

Hansik, the “privileged” place of women of the Korean community in Buenos Aires

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Introduction

According to the feminist geographer Isabel Dyck (2005), urban spaces in both social and material terms are a key dimension to observe the way the ‘local’ is structured not only by the everyday interactions and practices but also by relations of power in different scales. Space is revealed as a political and social product that is constantly in a process of construction (Lefebvre, 1974; Smith, 1997; Arfuch, 2002; Massey, 2005). In that sense, to focus on the ‘local’ as a methodological tool allows us “to theorize the operation of processes at various scales of gender relations from the body to the global” (Dyck, 2005:234).

How about food and food practices? Do food practices also represent relations of power or allow us to understand how gender relations are translated in urban space? How and to what extent does urban context reshape gender identities and women’s trajectories? In that sense, the purpose of this paper is to examine the process of revalorization of Korean women’s culinary capital (LeBesco and Naccarato, 2008; D’Sylva and Beagan, 2011) in relation to the changing social arena in Argentina. We found two different moments in which the value of Hansik (Korean Traditional Food) increases in Buenos Aires. The first one is related to the migration process itself, and the second is the result of both local and global phenomena that developed in the last two decades.

We conducted in-depth interviews with female Korean restaurant cooks and owners in Buenos Aires¹, Gastro Corea organizers, and also observed the use of social media in the promotion of the event. At the same time, we have been conducting fieldwork for our dissertations since 2014, which allowed us to articulate in our analysis these data with long-term territorial and historical processes related to Korean Migration in Argentina.

Ethnic enclaves, Hansik and Korean women in the migratory context

According to the Korean Association in Argentina (ACA), there are approximately 25,000 ethnic Koreans living in Argentina. Currently, about 90% of this population lives in Buenos Aires, and most of them work in the textile and garment industry, and their related activities. There are two neighborhoods where the majority of Korean community’s businesses, residences and institutions are located: *Baek-gu*, the oldest and most important socio-cultural ethnic enclave located in Flores, and *Ave*, the cluster of the clothing industry located in Floresta. *Baek-gu* started emerging as the heart of the community during the 70s while many immigrant families found manufacturing in the textile industry as a niche economic activity.

As has been analyzed in other cases (D’Sylva and Beagan, 2011), and in the case of Koreans in Buenos Aires (Delmonte, 2018), in the migratory context, food practices take particular meanings as vehicles for identity construction. Food “from home” offers the possibility of continuing cultural traditions and mitigating the psychological trauma of displacement. As food associated with home became central in the construction of the Korean migrant identity, Korean women’s culinary capital started to become more valuable. Foodwork, traditionally considered as a feminine domestic duty and obligation was not only limited to private spaces, but started to also be performed in community spaces such as churches and restaurants in Buenos Aires.

Also, their culinary capital related to Korean food, in some cases, translated into potential ventures, requiring a relatively small investment. As the Korean migrants increased twofold in the

¹ All the interviewees’ names have been changed, except in the case of *Gastrocorea* advertising videos.

1990, the *Baek-gu* was revitalized and many women started eateries at home or small restaurants, aiming at the fellow co-ethnic migrants. A second-generation female interviewee who helps the family restaurant explained how it was started:

"We had a small sewing factory when we got here but my mother got sick. She missed Corea a lot, and she stayed at home and didn't want to go out. She was afraid of this country. She did not know anything, the language, nor the people. (...) Her friends tried to think about how to help her. They said 'you cook very well, why don't you open a restaurant?' There we opened the restaurant and all that illness she had was gone. Besides, she really enjoys her work. She doesn't want to rest and wants to continue working. And it is one of the things that give her a sense of living in this country"
(Monica, Korean Restaurant owner's daughter)

Like her mother, many women in the Korean restaurants are primarily responsible for opening the business as well as the kitchen, at their own discretion. In this manner, the duty related to traditional gender roles becomes a vehicle for the empowerment of women and their foodwork.

