

Branding Korea: Food, Cosmopolitanism, and Nationalism on Korean Television

Min Joo Lee
(Wellesley College)

Abstract

Due to the significance of national images in global politics and trade, nations have implemented various methods to brand themselves in positive ways. Korea has used media to brand itself as aspirational and cosmopolitan. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of Korean television programs featuring foreign nationals engaging with and praising Korean culture. I analyze a popular television program entitled *Mom's Touch* [수미네 반찬] to examine the intersections of nation-branding, cosmopolitanism, and nationalism. I argue that the program adapts discourses of cosmopolitanism to brand Korea as aspirational and cosmopolitan. The nationalist agenda that touts “Korean-ness” as an aspirational value, and the cosmopolitan ideology of global community-building may appear antithetical. However, these seemingly contradictory agendas converge to promote “Brand Korea.” I suggest that cosmopolitanism, when co-opted into nation-branding strategies, become the discourse through which to discriminate against foreign nationals who are deemed as detriments to the nation’s brand.

Keywords: Korean media, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, food nationalism, Korean-ness, brand Korea, nation-branding

Introduction

The news report begins with a South Korean newscaster reporting, “Europeans are increasingly growing fond of Korean food.”¹ The scene changes to a Korean government-sponsored K-Food Festival in Milan, Italy. The camera zooms in on a white European man and woman leisurely enjoying dishes such as bibimbap, bulgogi, and japchae that are the best-known examples of Korean cuisine. When interviewed, the couple praises the dishes they tasted, saying that they are some of the freshest and tastiest they have ever eaten. The overall tone of the news report is that of nationalistic pride at the popularity of Korean food in Europe. It features images that are used to support the argument that Korean culinary culture enjoys global prestige. The news camera lingers on images of tens of hundreds of people standing in line outside the festival grounds to taste Korean food, as well as focusing on the white Italian couple praising Korean food. At the same time, the news report markets Korean culture as cosmopolitan by showing footage of renowned Dutch chefs learning about Korean food and the festival visitors clustering around a table to learn how to cook Korean food from a Korean chef. The images of non-Koreans immersing themselves in Korean food culture makes Korean culture appear cosmopolitan.

In this essay, I examine how food-related media discourses brand Korea as cosmopolitan, but at the same time, superior to other cultures. To promote a culture as superior and cosmopolitan at the same time may appear paradoxical. After all, promoting a country—more specifically, its culture as superior to others is the mark of a nationalist agenda, while cosmopolitanism is defined as a concept that eschews nationalism for the pursuit of the ideal of a common humanity and global citizenship. This essay examines how cosmopolitanism is co-opted into nationalist discourse so as to deprive it of its connection to the “ideal of universal belonging and obligation,” and is instead appropriated as a means through which to promote Korean culture and to achieve national advancement.²

I use the example of a popular Korean television program titled *Mom’s Touch* [수미네 반찬] (tvN, 2018–) to examine how discourses of cosmopolitanism are co-opted to brand Korea in a positive light. The

themes that I analyze concerning this program contribute to scholarly debates around cosmopolitanism and nationalism as well as scholarship on nation-branding.

Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism

In popular discourses as well as academic theories, cosmopolitanism and nationalism are often considered antithetical to each other. Nationalism corresponds to a set of values that are exclusionary, while cosmopolitanism is conceptualized as the overcoming of nationalism in favor of identities and affiliations that transcend cultural and national boundaries.³ Barney Warf argues that nationalism often degenerates to an uncritical celebration of one's own culture and at times militaristic disparaging of other cultures.⁴ Meanwhile, according to Warf, cosmopolitanism gives one an objective distance from one's culture through the cultivation of the belief in shared humanity and responsibility towards the world. Binary definitions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism raise some questions: Can nations aspire to be cosmopolitan and maintain their nationalistic sentiments at the same time? Is the cosmopolitan ideal, which embraces the notion of common humanity above cultural/national boundaries, realizable on a national scale?

