethnographic data suggest the presence of around 20 Korean grocery stores and kimchi retailers across Kyoto and the surrounding area (Kyoto de osusume 2026). These range from long-established producers with national distribution to small, family-run businesses such as Onma's Store and Kimchi no Mizuno (Onma no Ten 2026; Kimchi no Mizuno 2026). Many of these businesses combine production, retail, and prepared food services. Some emphasise artisanal methods and intergenerational knowledge transmission, while others experiment with hybrid products using local vegetables or milder flavours suited to Japanese tastes. Such hybridity is in particular seen in the development of "kimuchi", a Japanese-style kimchi that is less fermented and adapted to local tastes (Cwierka 2012; Han 2010). Rather than indicating simple assimilation, such adaptations reflect ongoing processes of negotiation, localisation, and postcolonial hybridity. Kimchi thus remains a practical and symbolic means by which Zainichi Koreans can maintain cultural continuity while engaging with Japanese society (Demelius 2023).

Despite its cultural significance, kimchi has historically been stigmatised in Japan and associated with Korean identity. The derogatory phrase "*kimchi kusai*" ("they stink of kimchi") illustrates this prejudice (Lee 2002).⁴ Kimchi has nevertheless gradually become embedded in Japanese food culture (Cwierka 2012). Initially, it was often encountered discreetly in Korean barbecue restaurants by early Japanese consumers before it entered the mainstream market. Today,

4 The novel *Pachinko* (Lee 2017) offers a literary parallel to these ethnographic observations, depicting Zainichi Korean experiences, including food-related discrimination (e.g., the smell of garlic, consumption habits).

kimchi is widely available across Japan in various forms, ranging from traditional pickled cabbage to innovative creations like *kimchi tomato*⁵.

Hybrid dishes also reflect evolving culinary identities. For instance, Laurent and Robillard-Martel (2022: 47–48) describe a dish combining kimchi and *natto* (fermented soybeans) from Osaka's Ikuno district, which blends two strongly flavoured foods traditionally associated with each culture. Such dishes exemplify how Zainichi Korean cuisine transcends strict national boundaries, embodying a lived experience that is neither purely Korean nor Japanese.

Figure 6: Kimchi and other pickles, Kyoto. Photo by the author, 2012.



More broadly within the Korean diaspora, cuisine operates as a complex cultural field that can evoke nostalgia, identity and conflict (Oum 2005: 109). Food is often essentialised as an expression of belonging, captured in the notion that “you are what you eat”, and kimchi is especially strongly linked to Koreanness.⁶ Still, it can also function as a marker of cultural openness; non-Koreans who consume and appreciate kimchi may be viewed as demonstrating cultural

5 Further, hybrid or innovative variations – such as so-called “tomato kimchi/kimchi tomato” – are specific to Japanese food culture and do not reflect Korean culinary traditions. These products are a form of culinary hybridisation more than being authentic regional variations of Korean kimchi. This distinction is essential for avoiding conceptual conflation and understanding kimchi’s transformation within diasporic and host-society contexts (see Cwierka 2012 and Demelious 2023).

6 Even though kimchi is not unique to Korea as it belongs to the “fermented vegetable group”, which also comprises sauerkraut and Japanese *tsukemono* (pickles), kimchi is an important part of Korean ethnic cuisine. Served as an accompaniment to almost every meal, kimchi has almost as great a claim to be called a staple as rice. During the 20th-century Korean diaspora, wherever Koreans went (whether to Japan, California or Kazakhstan), kimchi followed as “a persistent bond linking the Korean people” (Chu 1994: 102).

receptivity, or as Ms. Lee put it: “they seem to pass a preliminary test of friendliness and accepting the Koreans and others”.

Figure 7: Kimchi for sale at the Korean market in Osaka. Photo by the author, 2014.



The history of kimchi among Zainichi Koreans is closely tied to experiences of marginalisation. Formerly referred to as “Korean pickles” (*chōsensuke*), it was largely consumed within migrant communities until the 1980s when it was still stigmatised by the wider Japanese public. Many Zainichi Koreans recall growing up in marginalised neighbourhoods where their mothers (*omonis*) produced and sold kimchi as part of the informal economy. These spaces, often located near industrial areas, sustained Korean cultural practices notwithstanding the social exclusion. Therefore, kimchi functioned not only as a staple food, but also as a symbol of resilience, gradually spreading beyond these enclaves into broader Japanese society.

As Mrs Lee (2002: 61) recalls:

Not surprisingly, when we started retailing, most of our customers were Koreans living in Japan. Fortunately, more and more people stopped pickling kimchi at home and started buying and eating it, and so more Zainichi Koreans came to our fountains than we expected. There were also a few Japanese, who at first hidden that they like kimchi and they were secretly buying it from me.

