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CROSS-CULTURAL SEMIOTIC DIALOGUES BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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Italian food suits Korean women

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Abstract: This paper analyses the attitudes of different genders and age groups toward Italian food in Korea. By asking who consumes it, and with whom, how, when, and why, this paper examines the cross-cultural meaning of Italian food and how it is differently perceived by men and women of different ages in Korea. It argues that Italian food is perceived by consumers as sharing female traits and that this, in turn, lends a particular eating experience.

Keywords: taste, gender, space, Italian food, identity

INTRODUCTION

In general, studies on food preference related to gender consistently indicate that women rather than men have a tendency to choose their food based on the idea that healthy food will entail a healthy body (Westenhoefer, 2005). In Korea specifically, many case studies have been conducted on food preference from the gender and age perspectives. Based on a survey performed on 425 Korean college students in 2013, the research inquired how the components and types of comfort foods were determined by gender differences, and how the choice reflected gender emotional moods (Kim Ji-Ye and Lee Sang-Hee, 2014).

Age and gender distinctions also affect the practice of eating out and the selection of restaurants, as indicated in a survey conducted on 564 people living in the Pusan area in 1996. The results indicated that females and students were more open to experiment with unknown food and foreign food, including fast foods, than were males and older people, who showed a preference for traditional food and for more nutritious food (Kim Doo-Jin and Lim Hyo-Jin, 1998). Gender also accounts for differences in menu choice in restaurants scattered in the Jinju area, according to 321 salaried employees interviewed in 2001 (Kim Seok-Young and Kim Ju-Young, 2002).

Although the aforementioned surveys are outdated, they nevertheless indicate interesting gender and age distinctions regarding food. What is missing in the literature on food culture in Korea are studies on the

relation between gender and ethnic food, for example Italian food. This contrasts with the wide diffusion of Italian food related topics in TV soap-operas, films, internet food blogs, and other mass media that have young Korean women as their main audience.

The aim of this paper is to inquire whether the consumption of Italian food in Korea is experienced differently according to gender differences, and how its quality is affected by local culture. On the basis of interviews and questionnaires distributed in the survey in 2012, the paper argues that Italian food is associated with female preferences, on the levels of taste, personality, and on the socio-cultural level, in contrast with men's tastes and personalities.

In his article "Softer Soju in South Korea", Nicholas Harkness looks at the sensorial and social experiences of women consuming *soju* as instances of the same quality, by examining the commensal consumption of liquor in South Korea (Nicholas Harkness, 2013). The present paper differs from Harkness' work in that it is focused on what people perceive to be similar qualities for Italian food and women, based on those people's sensorial point of view.

KOREAN WOMEN AND ITALIAN FOOD

Italian food and Italy are popular in Korea. The image of Italy is that its music, fashion, and holidays are all 'bello', and Italian food is considered healthy and genuine. There is a symbolic social status of upper-middle class or the status of someone in possession of higher artistic sensitivities for anyone who appreciates Italian culture, including its food. As elsewhere, Italian food is associated with freshness and a long tradition, and it is easy to cook and is suitable to the Korean palate, which is confirmed by the fact that in 2009 there were more than 700 Italian food restaurants in Seoul alone (see *Guide and Directory of The Italian Restaurants in Seoul 2009*).

The popularity of Italian in Korea was facilitated by American fast food chains, and Italian had more than enough time to let Koreans familiarize themselves with its taste. It was in late 1990s that Italian food underwent a stratification in terms of consumers and the food consumed: 1) Spaghetti restaurants with affordable prices were geared toward families or youngsters; 2) Pasta restaurants, often in hotels with chefs who were either Italian or Koreans trained in Italy, were geared toward the upper-middle-class.

Korean women have played a pioneering role in the adaptation of Italian food to Korean palates since the 1950s. As mothers, they transformed and educated a new generation to appreciate foreign tastes (Song, 2016). For them, Italian food was not simply a matter of taste, but it was also perceived as an emblem of sophisticated Western culture, one that could mark their social status. It therefore became important for them to educate their children into it. Young Korean women made “an effort that presupposes a personal cost, an investment, above all of time” in order to incorporate Italian food into their lives (Bourdieu, 1986 in Song, 2016: 138, note 30; for further discussion on the application of Bourdieu’s idea on the Korean case, see Song, 2016: 53-54). It was through this accumulated knowledge that the consumers gained their urbanity and cosmopolitanism. This development occurred in parallel with Korean women gaining new positions and identities within family and society through economic, social, and cultural transformation. The continuous exposure to Western culture via mass media made it possible for women, who were newly empowered through ideas of entertainment, romance, and sexuality, to actively construct their own food lifestyles. The consumption of Italian in high restaurants has thus become a medium through which Korean women mark their “modernity”, their belonging to the upper-middle classes, and their identity and social status along the axis running from global/modern/high-middle class to local/tradition/low class (Song, 2016).

