

# Food as object and subject in Korean media\*

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## 목 차

- I. *Hansbik* and the new way of perceiving food in TV dramas
- II. A theoretical overview: the biography of visual goods and food as object and subject
- III. Talking Tables and Narrating Food: a Diachronic Approach
- IV. Eating together or eating alone
- V. Conclusion

**영문초록** | This study focuses on the role and function of representations of Korean food in multimedia material such websites, films, and TV drama<sup>1)</sup>. In particular, it aims to explore the methods used to transpose various meanings and semantic changes from the fictional world into today's Korean culture and society. In order to analyse food and its fictional representations within

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1) The word ‘drama’ in Korean is used to refer to the soap opera genre.

the Korean context, I apply a diachronic approach, which has a twofold objective. On the one hand, it seeks to demonstrate that food and its representations are not merely used to interpret the fictional and social Korean reality. Food is not only the subject (character) around which the story unfolds but also the object that is manipulated and consumed within the fictional world. Rather, food and its representations are both objects and subjects that influence and are influenced by the fictional and real world in an ever-evolving process that is mediated by the audiovisual text. On the other hand, such an approach aims to show that food and its representations are proposed to viewers as an example of Korean excellence that can convey a sense of cultural ‘escape’. They attempt to replicate reality through fictional plausibility. This approach is employed here as a key to interpret and show the role that food has in the Korean fictional and real world. In particular, it highlights the communicative function of food, which is able to convey peculiar meanings and modify perception. This is possible because food simultaneously influences and is influenced by the fiction and reality of Korean society.

Key Words : food perception, Korean food, communication, media, *hanshik*, eating alone

## **I. *Hanshik* and the new way of perceiving food in TV dramas**

The impact of food and its representations in Korean multimedia works can be traced to the late 1990s. Korean audiovisual works, including feature films, dramas and among them *Le Grand Chef* (2007) and *Taejanggŭm* (also known as Dae Janggeum, 2003) to quote few, are two extremely powerful examples of the way in its visual representation on Korean food, which have become an instrument of artistic expression that

contributed to and deeply influenced the change of food perception. Globalisation and *hallyu*<sup>2)</sup> are the two cultural and political phenomena that have most significantly raised awareness about Korean food as a means to promote national identity and have contributed to the entry into the scene of proposing food as a “star” in the media<sup>3)</sup>.

As globalisation has become a priority within the Korean government’s cultural and economic policy, it employed food to promote this country’s image abroad by using strategically Korean wave called as *hallyu* which has received consistent attention in abroad. For example, following the enormous international success of the drama *Taejanggŭm*, in 2010 Lee Myungbak’s government established the *Hanshik*<sup>4)</sup> Globalization Development Agency to promote *hanshik* (Korean cuisine) worldwide<sup>5)</sup>. *Taejanggŭm* comprises 54 episodes with an average length of 60 minutes. They were broadcasted twice a week from September 2003 to March 2004 across 91 countries and achieved an enormous success that contributed to launching the career of a new star, *hanshik*, as symbol of Korean cuisine in international entertainment. In *Taejanggŭm*, each dish tells its story; with its colourful food representations, it becomes sensually appealing, and

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2) *Hallyu* is a term coined by a Chinese journalist in 1990 to define the wave of Korean popular culture that spread through China, but subsequently it has been used for similar phenomena elsewhere.

3) Zimmerman, Steve, “A Star Is Born”, *Gastronomica* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 2009), p. 28.

4) *Hanshik*, traditional Korean food, see also Moon Okpyo, 2010.

5) Choi, Jong-Moon, “Globalising Korea Food and Stimulating inbound tourism”, *OECD: Food and the Tourism Experience: The OECD-Korea Workshop*, OECD Publishing, 2012. p.124.

manages to cause a feeling of synesthesia in the viewers. This TV drama created a growing interest in food and in its cinematographic and artistic representation between Korean and foreign viewers (mostly Asian).

The scenes set in the kitchen of the royal court during the Chosŏn period (1392-1910) follow as strictly as possible the rules of the era that regulated the preparation, arrangement and consumption of each dish. The word “faction”, a neologism coined by combining “fact” and “fiction”, has been used to define the current tendency to use historical events as the basis for fictional works such as historical dramas and feature films<sup>6)</sup>. From a narrative point of view, a new approach marked a departure from the way food had been represented in audiovisual works before *Taejanggŭm*<sup>7)</sup> where food was treated insignificantly and minimal interest were shown on eating scene. In similar lines, Zimmerman describes the scenes of American films where the food is partially present: «These scenes were seldom about the food itself, and they were almost never intended to celebrate food. Then and now, such scenes generally show the food that actors are about to eat, but before it is actually eaten the movie cuts to another scene, leaving the audience to imagine the actual eating of the meal».<sup>8)</sup> But such approach changed once the film industry «discovered the visual and aesthetic appeal of food, glorious food, and began to make movies in which food played a leading role, thus giving birth to a new genre: food films».<sup>9)</sup> According to the above quotation in

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6) See Kim Kyung Sook, 2013.

7) *Le Grand Chef* (2007) is another example of Korean drama that relies on artistic effect to transform a dish into a work of art.

8) Zimmerman, Steve, 2009, p.26.

*Taejanggūm* the food takes part in the narrative of film playing “a leading role” with its visual representation, with «a style all its own» (idem) but also as a «narrative device»<sup>10)</sup> to tell the story of Changgūm, a young girl working at court kitchen.