Although food is an important dimension of the sense of belonging and a source of comfort for the migrants, it was also embedded by the disputes of "legitimate" tastes that pervaded the intercultural contact with the rest of the society (De Garine, 2001). In this case, ethnic food choices, smells and presentations were used in discriminatory practices and discourses against Korean migrants. In other words, while the food drove the Korean community and the enclaves more consolidated, it also reinforced the image of the Korean community as closed and isolated from the eyes of the receiving society (Sassone and Mera, 2007). Therefore, it can be said that the revaluation of *hansik* and of the women's foodwork occurred more internal to the community, not across the society until other global forces influenced.

Korean State policies and global multiculturalism in a Latin American context

What we consider the second moment of revalorization of the Korean migrants culinary capital, is triggered by the interaction of multiple global and local phenomena, among them we consider two of them as the more relevant. In the first place, the state policy developed by the South Korean state related to their cultural industries in general (*hallyu*), and their traditional cuisine in special (*hansik*). In the second place, the multicultural turn that has pervaded the diversity management in many big cities around the globe, that has acquired its own peculiarities in Buenos Aires.

Since the 1960s the Korean government has been developing a series of policies related to the promotion and institutionalization of a Korean cuisine (Young, 2005). But in the last decade it has gained a special boost. In 2010 the "Hansik Globalization Project" was launched, with the pursuit of favoring the image of Korea (the "Korea brand") through its culinary culture: increasing the Korean food exports and developing the restaurant business together with the tourism industry.

In 2014, these policies started to materialize in Buenos Aires, mainly organized by the Korean Cultural Center (KCC) and the Republic of Korean embassy. In July 2014, the "Kimchi Bus" -a food truck performing demonstrations and tastings of *Hansik*- arrived in Buenos Aires. This same year, the "Korean gastronomy festival" started to be organized annually in five stars hotels. In 2015 the KCC began hosting lectures on food, in 2017 started offering cooking lessons and in 2018 with the inauguration of a new building it added a permanent exhibition on *Hansik*. Beside these initiatives, in these last years between 2015 and 2020 the promotion of *Hallyu* also expanded in Buenos Aires resulting in increasing numbers of "hallyu fans".

The second phenomena that we recognize as being involved in this revalorization is related to the changes that took place in the last decades, on how ethnicity, race, cultural diversity and national identity is perceived and represented in Argentina, and especially in Buenos Aires. This

changes can be observed in State policies, legislation and discourses and also in non-institutional initiatives carried out by the civil society, for example in the pop culture arena (Melella, 2020; Laborde, 2017).

Until the last two decades, the metaphor that structured the national identity discourses was of “the melting pot”. But, as Grimson (2006) states, while in other national projects this conviviality of “races” included diversity, in Argentina this meant a mixture of only European “races”. Structuring in this way a regime of invisibility, a national project that denied the existence of nonwhites. But from the first years of the 2000s a shift towards a discourse that embraces racial, ethnic and cultural diversity have occurred, with both local and global phenomena involved in this process. And as Ko (2016) states, the global pursuit of diversity as a desirable value has created a new space for the formerly marginalized peoples in Buenos Aires city.

Since 2009, the city government has organized BA Celebra, a program that “celebrates” the migrants’ communities through events organized in the public space where traditional music, dances, clothes and food are the focus. In this context, Asian migrants and their cultural productions have functioned as marks of this emerging multiculturalism, they have been recognized but at the same time preserving ethnic hierarchies (Ko, 2016).

Korean women, culinary capital and Buenos Aires foodscape

We found that this context pervaded by the influx of Korean state policies, the multicultural turn, the transnational circulation of culinary fashions, among other phenomena, enhanced the awareness and curiosity on Korean cuisine by the general public in Buenos Aires, and encouraged the presence of this cuisine in different spaces of the social arena.

Gastro Corea food week, organized in October 2019, is one of these cases. Unlike the ones described before, this event was a civil society initiative. A group of three Korean-argentinians: one restaurant owner, a multimedia marketing agent, a cinematographer, and an Argentinian foodist without Korean descent were the organizers. In this case, twenty Korean restaurants prepared special menus for the week, with the common aim to promote Korean Food in the local society and attract more non-Korean consumers. Some non-Korean restaurants also participated, fusing Korean plates with their regular menu. They trained a group of volunteers to explain the menu as well as *Hansik*’s basic principles to the customers. They were young second or third generation Korean Argentinians and non-Korean k-pop fans.