This brief history of Italian food in relation to Korean women reveals its socio-cultural meaning. But the question of whether or not women are more ardent consumers than men needs to be answered. In other words, can we identify a gender preference in the consumption of Italian food? If so, how do people explain and describe it and how is the gender culturally and socially embodied in its consumption?

It is a fact that in Italian food restaurants in Seoul, the clientele is composed of more women than men, regardless mealtime. The chefs prepare dishes targeting women, as often mentioned in the drama *Pasta* and in interviews with chefs in restaurants in Seoul and Jonju. The drama *Pasta* (2010, MBC), a “gourmet drama”, which aired 20 episodes from January 2010 to March 2010 in Korea on MBC34, was viewed mainly by young Korean women, and its plot focused on Italian food and its main, female consumers.

In this paper the author uses the survey and fieldwork carried out in 2011 and 2012 to examine how the interviewees conceptualize Italian

food qualia with female characteristics, and how they interpret Italian food tastes and its restaurants in relation to gender preferences.

SURVEY

The survey was conducted as field work at two separate times, in 2011 and in 2012¹. Questionnaires were distributed to elementary school children, university students, professors, and employers living in Seoul and in Jonju. They contained 27 questions and were distributed to a sample of 322 people (126 males, 139 females, and 57 no-answers in the age groups of 10-11, 20-30, 30-40, and over 40). Most of the respondents demonstrated considerable knowledge of ITF and were consumers of ITF.

Food Preference: Gender and Age Differences

Many of the questions in the survey concerned food preferences according to gender, and how and with whom Italian food is preferably consumed during the day (no distinction was made between lunch or dinner, except when it was spontaneously specified by the respondents in their comments). In order to analyse gender differences, a list of the most common Italian dishes in Korea was provided, and the respondents were asked to rank the dishes from 1 (highest) to 6 (lowest).

The answers indicated differences in gender and age regarding preferences and the way tastes are perceived: women like Italian food more than men do and perceive it tasting differently from the way men do. Also women eat at Italian restaurants more frequently than men. Respondents ranked in first place pizza (men) and pasta carbonara (women). Both are very popular dishes in Korea and have been adapted to Korean taste: pizza is served American-style with plenty of toppings, and carbonara is served in cream sauce. Women prefer carbonara because they like the creamy, greasy, and sweet (see below). Spaghetti vongole was the second most preferred dish for both men and women, but limited to those under 30 years of age, while older respondents preferred *kalguksu*, which is a Korean soup with noodles and clams, in other words the same ingredients but much cheaper. Women ranked all dishes (except amatriciana) with a 1 or 2, indicating that Italian food is much more appreciated among women than among men, whose appraisal varied over the six rankings. It also indicates that Italian food is preferred by the under-thirties.

ITALIAN FOOD RESTAURANTS AND TASTE-GENDERING

With whom would you like to go to Italian restaurants? This question also reveals social and gender attitudes. At the top rank, with no distinction for age and gender, the respondents preferred “fiancé”, followed by “(female) friend”, then “family”, “colleague”, and at the bottom of the ranking “(male) friend”. As one male interviewer said: “if you think about the price of a dinner it is certainly better to invite a woman than a male friend”. It is interesting to note that partner preference remains unchanged even from the perspective of age. In brief, we can deduce that men prefer to go with a female partner.

Both genders acknowledge that the atmosphere of Italian restaurants is related to the choice of the partner with whom to consume: the nice interiors, service, romantic atmosphere, and the neat and refined space. Italian food restaurants are therefore described as spaces in which to give an outlet to the emotions as well: they are pleasant spaces where one can not only taste new flavours and enjoy foreign food, but they are also places for people who love new trends, who love to travel, and who are open to change. These characteristics are perceived to be of greater interest to women.

In the description given by respondents, Italian food and Italian restaurants are perceived as especially similar to women’s personalities: Italian food is expensive, and so are women who like expensive things and enjoy spending money for things that they can appreciate better than men can. Italian food and women have the same “sophisticated taste”, and they represent “cultural knowledge” and “high cuisine”. In the survey, women and men are described in dichotomy: women know more about food because they cook better than men; women like things that are sweet, small in quantity, well served, and consumed in a pleasant atmosphere; they dislike the spicy tastes that men prefer; women consume creamy, expensive, sophisticatedly prepared food, while men consume “raw, unsophisticated food”, like cheap and spicy soup.