High viewing ratings immediately resulted in an improved image of Korea, the creation of a national food symbol, and an increase in the sale of food products *made in Korea*.<sup>11)</sup> The tourism sector has also witnessed a growing interest in food; according to Choi Jong-Moon,<sup>12)</sup> many tourists have perceived the particularity of the Korean culture as represented by its food. This seems to be the driving force behind the new wave of food tourism.<sup>13)</sup> Many representatives of academic institutions and food companies have become members of *Hanshik Globalization Development Agency* so as to ensure that its objectives are carried out. In general, *hallyu* is a well-known concept in Asia. Hence, it is being used by the Agency to contribute to the governmental project that involves the systematic display of tasty food in many Korean dramas, almost synonymous with *hanshik*, in its depiction of festive than daily food, which should stimulate the viewers’ desire to taste and to cook

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9) Zimmerman, Steve, 2009, p.25.

10) Batty, Craig, “You Are What You Eat: Film Narratives and the Transformational Function of Food”, edited by Peri Bradley, *Food, Media and Contemporary Culture. The Edible Image*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp.27-28.

11) Lee Tae Hee, “Development policy strategies for Korean cuisine to become a tourist attraction”, In *OECD: Food and the Tourism Experience: The OECD-Korea Workshop*, OECD Publishing, 2012, p.102.

12) Choi, Jong-Moon, 2012, 123-131.

13) “Globalising Korea Food and Stimulating inbound tourism” in *OECD Studies on Tourism*, OECD Publishing, 2012, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264171923-en>.

it. Most of surveys on *hallyu* for foreign viewers reported that the viewers showed close attention on food displayed in screen, believing Koreans would eat the amount of food displayed everyday. Moreover, the strategic exploitation of *hanshik* in several audiovisual works has been reinforced by its becoming a symbol of healthy food. “K-food” made its appearance in “K-dramas” and “K-films” as an essential part of their narrative in order to spread Korean food culture abroad and, at the same time, to raise Koreans’ awareness of their traditional food culture. In other words, this analysis reveals that the state power actively intervened in the process of raising *hanshik* as an international star by riding on the successful wave of *hallyu* which has expanded the interest on Korean food in screen. With this strategic effort, as indicated in the high rate of viewers of *Taejanggŭm*, *hanshik* programs could gain the spontaneous and genuine interest in the Korean food culture from foreigners.<sup>14)</sup> The *hallyu* fever had spread even in Korea which has simultaneously raised the consciousness and pride of Koreans who rediscovered Korean food as authentic, healthy and traditional. This has been made possible by the spread of audiovisual works like *Taejanggŭm*, but also by film which show Korean cuisine. The food consumed by the court pictured in the TV drama *Taejanggŭm* has become a symbol of a national cuisine that has spread worldwide via the “*hanshik segyehwa* (of *hanshik* globalization) project.

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14) For the lack of space and coherence of the argument in this study, the relationship between food and power are not discussed here remaining it for a further study.

## II. A theoretical overview: the biography of visual goods and food as object and subject

Despite the wealth of publications in film studies that have thus far appeared, the literature on food and its continuous representation in multimedia texts remains sparse. This study does not aim to offer a general overview or a summary of the current status of the literature dealing with the development of multimedia productions within Korean society. Such an endeavour would be beyond the scope of this work, especially taking into account that the considerable amount of literature produced on this subject cannot even be summarised here.<sup>15)</sup>

I shall attempt to analyse the representation of Korean food from two different points of view: 1) by considering its communicative function as a “visual good” that has its own biography; 2) by taking into account its role as evoking subject and object. These two perspectives are used here jointly, although they may seem far apart in theoretical terms. They can be used in conjunction to guide the analysis of the visual texts under scrutiny.

Food is an excellent tool of narrative communication. On the one hand, the dinner table, on screen, somehow talks to its viewers via the food on it. Both the table and the food are visual goods that can tell their own story; they have a social life (e.g. a

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15) Yet, two research studies that apply a similar semiotic approach to the study of Korean food in audiovisual works are worth mentioning: Kim Hoyŏn (2012, 221-243) and Paek Sŭngguk (2004, 183-202). The latter in particular investigates the viewers’ synesthetic experience and the evocative power of images to recall taste while watching the TV drama *Taejanggŭm*.

banquet while on holiday, a frugal lunch during working days, and so on) and biography characterised also by peculiar forms and traditions that carry specific meanings and messages that change over time. On the other hand, Korean food and its representations in multimedia texts confirm the active role they have as agents of visual communication, in both functions of subject and object, as we shall see. In both cases the food and its representations affect and are affected each other and interact both in terms of perception, evocation in the relationship between participants (food and viewer). In this dynamic interactions, the food including the table or dishes are more than just objects, having a role and an active function. The food plays an active role and function also outside of the monitor screen by creating a visual communication between participants in and out of the screen. Drawing on Canevacci,<sup>16)</sup> I developed my theoretical approach to analyse food in multimedia material. Food is embedded in a complex type of inter- and intra-human communication whereby “what is observed is no longer a passive object; it becomes an active subject that observes its observer, modifies it (and modifies “itself”), and interprets it. The observer is not the only acting subject but it becomes an observed subject (...); the viewer (...) is no longer a passive recipient, but an active interpreter “in fabula.”<sup>17)</sup> In this light, visual goods (in the present case, food) have a communicative value; they are both the object and subject that the actor/author manipulates to activate a process of “*exposure*”. As

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16) Canevacci, Massimo, *Antropologia della comunicazione visuale*. [Anthropology of visual communication]. Milano: costa & nolan, 2000.