Cosmopolitanism and nationalism can converge in ways that blur the distinction between the two concepts. Such convergence occurs through the co-optation of cosmopolitanism into nationalism rather than the other way around. According to Pheng Cheah, cosmopolitanism on a national scale can degenerate into "a set of strategies for the biopolitical improvement of human capital" that serves as "merely a symbolic marker of a country's success at climbing the competitive hierarchy of the international division of labor and maintaining its position there."⁵ Cosmopolitan rhetoric can be used to attract highly skilled and wealthy individuals to the nation as well as to exploit migrant laborers. Here, cosmopolitanism is just a discursive concept used by the nation rather than an ideology that strives for global community beyond national boundaries.⁶ Cosmopolitanism becomes a discourse

through which countries, rather than seek harmony with each other, try to take advantage of the other. Oisín Keohane defines the co-optation of cosmopolitanism into nationalism as “cosmo-nationalism.”⁷ “Cosmo-nationalism” is a type of nationalism that utilizes, rather than opposes, cosmopolitanism to further the aim of a particular nation: it uses cosmopolitan rhetoric to globalize the local.

In South Korean government and media discourses, cosmopolitanism is mobilized as an instrument associated with South Korea’s advancement as opposed to an ideology that attempts to create a borderless global community.⁸ Since the South Korean government launched its Presidential Council on National Branding in 2008, efforts that appear cosmopolitan on the surface, such as “treating foreigners and multicultural families better,” and “increasing external aid,” have been used to promote cosmopolitan images of “Brand Korea.”⁹ Being cosmopolitan and striving to be *perceived as* cosmopolitan have sharply different meanings: the former means acting out of the desire to create a global community beyond national boundaries, while the latter means putting an effort into carefully curating an image so that others perceive a person or a nation as cosmopolitan.

In this essay, I focus on mediated constructions of “Brand Korea” that make Korea *appear* cosmopolitan and aspirational. Media have been at the forefront of transnationally disseminating “Brand Korea.”¹⁰ For example, the television program *Mom’s Touch*, which I will analyze in this essay, co-opts images of foreign nationals consuming and appreciating Korean food to demonstrate the cosmopolitan and aspirational qualities of “Brand Korea.” This essay contributes to scholarly debates on how transnationalism reconfigures the conception and practices of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In the next section, I examine how Korean mediated discourses of nationalism and cosmopolitanism have been particularly entwined with food.

Food Nationalism

Nationalism that strictly polices the boundaries between one’s own culture and that of others may be useful in contexts where nations and

their inhabitants need to guard their cultures against the attempts of outsiders to erase them. The concept of “Korean-ness” has historically been mobilized to police such boundaries: existing research on “Korean-ness” has defined it as a national identity that fosters belief in the cultural uniformity of Korea.¹¹ The adherence to such belief in cultural uniformity can also be found in other countries characterized by relative ethnic homogeneity, such as Japan with its popular and ongoing discussions about the concept of *Nihonjinron* (“Japanese-ness”). However, these concepts are often based on ambiguous and amorphous definitions that change based on social circumstances and contexts.

Food is tightly entwined with the concept of “Korean-ness.” The significance of food goes beyond its position as essential sustenance for our bodies: “It can serve to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or, it can serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segmentation.”¹² Regular and repetitive choices that individuals and groups make throughout history affect the way nations are imagined by their inhabitants as well as by others.¹³ In that regard, a nation’s identity and brand can be partly formed through the repetitive and regular choices that individuals make regarding food. In the 1980s, South Korean media associated McDonald’s with “American-ness” and a foreign culture that diverged from “Korean-ness” and “Korean food culture.”¹⁴ Many Koreans thought of eating at McDonald’s as an act of breaking away from the regular and repetitive consumption of “Korean food” that affirmed one’s “Korean-ness” and affiliation with Korea. Due to these perceptions, McDonald’s had a languid start in Korea. Many Koreans initially rejected the franchise due to fear that McDonald’s was attempting to colonize South Korea culturally through hamburgers and french-fries. To succeed in South Korea, McDonald’s had to market the similarities between a McDonald’s meal and a “Korean meal” so that Korean customers did not reject the franchise for being too foreign.¹⁵