Gastro Corea, focused its publicity campaign on social media. Besides some photos of the plates offered, they selected five cooks -four women and one man- who shared their life stories and their relation to food. In all cases, the narration of their bond to *Hansik* includes family and ancestors, but in female stories this dimension is more stressed, and in many cases their actual performance of cooking is still attached to these representations. In the video interviews, women are dressed in traditional Korean clothes, meanwhile the male cook wears a professional cook outfit. These outfits emphasize the idea that for female cooks, their expertise in Korean food is attached to ethnicity and family, while in the case of the male cook, it is legitimated by his professional formation.

"I became a professional chef, then I went to Korea where I also studied cooking. I worked in other Asian countries and in Canada, but where I got the most was in Korea, which was also where I was able to get the ideas I am working on now. I opened this place and my objective was to reach the Argentinian palate, using ingredients that are known here, but combining with others less known. (...) You express yourself through food". (Pablo, Gastro Corea advertising video)

"Since I was a little girl I didn't like to study but I liked to prepare food (...). When I emigrated here there was nothing I was passionate about, so I opened a restaurant. The customers told me

that it was delicious (...) It doesn't matter what I'm cooking, I think it's food that my son and my husband will eat (...) If I didn't do my business this way, thinking that I am cooking for my family, I wouldn't be able to work" (Mama Moon, Gastro Corea advertising video)

This phenomena is not exclusive for Koreans cooks and chefs in Argentina. As has been stated by Farrell for other cases, "Female professional chefs continue to be represented in the media through the gendered lens of the feminine, the domestic, and the private. By underrepresenting their professional achievements, through media representations, they continue the historical narrative of women's association with the private realm of the domestic. This reinforces the gendered dichotomy of the public and private, while also reinforcing men's association with the professional skill of cooking" (Farrell, 2016: 6). This is a phenomena present in most societies. But, what are the peculiarities of this case? In the first place, it is delineated by migration and migration trajectories. Professional cooking -opening a restaurant/eaterie- becomes a possible way of earning a living for Korean women in the migratory context, one that does not demand proficiency in the new language, Spanish in this case. Besides that, the Korean restaurant scene in Buenos Aires is mostly dominated by women. Women are in charge of Korean restaurant kitchens to a greater extent than what happens in other restaurants in the same city. And, as we have seen in the first part of this article, their foray into the restaurant industry was triggered by their role as the traditional values' gatekeepers.

"Unlike the manly Japanese cuisine, Korean cuisine is a mom's thing. I don't know if it is professional. It's home-cooked food, the recipes are from each mother, differently from the standardized French cuisine. Still each mom has her own recipe, her own way of cooking, her own love and warmth". (Verónica, restaurant owner).

We also find contradictory consequences on this characteristic. Traditional gender roles have placed women in the private, domestic space, the kitchen and the food related duties. But, in this context of revalorization of *hansik*, and them being the gatekeepers of this tradition puts them in an empowered place in the family business:

"My mother prepares all the fundamentals, kimchi and the soups. And then, everything gets heated and mixed by the employees. My mother taught them every last detail. (...) Still there is something that can not be transmitted with recipes..." (Carlos, runs a restaurant with his mother).

Returning to *Gastrocorea*, and taking all the previous in consideration, this social media campaign allowed Korean-Argentinian female cooks to tell their life stories in their own voices, and put into words their ideas about what Korean cuisine is and should be.

Korean female cooks also start to appear in traditional media spaces. In the last year, one of the main gastronomic TV channels in Latin America, incorporated an "Asian cuisine" show hosted by a Korean-Argentinian young chef, Marina Lis Ra, who also runs her own restaurant in Buenos Aires. The show is presented with the objective to bring the "Asian cuisine" closer to a Latin American audience in a way they can recreate the recipes at home. Former Asian TV hosts in food channels were mostly men, Japanese or from Japanese descent, depicting a cuisine that, as Ray (2016) states, has become the new culinary co-hegemon with France and Italy.