17) Canevacci, Massimo, 2000, p. 6; *my translation*.

Canevacci further explains: “The idea of *showing oneself* underlines a transformative and reflective process that involves the subject, which turns into an observing entity. *Observing* enables that process of reflection that leads to a polymorph, sensitive and emotional interpretation”.<sup>18)</sup> This anthropological approach to communication “sees visual goods as objects that turn into biographical subjects, biological fetishes whose value is redefined and represented in order to attempt a critique of political and communicative economy”.<sup>19)</sup> Put more simply, visual goods are watched and observed as objects/subjects; we accept that they can have their own ‘biographies’ and social lives just as any human being has their own social and cultural values.

For example, Korean *kimch'i* is a well-defined good which has a biography combining both global and local processes. Yet, this results in contrasting and conflicting reactions when its identity needs to be reaffirmed, as it implies a decontextualisation of food and the reclassification of this object (traditional food) as a subject.<sup>20)</sup> Considering *kimch'i* as a food with its own historical and national identity that represents Korean people leads to a new level of awareness of its cultural and historic value both at the national and international level. Several factors have contributed to this. For instance, the Olympic Games that took place in 1988 allow Koreans to discover some foreign food, which sometimes was perceived as having an unpleasant smell (e.g. some type of

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18) *ibidem*, 12; *my translation*.

19) *ibidem*, 13; *my translation*.

20) A type of food that defines Koreans; Han, Kyung-Koo, “Some Foods are Good to Think: Kimchi and the Epitomization of National Character”, *Korean Social Science Journal* 27, no.1, 2000.

cheese). Following the rise in international sales of *kimch'i*, Korea had to conduct a fight with Japan<sup>21)</sup> to claim the originality of *kimch'i* as a Korean product. Moreover, the media and audiovisual works such as TV dramas and feature films effectively contributed to the equation of *kimch'i* with Koreans and an increased national awareness. As we see it in the fictional and real world, *kimch'i* is an object, a material good, which turns into a subject that is able to interact while instances of inter- and intra-human communication enfold. It works inside and outside the context of audiovisual materials to stimulate and elicit all other participants' reactions. This process can occur within multi-, trans- or glocal cultural contexts. The history of *kimch'i* shows the fluid and ever-changing nature of food that acquires imaginative power, like a voice-image that prompts others to watch and listen to it. In *Taejanggŏm*, *hanshik* but also other material objects like table, metaphorically has its own voice and eyes, much like a dinner table that tells a story through the plates on it. As mentioned earlier, each plate contains a dish with its own 'biography'.

In brief, food has a dual object/subject function: it is an *object*, simply it is food to be eaten, that is seen and it is a *subject*, the protagonist of a story, with its own history, communicative, and having the function and role to be seen but also to look at and to interact with the other participants within the fictional and real worlds. In this sense, Korean food is loaded with meaning that is reflected inside and outside the audiovisual work. In both cases, as visual goods and as object-subject, the

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21) See Han Kyung-Koo, 2011.

food and its representations influence each other and interact from a perceptual and evocative point of view. Moreover, they enhance the relationship among participants so that the food or the table are more than mere objects; they have an active role and function themselves. Both representations and participants have their role on and off screen (within the fictional and real world), thus creating a sort of visual communication involving all participants (i.e. characters and viewers). On screen, the camera focuses on the food's taste and the whole set of meanings it entails. Off screen, in the real world, food becomes an active subject that influences the transformation process involving all senses, especially taste perception, which enables its popularity to spread.

As demonstrated thus far, food is an object/subject that sheds light on the fictional, constructed or real world within which it is embedded. It embodies a semiotic process that brings together subject, object and setting to create a unified whole that eliminates “the fixed distance between the screen and the viewer” since “the camera takes my eye and leads it to the centre of the screen; I can see the things as if I was inside the fictional world, I am part of the action and I can see it from every angle”.<sup>22)</sup> The non-verbal text is conceived as resulting from the involvement of all those who take part in the action and interact as observers and observed. They can intervene to influence others and themselves; they all have a double role that is both active and passive as

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22) Balázs, Bela, *Der Geist des Films*, Wichelm Knapp, Halle 1930 (translated it. *Estetica del film*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1975, pp. 11-12), quoted by Lorenzo Bianciardi; 108, note 86; 133.

objects and subjects. This role is performed on the basis of a non-static logic, which produces changes according to each context.<sup>23)</sup>

The filmic image allows subject and object, subject and setting to merge, not permanently, however, so that viewers may still distance themselves and “watch things from the outside so that they can possess them and rule over them”.<sup>24)</sup> On the one hand, a movie displays the material and techniques that can evoke feelings and, on the other hand, it shows the effects that result from involving the viewers. As Bianciardi suggests, “these effects recall the moment when the viewer pragmatically interprets the text, which depends on each individual’s emotional and personal dynamics”.<sup>25)</sup>

### III. Talking Tables and Narrating Food: a Diachronic Approach

In this paper I will analyse few films that represent the relationship between the virtual and social reality expressed by the food and the table from diachronic point of view. The films considered are: *The T’aebaek Mountains* (Im Kwon-taek, 1994), *Potato* (Shin Sangok, 1967), *Koryŏjang* (Kim Ki-young, 1963), *The Coachman* (Kang Dae-jin, 1961), *The Show must Go on* (Han Jae Rim, 2007), and the drama *Siksarŭl hapshida*, (also known in English as the *Let’s eat*).<sup>26)</sup> In the TV dramas under scrutiny here,

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23) See Canevacci, 2000.