The Korean term “*Sintoburi*” [신토불이] also reflects the entwining of food and nationalism. It means, “[t]hat human bodies and their native environments are so closely linked that people should eat what is produced locally in order to maintain cosmic harmony.”¹⁶ This phrase

can be interpreted as an eco-friendly reminder that people should live in harmony with nature. However, the term is also used as a nationalist call for people to consume products grown on “national soil” by their peer “national subjects” as opposed to consuming imported goods produced by other nations. Although this phrase is used less nowadays, remnants of such sentiments still exist in the cultural value placed on “Korean beef” [한우] and “national produce” [국산] compared to imported beef and produce. The value imparted on “Korean produce” supports the environmentally friendly idea that people should consume local food items that do not have significant carbon footprints. At the same time, these concepts have nationalist undertones. Stores and restaurants around Korea emphasize that they only sell “Korean beef” or use “national produce” because foreign produce is perceived as inferior. The history of sensationalist media discourses regarding imported food (such as the claim that imported beef was infected with the “mad cow disease”) exacerbated the disparity in the value placed on “national” versus “foreign” products. This practice of valuing national produce and devaluing imported produce is just one example of how food is used as a mechanism to reinvigorate nationalist sentiments.

However, I argue that “Korean-ness” and Korean food are no longer only employed as means to unify national subjects against outsiders. They are also used as cultural concepts that could be marketed across the globe as representative elements of “Brand Korea.” In the context of nation-branding, “Korean-ness” becomes a matter of perception rather than about what it “traditionally” signifies. For example, in mediated discourses, *chimaek* (fried chicken eaten with beer), which does not have a particular cultural origin, is claimed as representative of “Korean-ness” and as a component of “Brand Korea” that may appeal to foreign nationals. Ying Fan defines “nation brand” as “the total sum of all perceptions of a nation in the minds of international stakeholders, which may contain some of the following elements: people, place, culture/language, history, food, fashion, famous faces (celebrities), global brands and so on.”¹⁷ “Korean-ness” becomes a carefully curated discourse informing the efforts of “Brand Korea” to make the country appealing to foreign nationals.

For instance, kimchi is imparted with symbolic meaning as food that supposedly unifies ethnic Koreans as well as being a culturally distinct product to be marketed to people outside South Korea as an integral part of its national brand. Some scholars suggest that kimchi is a symbol of “Korean-ness” that unifies ethnic Koreans living all over the world. Hong Sik Cho claims that kimchi is “a popular psychological and physiological connection tool with the Homeland.”¹⁸ Although I agree with this body of research that examine the significance of Korean food for the Korean diaspora, I find it problematic that it ties ethnic Koreans with Korean food to create a binary of ethnic Koreans versus foreigners. For instance, Cho claims, “The value of kimchi as a national symbol comes from its generalized daily consumption among ethnic Koreans. ... Whatever the main staple, kimchi is the *sine qua non* of a Korean meal.”¹⁹ In this passage, ethnic Koreans appear as a uniform and bounded category of individuals who consume Korean cuisine and revere kimchi as a national symbol. Korean food like kimchi, is significant for ethnic Koreans because it invokes the image of a homeland and provides a sense of national belonging. However, as I explain in this essay, South Korean media do not wish to portray Korean food as a cuisine that is consumed primarily by ethnic Koreans who want to reminisce about the homeland.

In marketing Korean food to promote “Brand Korea,” the South Korean media highlights the enjoyment of Korean food by non-Koreans rather than by ethnic Koreans. For instance, during the news report about the Korean food festival to which I referred at the beginning of this essay, the camera exclusively focuses on white Europeans enjoying Korean food and lining up to taste it. The camera glosses over the presence of the diasporic Koreans who were attending the festival; they only appear on the screen as peripheral and fleeting figures. The news focuses on depictions of the cosmopolitan foreigners and their appreciation of Korean food as affirmations of the global allure of “Brand Korea.”