The respondents indicate that men are more conservative matters of taste: “men think that food consists of nothing but rice, *kimch'i*, and soup”. The socio-cultural meaning of Italian food is Koreanized, but it is nonetheless perceived in contrast to Korean food, which creates a binary opposition between national-foreign and between male-female. In other words, national (cheap) food is suitable for men, whereas Italian food (expensive) is suitable for women. Moreover, emotional aspects are also

described in terms of gender differences: creamy and greasy food helps women get rid of stress, while spicy and cheap food in ample quantities and strong drinks are the best solution for men to enjoy.

The following question was addressed only to the male respondents: Explain why men do not usually dine at Italian restaurants with other men. The reasons offered are dictated, again, by the similarities between the qualia of Italian restaurants and female characteristics: for instance, the interior atmosphere is perceived as a place for dating. The explanations given by male respondents on why it is not a place for a male couple are: “even if I feel like going I will hesitate to go there with male friends”; “I lose my appetite if I think of going there with my male friends”; “if you go there with other men everybody looks at you”; “there is a kind of social etiquette that discourages you from going there with other men”; “men feel uncomfortable about going to a place people usually go to on special occasions”; “I don’t think it is a place for men”; “in Korea it is strange for men to go together”; “it is known as a place with a certain special atmosphere”; “the interior design is too feminine and you might be taken for gay” (male student).

FEMINIZING ITALIAN FOOD TASTE AND SPACE

From the above survey we see that, for Korean women to consume Italian in an Italian restaurant signifies a delicious, desirable meal within a set of emotions or ideas that accompany the circumstances of consumption. The space of an Italian restaurant constitutes a deep gender distinction: as mentioned, the emphasis is on the atmosphere of the restaurant, whose interior design is suited to women, and the adjectives used to describe it are: elegant, refined, sophisticated, dark, romantic. These adjectives, used for the description of place, signal an equivalence between the object (food), the subject (women), and the context (restaurant), and their taste preference becomes equivalent to the taste of Italian food.

In this process, many adjectives are perceived as feminised or feminine, and women’s psychobiology is perceived as having affinity with Italian food, and their personalities with the semantics of Italian food restaurants. The atmosphere of these restaurants is refined and sophisticated, as are the personalities of women, who are different from men in food tastes and preferences: women prefer food that is sweet,

greasy (creamy), fresh, not spicy, not hot (temperature), nice to see, not cheap.

This profile implies the construction of a female identity within the realm of Italian food, something that is acknowledged also by men who are habitual clients, by children, and by chefs, who intentionally create a feminine atmosphere for their female clientele. This does not mean that men are not enthusiastic consumers, but they tend not to want to go with other males, especially at dinnertime, because of the special atmosphere.

The way food taste is perceived and how taste words are extended to non-sensory domains is defined as a “conceptual metaphor” (Harrison, 2009: 22-27), which Korean respondents also used in describing Italian food taste as related to gender. Indeed, Italian food is described meta-linguistically as a female personality, by the adoption of a wealth of metaphors that describe it as replete with female qualities. In Korea, women’s preferences therefore shape the culinary and dietary identity of Italian food and by the consent of others are empowered to act as protagonists in the cultural formation of beliefs. This interpretation, focused more on the perception of taste and on the image of Italy, is distinctly Korean.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey indicates that women are interested in following new trends. The object (food, restaurant) and subject (women) are perceived as sharing common characteristics. The interiors of Italian food restaurants are often adorned with furniture, carpets, and pink walls, geared to create a deeply romantic atmosphere. Even more meaningful is that the ads for these restaurants are meant to associate the image of a real Italian atmosphere with a fictional one in the minds of their clients, who remain suspended in an intentionally created space midway between *here* and *there*. The invented atmosphere is relaxing and comfortable, and offers the illusion of an escape from routine into an exotic atmosphere suitable to a sophisticated and sensitive soul. Other adjectives – like authenticity and naturalness – by extension become associated with women who love Italian food.

In their descriptions of their tastes, the respondents employ socio-cultural values (healthy food, “good to eat”, comfortable places for dining, a place preferred by women, a place to have meetings or a date). In this way, taste comes to be a complex network of signs associated

with sensory perception, aesthetic judgements, and social dimensions. Also in this instance we find gender differences.

In brief, this paper is not on the domestication of Italian food, consumers' social class, or on taste studies, which cannot be examined here for lack of space. Rather, it has focused on how the taste of Italian food is perceived by Koreans, through gender and age differences, how Koreans describe ITF, and how ITF is culturally Koreanized. From the viewpoint of gender, the survey indicates that the respondents think women prefer ITF more than men do. This is explained by the notion that there is an equivalence between the quality of food, its cultural semantic value, and the atmosphere of ITF restaurants, on the one hand, and the female personality and identity on the other. It also indicates that taste perception is personalized, and that taste words are used as a reflection of gender personality.

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Note

¹ In this paper, for lack of space, my analysis considers only those aspects of the survey that are related to the aim of the paper. The survey is not intended to be exhaustive but experimental, with need for further research.

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