24) Bianciardi, Lorenzo, *Il sapore di un film. Cinema, sensi e gusto*. [The taste of a film. Cinema, senses and flavour]. Siena: Protagon, 2011, 109; *my translation*.

25) *ibidem*, 110; *my translation*

the well-laid table they picture is the object that receives peculiar attention. When such a table appears on screen, it can tell its own biography and social life via the way it is laid and the dishes on it. The table speaks: it communicates emotions, reaffirms a given social status and, at the same time, performs a didactic function. The way a table is laid informs the audience of the rationale behind its shape and size, which ultimately determine the relationships among the diners sitting around it. For instance, movies set in the pre-modern period show small tables since they were designed to serve few people or single individuals. They were low tables, with the diners sitting on a cushion on the floor. The number of dishes served, both main and side dishes, could vary from six to twelve, depending on the diners' social status.<sup>27)</sup> For example, in *Taejanggŭm* the dinner tables "reflect" the status system of the Chosŏn Dynasty's culinary culture. These tables are like open books that reveal the social hierarchy of that time, which was based on complex protocols that determined not only the number of dishes but also their contents. These tables also give us information about the Five Elements, based on colour, taste, temperature, consistency, *yin* and *yang*.

Food is the protagonist of each episode of this TV drama, and the camera lets it 'speak' by focusing on how it is prepared and eaten at the table. This helps the viewers to overcome the fixed distance between them and the fictional world. It also helps them

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26) I have selected a list of films and other video material for my analysis considering the communicative functions above mentioned: the meanings and role that food on screen being communicated.

27) See Kim Jong Su, 2008.

interpret the scene and ask questions such as: Who is eating? When, where, and what are they eating? In many historical feature films or dramas, for example, an apparently simple scene that pictures a sick king eating a soup in his private room, while the queen mother watches him, leads to more complex semiotic interpretations. The king's physical weakness is equated with the weakness of his kingdom. The food here is also modest and informs the viewer-observer that normal rules are being overlooked since the rules governing food consumption in private or public spaces have been broken. As a general rule, it is not appropriate for a king to show his weakness. Indeed, if a king eats such a modest dish in front of others, this event turns into a political issue. As the king's weakness is revealed by his lack of physical energy, this is considered as a symptom of impending calamity. His eating behaviour itself, which is shown in the form of slow chewing and swallowing, becomes a linguistic act that is loaded with performative and perlocutionary power. In short, the king's dinner revealing his way of eating and his soup are used to describe a specific context. They all communicate emotions, too, via non verbal codes that convey to the viewer given meanings, which go beyond the words they hear and the images they watch.

Outside the fiction, a biography of dining in Korea would include banquet scenes that speak eloquently of the first Korean negotiations with foreign delegations. These scenes show how both food and mealtimes became the meeting point with modernity during certain dramatic periods in Korean history (i.e. with Japan at the gates with its colonial policy). An Chungshik's (1861-1919) paintings pictured Korea's first contacts with modernity, which included foreign semiotic codes (cf. for instance,

the painting of the banquet attended by Paul Georg von Möllendorff (1848-1901) and his spouse). His paintings show how tables became taller over time, and all diners sat on chairs. Cutlery (knives and forks) replaced the chopsticks, and plates and dishes replaced the bowls, cups and saucers. It should be noted that the concept of taste based on the Five Elements mentioned above seems to have disappeared, as demonstrated by the serving procedure seen in these paintings, which is sequential rather than simultaneous, as in the past.

The banquet scenes shown in the film *The Taebaek Mountains* (Im Kwon-taek, 1994) are used for negotiations and attempts to reach diplomatic compromises. Here food virtually becomes a spy that informs us of the diners' discussions. This movie is set in 1948, soon after the Korean Independence in 1945 and before the Korean War (1950-1953). Its main theme is the ideological conflict that took place in Yeosu, a city in the south of the Chōlla province. In 1948, many families became involved in ideological conflicts and this created internal fights among their members, who became enemies. This event anticipated the civil war that started in 1950, which was deeply marked by the combatant's ideological beliefs. Food scenes are almost completely absent, apart from the two banquet scenes that portray politicians, intellectuals, and land owners from Yeosu and Seoul. The negotiations and discussions take place around a long table that is covered by a white cloth and laden with many dishes. The first banquet was arranged to honour a general who was famous for his policy of violently repressing and killing all possible "red" (communist) fighters hiding in the mountains. When this general is asked to scale back this violent repression, he refuses. It is worth

noting that, after the first few toasts, nobody eats; chopsticks, spoons and plates are left untouched, in perfect order. The dishes on the screen are not being 'observed' by the camera in the foreground, but are relegated to the background; the camera appears to be detached from them. Interestingly enough, it is just this way of representing dishes ready to be eaten but that nobody wishes to indulge in that suggests a communication breakdown. Consequently, all the diners understand that they will not reach a final agreement. The second banquet is held to honour a member of the National Assembly, the Korean parliament, and this makes for a slight change in the narrative structure of this drama. More dishes are on the table and some diners are eating, while the camera offers a 360-degree view of the table to emphasise the quality of the food. Such changes are linked to the structure of the previous scenes that pictured the member of the National Assembly, who had just arrived in Yeosu and had attempted to reduce or even clear a number of convicts' sentences. His behaviour gives hope to the local people who invite him to dine together and prepare large amounts of food in his honour. The local people's hope is semiotically expressed via their generous offerings and participation in the food consumption process. The pleasant and chatty conversation during the banquet is suddenly interrupted and all diners stop eating to show their disapproval of the member of National Assembly's proposal to appoint Yeom Sanggu as General Inspector of a youth organisation; Yeom Sanggu is Yeom Sangjin's brother but these two siblings have opposing ideological views, since the latter is the leader of the communist rebels.