A second kind of space that has become to be transformed by the agency of Korean-Argentinian women and their culinary capital is the one of culinary institutes, where professional cooks are formed. The Argentine Institute of Gastronomy (IAG), one of the most prestigious culinary schools in Buenos Aires, has had in the last years, on the one hand, an increased participation of Korean-Argentiniens -from second and third generations- as students.

And on the other hand, this revalorization of Korean cuisine encouraged its presence in the institute curricula, even though still in a marginalized way.

The formation as a gastronomic professional in this institute is two years long and involves ten courses, mostly using a French technical framework, as is the case in gastronomic schools globally (Ray, 2016; Lasater-Wille, 2015). Even though the curriculum doesn't include any mandatory courses on Korean cuisine, since 2018 a former student, a Korean-Argentinian woman and restaurant owner, Sandra Lee, imparts a kimchi and hansik workshop, aimed at students and former students of the institute.

An increase in Korean cuisine prestige allowed this tradition to enter the space of culinary professional education in Buenos Aires, and in so doing, allowed Korean Argentinian women to position themselves in the place of educators, with its subsequent consequences on social hierarchies, contesting their place both as an ethnic and gender minority in the field of cooking schools.

Finally, we witnessed a repositioning of Korean restaurants in the city's landscape, which is closely related to the dwellers' way of practicing the urban spaces in Buenos Aires. According to Giglia (2012:6), *habitar*, which translates into dwelling in English, reflects relationships between subjects -both individual and collective- and places. The author associates the notion of "domesticating" a space as the process where an accumulation of daily routines produces habitus and modifies the space. In that sense, we observed new forms of consuming Korean Food and, in other words, new urban spatial practices that are reflected in the geographical configuration, even if this is still an incipient process.

During the last decade, we observed that some Korean community's eateries and restaurants located at the small alleys in Flores and Floresta have turned into a popular urban spot among the local foodies as a gourmet getaway to taste "authentic" Korean food and to explore Korean gastronomic practices. Also, since 2018 six new Korean restaurants have been opened or relocated in the central and touristic areas of the city, such as Palermo and Recoleta, going beyond the ethnic enclaves of the Korean community. Even if the geographical expansion of Korean cuisine in the city center is driven by restaurants aiming at local customers, it should also be understood as a contested space, which implies the changing demand of consumers and local dwellers. For instance, the restaurants "Fasongsong" and "Mr. Ho" opened up last year in Recoleta and rapidly became bustling and somewhat trendy lunch destinations for many office workers, allowing them to experience Korean food on a more regular basis.

This process goes hand in hand, resulting in a change in the business pattern of the Korean supermarkets as well as the food production and distribution practices of women in the community. As our interviewee informed: "there are lots of women (in the community) who are preparing kimchi, convenience food, ready-to-eat meals at home, responding to the increasing demand", the overall process of expansion of Hansik in the city has repercussions on these women's lives and daily practices, as well as on their plans and projects.

Final remarks

This research illustrates the revalorization of Korean women's culinary capital and their increased presence in Buenos Aires' spaces.

As we showed, since the first years of establishing in the city, Korean restaurants have been central places where ties among co-ethnic were constructed and "home" was recreated. In doing so, Korean women contributed toward consolidating the ethnic enclaves, and simultaneously they saw their social status became enhanced as gatekeepers of the culinary tradition.

We observed that during the last decades, the successful outputs of Hansik globalization campaigns, as well as values on multiculturalism pervading both state policies and discourses, operated as a trigger in this increase of value, that impacted both on the scope of Korean women's professional careers and incomes, as well as in their prestige and hierarchy in the social space. Yet, this process involved some contradictions. Even though the presence of women increases in public performances of Hansik, both in media, culinary institutions and restaurants, their tie to the gastronomic tradition is often represented through ideas of care, family and motherly roles, instead of professional images.

In 2020, a year signaled by life modifications related to the Covid pandemic, this expansion can also be observed in the appearance of small food ventures, mostly focused to the delivery of ready made Korean plates -such as *kimchi* or *mandu*- or Korean groceries, run by second generation of Korean migrants, and that aim to achieve a general public by social media advertising. It will be suggestive to continue analyzing the local reconfigurations of this global process, by which Korean cuisine becomes a revalued cultural commodity and can be used by an expediency by both state and civil society actors.

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