Yet, over time attitudes shifted. Economic development in South Korea and rising cultural confidence helped with a more positive perception of Korean culture. By

the 1990s, kimchi was being reimagined as a global cultural product in the context of globalisation. As Chu (in Walraven 2002: 99–100) argues, the international promotion of kimchi became linked to national self-respect and cultural recognition. Today, kimchi in Japan represents more than just a culinary import; it is a product of historical encounters, marginalisation, and adaptation. It embodies both the persistence and transformation of Korean identity in a Japanese context.

5 Conclusions

Studying food provides an important analytical lens via which we can understand not simply the everyday practices of nourishment, but in addition the broader cultural and social dynamics within which these practices are embedded. Feeding and eating are never merely physiological acts; they are deeply symbolic, socially structured processes in which identities, relationships and values are formed and conveyed. Food is a form of cultural expression in which the ingredients used, techniques employed to prepare them, and patterns of consumption that emerge together form a meaningful system that conveys social norms, collective histories, and individual identities.

Within this framework, the experience of Zainichi Koreans in Japan exemplifies how food can take on particular significance in contexts denoted by historical inequality and marginalisation. The presence of Koreans in Japan is shaped by the latter's colonial history, with this postcolonial condition having profoundly influenced the social positioning of Zainichi Koreans, who have long experienced discrimination and contested belonging within Japanese society (Chapman 2008). In these circumstances, everyday practices, including the production and consumption of food, acquire heightened importance as sites where identity is reproduced, negotiated and maintained.

As a central element of Korean culinary culture, kimchi is an example of this dynamic. It functions as both a dietary staple and a symbolic medium via which "Koreanness" is expressed and articulated in the Japanese social context (Demelius 2023). At the same time, kimchi's journey in Japan – from being associated with marginalised migrant communities to becoming a widely consumed product – reveals significant shifts in cultural perception. Once stigmatised as a symbol of foreignness, kimchi has gradually gained acceptance in mainstream Japanese society and become part of everyday consumption. This shift illustrates the complex relationship between cultural commodification, identity politics, and evolving societal attitudes to ethnic minorities.

The Korean food economy in Japan reflects these processes of transformation and negotiation. Small-scale enterprises, including kimchi manufacturers,

grocery stores, and restaurants, have historically provided economic opportunities for Zainichi Koreans, while also functioning as spaces of cultural continuity. In this context, the development of Japanese-style kimchi is particularly illustrative. Rather than being a mere imitation, Japanese-style kimchi reflects an adaptation process whereby Korean culinary practices are localised to suit Japanese tastes, often resulting in milder flavours and altered production methods (Cwiertka 2012; Han 2010). These adaptations highlight the flexible and dynamic nature of diasporic food cultures, which are in a constant state of negotiation between preservation and transformation.

Concurrently, the growing popularity of Korean cuisine in Japan exemplifies the ability of food to bridge cultural divides. Culinary exchange can facilitate mutual recognition and cultural curiosity, helping lead to a more diverse and interconnected social landscape. Still, this process is not without contradictions. The widespread acceptance of kimchi does not necessarily correspond to the full social inclusion of Korean residents. As scholars have observed, a persistent gap remains between the appreciation of cultural products and the acceptance of the people who produce them (Demelius 2023). This ambivalence reveals the importance of analysing food as both a cultural phenomenon and as part of broader structures of power and inequality.

The case of kimchi in Japan illustrates how food operates on multiple levels: as a commodity, a cultural symbol, and a site of identity negotiation. It shows how diasporic communities use everyday practices to maintain continuity with their cultural heritage while adapting to the new social environments. Further, it demonstrates how dominant societies selectively incorporate and reinterpret elements of minority cultures, often without addressing the underlying inequalities.

In an era of increasing globalisation, food is often seen as a medium through which cultural boundaries are softened and differences reconciled. However, the persistence of strong cultural associations and preferences suggests that food remains deeply tied to identity and social distinction. The historical example of kimchi consumption in Japan, where it was once consumed discreetly before becoming mainstream, underscores the gradual and frequently uneven nature of cultural acceptance (Walraven 2002: 96). Moreover, the global promotion of kimchi as a symbol of Korean national identity further emphasises its role in broader processes of cultural branding and international visibility.

Ultimately, studying Korean food in Japan reveals that culinary practices are central to understanding the complexities of social life; namely, neither trivial nor peripheral. Food embodies memory, identity and power, making it a fruitful area in which to examine how communities negotiate belonging, difference, and cultural continuity. The example of kimchi shows how everyday practices can

reflect and shape wider social transformations, contributing to ongoing processes of intercultural exchange, adaptation, and negotiation in contemporary society.

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