Generally speaking, both banquet scenes suggest a link

between the content of the diners' dialogues and their actual eating (or not eating) the food. The food shows the viewers its *communicative* function, as it helps those who eat it start a conversation. Moreover, eating is used as a *performative* act by the diners who seek to convey a specific message: their intention is to talk because they want to reach a consensus. Therefore, even their non verbal language becomes an intrinsically encoded performative and communicative act. Conversely, they stop eating when the dialogue fails and communication is interrupted. To some extent, it could be said that the food (or dishes) becomes part of the diners' performative act and refuses to be 'seen' as commodity that facilitates communication.

Some films produced in the 1950s and 1960s focus on the Korean War and rarely mention food or only lightly touch upon this issue. Interestingly, the few instances in which food is dealt with mainly refer to its scarcity. The focus of attention becomes a violent, painful, gnawing hunger, which is a primary physical need. Yet, it is also an emotional need caused by desperation and anger: it can justify anything and make everything else appear negligible. Hunger is indeed a complex matter in this kind of movies. In the face of hunger, the socially and politically vulnerable characters (e.g. women and children) are portrayed as voracious. They eat potatoes and rice mixed with beans<sup>28)</sup> (if lucky enough to have some) and their own tears; they shove spoonfuls of food into their mouths or down a boiled potato. Bite after bite, they eat

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28) In TV dramas and feature films, roasted or steamed potatoes are associated with less privileged classes; hence, they are loaded with social, historical and political meaning.

convulsively, making noises and gestures to show they cannot swallow properly; they need to beat their chests to get their food down (cf. for instance *Potato* - 1967, by Shin Sangok - based on Kim Dong-in's novel "Potatoes").

In these films, finding something to eat becomes a priority for women and children. All the rest is insignificant when your stomach is empty, so that all other values appear relative, if not futile. Many women sell their bodies for a single potato and do so gladly, while the children's only way to find food and survive is begging. Men are virtually absent in these food scenes, which suggests that food (or the lack of it) cannot be their primary concern. They have to survive by finding ways to obtain food rather than eating it. Nonetheless, hunger hits them as well and the camera shows their aggressive reactions when they realise that the people they love are dying of starvation. Sadly, they give vent to their anger by striking their loved ones. Rice and potatoes, then, are like a dream, and bring joy to the starving people portrayed on screen.

The most representative example of hunger in film is *Koryŏjang* (Kim Ki-young, 1963). The mother of Kuryong, the protagonist of the film, tells her only child: "They say that having a full belly is a sin". This black-and-white movie is set in an unreal time. The script seems to have been written to be performed on stage rather than in a film. In a nutshell, this movie tells the story of Kuryong and his mother, a widow who remarries a widower who has ten sons. The shaman in this village predicts that Kuryong will kill his ten step-brothers, who decide to mistreat him. They prepare a trap with a snake that bites Kuryong and makes him a cripple; they also rape Kuryong's wife and

poison his well. In the meantime, Kuryong's former lover Kannan returns to the village with her sick husband and ten daughters. Kannan sells one of her daughters to the shaman for food. Kuryong's step-brothers kill Kannan while Kuryong is away taking his mother to the mountain to die, for according to an imaginary traditional culture, people older than seventy must be left to die alone so as not to deprive their offspring of food. Hunger is the narrative thread of this movie, which is exemplified by the potatoes the characters struggle to find. Potatoes are the only kind of food that can help them survive. The director seems to associate the characters' misery and struggle for physical subsistence with spiritual survival, shamanic traditional way of thinking, and the general assumed ancient practices that date back to the Koryŏ period (e.g. taking one's old parents to the mountains to die). Both hunger and what is considered as tradition seem able to instil unconscious terror in the people, who are unable to see any possibilities of change. Their only solution is to give vent to their desperation by abusing others as singles or in a group. Hunger reveals itself blatantly, in its total and unimaginable cruelty. For instance, in one scene of this film a knife is shown cutting a potato in twelve pieces, one for each of Kannan's ten daughters; a couple of pieces are left to be offered to their grandparents. The latter are hesitant at first, but then, in one swift motion, take one piece each and put it into their mouths. Their granddaughters hit them and shout that they hate them, since everyone is a potential enemy who can deprive the others of their sustenance. In this case, potatoes metaphorically represent a historical moment in Korea characterised by military dictatorship and brutal industrialization.

The desire to still their hunger is the extreme expression of these peoples' struggle to survive and it is a threat to values and ethics; in other words, it represents the struggle between nature and culture. The village this movie portrays is ruled by the shaman and Kuryong's ten step-brothers. The former uses her "magical spells" to exert control over the others; everybody obeys, including the ten step-brothers who in turn use violence to rule over the other villagers. The director Kim Ki-young (2008, 65) notes that "It is interesting that the capitalist power of the ten brothers with violence and economics (the well) does not clash with the occult power of the shaman". The relationship between these two ruling forces is one of mutual aid, when needed. However, they do not trust each other and are always ready to challenge each other. Out of hunger and in order to survive, the main character Kuryong decides to cut down the sacred old tree the shaman had used to impose sacrifices on the others (e.g. killing a little girl). Kim Ki-young commented on the metaphor of cutting down the tree aims to recall the fact that: "104 students lost their lives in order to destroy the old tree during the 4-19 Revolution".<sup>29)</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, Korea witnessed difficult times due to its hasty process of industrialisation and modernisation. The size of the tables and the plates laid on them reflect the social and economic transformations of Korea. Each family had to face reality and adapt to it, which involved the struggle to improve one's

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29) It refers to the student demonstrations of 19 April 1960 when martial law was proclaimed. On April 25th there was another demonstration and this time also participated school teachers and the soldiers refused to fire on the people. The day after Syngman Rhee was forced to resign.

social and economic status. Once again, the historical period can be understood by the tables seen in the films. For instance, it can be small and low, and taken by the mother into her son's room as he studies all night long. Such scenes reflect a social and historical period when the whole family was ready to sacrifice itself for one son; they all relied on him for a better future. This son, instead of getting a job, studied hard to obtain access to one of the most prestigious universities in the country so as to help the whole family improve their social and financial status. *The Coachman* (Kang Dae-jin, 1961) is a film that light-heartedly depicts social changes and people's struggle to adapt. The main character is a widower who works as a coachman and uses a rented horse to deliver goods. He places all his hopes in his older son who does not work but must study hard to become a lawyer. The coachman is in sharp contradiction with the time he lives in; as his job further confirms, he is still bound to traditional Korean cultural values. He accepts the traditional idea that one's married daughter must die in her husband's house even if he mistreats her. This widower's dream of improving his social status is bound to his son's success in becoming a lawyer, which is a typical traditional way of thinking. It is therefore not surprising that some scenes portray father and son eating together and discussing family matters. They sit and eat together, which confirms the patriarchal values men share.

The table is where food is consumed and today it can still be seen as the object/subject that dictates social and gender differences in TV dramas and real life. However, it employs a different type of language from the one used traditionally. In the past, one's social status was reflected by the number of dishes on

a single table and strict rules determined gender division. Based on some field-studies Chu Yongha mentions the recent tendency of people sitting around a table on the basis of a hierarchical scheme determined by the TV set.<sup>30)</sup> Those having a more privileged status have the best seat to watch the television while eating. Within the fictional world of a TV series, it is interesting to note that the diners' behaviour and the table itself can facilitate a semiotic interpretation of the audiovisual text. The scene generally follows the traditional codes and rules in accordance to which the members of a traditional and usually modest family sit on the floor around a low table and talk loudly. Conversely, the members of a modern middle-class family sit on chairs in a kitchen or a dining room, eat elaborate dishes and take turns while speaking. They follow the asymmetrical rules of the Confucian hierarchy that regulate interpersonal relations; thus, the head of the household is the one entitled to more talking time. The scenes involving such families rarely portray joyful moments; what they often convey to the viewers is the diners' tension. Everyone seems to eat very little and too quickly so that they can get up and leave such an uncomfortable space.<sup>31)</sup>

Food is the most precious thing that can be placed on a table,

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30) Chu, Yŏngha, “*Ŭmsingmunhak, ŭmsigŭro pon ban'gugŭi yŏksawa munbwa* [Korean culture and history from perspective of food and food literature, 음식문학, 음식으로 본 한국의 역사와 문화]”. Seoul: Humanist, 2011.

31) In the drama *Cunning Single Lady* (2014), episode 6, a rich young man comments on the cheerful atmosphere of his colleague's household who are very modest economically in contrast to him: “When I eat with that family, they are so loud that I never know if I am eating with my mouth or with my nose; something I could never see in my house. I like it. You can see that these people really live”.

and is endowed with different meanings depending on with whom and where it is consumed. Even though eating is an individual action, it becomes social when it is done with others. Hence, eating together is the norm while eating alone can be seen as socially unacceptable. Eating is an act that generates and reinforces solidarity, and it builds future bonds both in private and public contexts. It is therefore not surprising that many Koreans consider meeting in a restaurant with colleagues or prospective clients more important than discussing business in an office setting. Restaurants are places outside the office walls that facilitate solidarity, friendship and alliances. As Song Kyosŏng puts it, a table is the space where we eat together and share information, energy and feelings.<sup>32)</sup>

#### IV. Eating together or eating alone

In continuation of the role of the food and the table, it illustrates the transformation of the food and its eaters recently, considering them within social changes by analysing TV dramas and films.<sup>33)</sup> The recent changes in the way food is consumed both on screen and in the real world, along with the transformation of values it is said to have produced constitute

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32) Song, Kyosŏng, "Sikt'ak wiŭi sahoe [식탁 위의 사회]", *Singmumbwaŭi ppurirŭl ch'adasŏ [식문화의 뿌리를 찾아서]*, edited by Yu Aeryŏng, Seoul: Kyobomungo, 1997.

33) As the purpose of this paper is not to demonstrate chronological examples of films where food is displayed or is meaningful, only those which are related to the scope for my argument have been selected.

additional aspects of analysis in the study of the media. Korean society is currently undergoing a profound transformation and many people have started developing a more complex sense of community and solidarity.

In more recent TV dramas, a growing number of scenes portray households where eating a meal reflects the crisis of the traditional values that is affecting this society. The word *chip* (house) has two different meanings. On the one hand, it defines the building itself, a place built to protect the family from the wind, rain, cold and heat. On the other hand, it describes those who share its space, householders who share food under the same roof; *shikku*, 식구, 食口, has been used in the past to indicate the number of “mouths” of a household. Nowadays the concept of *shikku* has a broader meaning. According to Chu Yŏngha, nowadays in cities *shikku* is used as equivalent to *chip* to indicate groups who eat and live together: “*shikku* is the domestic group sharing human relationship and food products which are consumed regardless of the existence of blood ties”.<sup>34)</sup> *Shikku* is not confined to its main family members who eat together on a daily basis (i.e. father, mother and children); it refers also to the extended family that includes all those relatives who are invited to a banquet during festivities or special occasions.<sup>35)</sup> It is worth noting that in more recent multimedia material the meaning of *shikku* is associated with a social and cultural code of eating behaviour that reflects the way Korean social life is changing, especially in the cities. I suggest that this term is used to refer in

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34) Chu Yŏngha, 2011, p. 46.

35) *ibidem*, p. 66.

the context of eating together, even with “improvised family members”. By focusing on eating, *shikku* indicates the crisis of the traditional concept of family and the word has acquired a figurative meaning that refers to other forms of community membership.

TV dramas anticipate such changes as they portray both “traditional” scenes as well as ones showing characters eating alone. In the latter case, the camera takes a 360-degree swing around the room to underline the sense of loneliness, awkwardness and not belonging to a group. The lack of communication is demonstrated by the fact that the person eating can only talk to her/his food. The food is often a simple dish of *ramyŏn*, which is usually (but not always) associated with loneliness and weakness; it is often eaten directly from the lid of the pan where it was cooked. Children eat *ramyŏn* alone because their parents are at work.<sup>36)</sup> In other cases, a father is left alone in Korea to work and send money to his children who attend a school or university abroad in English-speaking countries where they can learn the language.<sup>37)</sup> Such a phenomenon is known as *kirŏgi appa* (wild geese fathers) and started to spread at the beginning of the year 2000. In 2008, it was estimated that 200,000 Koreans were wild geese fathers, thus making this trend part and parcel of the present social culture,<sup>38)</sup> as demonstrated by the many TV dramas

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36) Pak Chŏngwŏn, 2009/01/02.

37) Kim Eun-gyong, 2008/04/02.

38) Depending on the father’s economic situation, different labels have been created: a “wild goose father” can visit the family regularly, whereas a “penguin father” can visit only every four years (cf. Wang Lucy, last visited: 2015/11/18)

that include *kirōgi appa*.<sup>39)</sup> *The Show Must Go On* (Han Jae Rim, 2007) is a film that also shows how the “wild geese fathers” can be a valid alternative in solving family problems. In this movie, I am interested on the way food is represented, and particularly *ramyōn*, which is used to shape and emphasise the main character In’gu’s (played by Song Kangho) personal traits. A gangster with a very complex personality, as often found in Korean films, In’gu is violent towards others but kind to his loved ones. Food rarely appears on the screen but when it does, it is imbued with meaning. In two scenes, In’gu has lunch with a friend and eats *twaeji kukpap* (rice and pork soup). The two playfully pretend to fight as they used to do when they were young. The soup they eat is filled with memories about their youth in their hometown. In another scene, In’gu dines with his wife, and this again allows for a semiotic reading of the situation. The dish eaten here is *tchajangmyōn* but to them it is no ordinary *tchajangmyōn*; it is the dish they had the first time they met in the 1980s, when it was considered a small luxury, trendy and desired dish.<sup>40)</sup>

The first time In’gu sits silently eating *ramyōn*, the camera shoots him having it from the pan lid. He is sitting in his living room. His wife and daughter are away and silence pervades the

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39) Cf. for instance *Birdfather* (2013), an animated short film; it tells the story of a male wild goose that wakes up every morning at dawn to go to work. In the TV drama *Scent of a Woman* (2011) a manager calls himself a “wild goose father”. In *Cunning Single Lady* (2014), episode. 9, an employee cooks with his boss and suggests *ramyōn*, thus showing this is quite a usual thing for him to do. He further explains he is a wild goose father and he misses his daughters who have nevertheless decided to keep on studying abroad. He has to keep sending them the money they need since, as he says, this is what the head of a household has to do.

40) See Yang Young-Kyun, 2010.

half-lit room, which again conveys a feeling of loneliness and prompts compassion since the viewer already knows about the communication breakdown that exists between In'gu and his family. Indeed, although he asks them for love, he cannot give up the one thing they ask: being a gangster. In another scene, In'gu eats *ramyŏn* while watching a home video his family sent him. This last scene of the movie shows In'gu's loneliness, sadness, and a feeling of powerlessness that are symbolised by his food, which grows cold. He cannot control his emotions any longer and reacts by throwing the plate at the TV screen. He calms down almost immediately, and this leaves him feeling deflated. He surrenders, takes out a plastic bag and cleans up the mess, sorting out what is broken (which represents the breakup with his family) while the home video keeps on playing the images of his happy family.

In both these scenes, *ramyŏn* stands for continuity within the narrative structure of the movie since it anticipates what is about to happen. In the first scene, In'gu eats his meal alone, which semiotically anticipates the feeling of solitude that is slowly growing inside him. In'gu goes into every empty room as if looking for traces of his loved ones' presence. In his daughter's room he finds a journal where she had written she would like to see her father dead (because he is a gangster). The apparent tranquillity of this room is at once dramatically replaced by sadness, loneliness and In'gu's awareness of not being loved by his family. In the second scene, the main focus is the escalation of In'gu's emotions in front of the *ramyŏn* dish and home video. His emotions are symbolic representations leading to the cathartic image of *kirŏgi appa*; this image conveys the idea of a father

eating *ramyōn* alone, as it happens to In'gu. Additionally, he is seen while watching a home video that shows his family who are far away but happy. He is a father overwhelmed by emotion. The last scenes of this movie are loaded with meaning that evokes a social critique of the pressure imposed by the moral and ethical duty Koreans feel obliged to obey in order to honour the values of excellence, competitiveness, dynamism and sacrifice, which will destroy the traditional meaning of family and the idea that a dinner table is a symbol of coexistence and love.

The recent meaning of *shikku* as “improvised family members”, above mentioned, is well expressed in *Shiksarūl hapshida (Let's eat)* which is a TV drama comprising 16 episodes. Each episode includes at least one scene that pictures its main character fondly eating her food as a way to compensate for her lack of a love life. This drama deals with the lives of Korean singles, often affected by social norms that restrict their options for eating out. The main character in the show is a young divorcée who loves to eat and needs a (male or female) partner to be able to enjoy all the courses restaurants serve. She even agrees to dine with strangers waiting to be served. The main point is not with whom to eat, but what to eat or how to obtain access to dishes that are off-limits to singles. The appeal of this program seems to be the way the characters on screen voraciously eat these main courses; they do not have favourite dishes but eat, chew and swallow everything they are served as noisily as possible to express the pleasure they feel. The main character's facial expressions are quite repetitive but they work like a magnet, glueing viewers to their faces. The actress savours the anticipation of tasting the food she is about to eat by moving her tongue over her lips, and visibly

swallowing as soon as she hears the name of a dish. She first eats her meal with her eyes and mouth wide open as if she had already swallowed it. Soon after, she gently places the food in her mouth. The camera zooms in as she closes her eyes to swallow; she greedily opens them again to get another mouthful of food. The crunchy fried chicken is still hot and she chews it with her mouth half open to let people see the steam coming out of it. All these images convey a world of senses; taste is noise, consistency, tempera- ture and emotion. When watching her, viewers feel as if they are eating with her and they can almost taste the food and the consequent feeling of satiety.

## **V. Conclusions**

To conclude, in this study I have tried to explain the role and meaning that food and its representations have in Korean audiovisual works. To this end, I have investigated food and its two folded function. On the one hand, both food and its representations are seen as objects since they are material goods. On the other hand, they can be considered as subjects that have their own life and communicative power. This approach allowed me to look at food as a way to convey a wealth of information regarding social hierarchies, as well as cultural, historical and economic changes that have taken place over time. Subsequently, I carried out an analysis regarding who eats what food, how and when they do it on screen and in real life. This has also led to a thorough examination of semantic changes in terms of communication between food and viewers. All this has culminated

in the analysis of the function food and its representations have within multimedia productions and the meanings Korean society has attached to them. The examples of *hanshik* and *kimch'i* discussed above have clearly shown the political and social importance of food in Korea. The metaphor of being hungry for freedom in *Koryŏjang* and the idea that food can trigger memories in *The Show must go on*, for example, are cleverly used in movies to reveal the complex relationship that food has on and off screen. These audiovisual works can explain communication breakdowns between those who make food, those who watch and those who eat it. Food in multimedia materials exploits a specific language of communication; its messages and meanings depend on cultural and social changes that occur over time. My conclusion is that not only do audiovisual works do not only reflect a certain version of reality, but that they also filter and amplify that reality. For instance, eating alone on the screen may imply being separated or single. In Korean TV dramas is often seen as the “issue of being single”. In both the fictional and real world, people have attempted to create systems that can adapt to singles’ needs in terms of food, times and places where it can be consumed (e.g. opening single- oriented restaurants, publishing eat-out guides for singles and advising what and where to eat).

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## 한국 미디어 속 주체이자 대상으로서의 음식

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이 연구의 목적은 미디어에 나타난 음식에 관한 다양한 의미와 의미론적인 변화를 통해 오늘날 한국의 문화와 사회를 해석함으로써, 미디어 속에서 음식의 재현이 가지는 역할과 기능을 천착하고자 하는 것이다. 한국적 맥락을 고려하여 미디어 속 음식의 재현을 분석하기 위해 인터넷 사이트, 영화, TV 드라마와 같은 다양한 미디어 자료를 통시적인 관점에서 분석하였다. 이 연구에서는 음식과 음식의 재현은 단지 현실과 허구 속 한국의 실재를 해석하는 데에만 사용되지 않는다고 보았다. 음식은 이야기를 펼치는 주체일 뿐만 아니라 미디어에서 조작되고 소비되는 대상이기도 하다. 즉, 음식과 음식의 재현은 시청각 텍스트가 끊임없이 중재하는 과정 속에서 이루어지며, 미디어 속 허구 세계와 현실 세계에 영향을 미치면서도 동시에 그것으로부터 영향을 받는 대상이자 주체이다. 한편, 이 연구에서는 음식과 그 재현은 허구적인 그럴듯함을 통해 현실을 복제하려고 한다는 점에서 문화적 '탈주(escape)'를 전달할 수 있는 한국의 우수성의 예로서 시청자들에게 비추지고 있음을 보이고자 하였다. 이 연구에서 적용한 이러한 통시적 접근법은 미디어와 현실 세계에서 음식이 갖는 역할을 드러내고 해석하는데 있어 중요하다. 특히, 음식은 지속적으로 미디어 속 허구 세계와 현실 세계에 영향을 주는 동시에 영향을 받는다는 점에서, 이 연구는 특정한 의미를 전달하고 사람들이 음식을 지각하는 방식을 변화시키는 음식의 의사소통적인 기능에 주목하였다.

**핵심어** | 음식인식, 한국음식, 의사소통, 미디어, 한식, 혼밥