In this essay, I expand theories on food nationalism beyond the examination of how food creates a sense of collectivism among subjects with shared ethnic backgrounds. I analyze the depictions of foreign nationals who consume “Korean food” on Korean television. I examine how Korean television programs use images of these foreign nationals

to market “Brand Korea” as cosmopolitan and aspirational. Instead of focusing on food’s unifying qualities among those who are already included as members of the nation, I examine how food is utilized to welcome certain foreign nationals into the boundaries of national culture and thereby to brand South Korea as cosmopolitan.

Current research on food nationalism tends to examine two major themes: the meaning of food for members of an ethnic diaspora who attempt to reconceptualize their “traditional” culinary practices in a new country, or the role of food in creating imagined communities and a sense of nationhood among individuals with shared ethnicity.²⁰ The premise of this scholarly work is that there is some sort of shared connection between people with the same ethnic backgrounds that makes some foods significant to them in ways that they would not be for others. Although some scholars, such as Donna Gabaccia, examine the cross-cultural mixing of food cultures across ethnic boundaries, most of these inquiries are undertaken in the context of the US, where the discursive embrace of multiculturalism is part of the national identity and “brand.”²¹

South Korea has historically espoused a mono-ethnic nationalism that placed value on ethnic “purity” and uniformity. However, in recent decades, the South Korean government has sought to demonstrate that it values diversity. It has done so in part by organizing international events to encourage foreign nationals to try Korean food in order to win international acceptance of Korean culture.²² How do we make sense of the seeming contradictions between South Korea’s long-held mono-ethnic nationalism and efforts by the South Korean government and media to market “Brand Korea” as cosmopolitan by inviting foreign residents to enter within the boundaries of “Korean-ness”?

Historical Trajectory of “Brand Korea” and “Korean-ness”

People may perceive their culture as superior and hence insist on maintaining its purity. Conversely, a culture’s sense of superiority may derive from its sense of purity. According to Gi-Wook Shin, the insistence among Koreans on cultural purity was reinforced during the Japanese

colonial period when a sense of unity was essential to sustaining a precarious sense of Korean nationhood.²³ Since then, “Korean-ness” has been rooted in the conflation of ethnicity with race and nationality. Discourses of “Korean-ness” nevertheless continued to evolve since that time.

The South Korean government has been assiduous in promoting particular notions of Korean national identity: the 1960s was marked by a national slogan of “self-reliant industrial economy” [자립경제], while the 1970s and 80s were marked by the national campaign to promote “self-reliant economic growth” [자립성장].²⁴ These slogans and campaigns reflected the government’s aspirations to achieve the status of a self-reliant country. During these periods, the government’s efforts to brand South Korea was primarily directed towards its citizens. These branding efforts attempted to shape the ways that South Korean citizens imagined their nation and to motivate them to strive collectively to achieve the ideal image of a “self-reliant” South Korea that was put forth by the government.

Changes away from such inward-facing nationalist campaigns slowly occurred around the late 1990s as South Korea was trying to recover from the Asian Financial Crisis. Beginning in this period, the South Korean government, rather than focusing on maintaining Korean cultural purity against external forces, instead worked to re-brand Korean culture as something that could be globally exportable. President Kim Dae-jung claimed for himself the title “culture president” and devoted government resources to developing South Korean cultural contents for export overseas.²⁵ As part of the effort to recuperate from the 1997-98 financial crisis, the government and businesses vigorously exported anything and everything marketable overseas. There was tremendous effort to export “Korean culture” products such as Korean television dramas and food that were regarded as appealing and accessible to non-Koreans.²⁶

Beginning in 2008, the national project to brand Korea began to focus as much attention on how the outside world viewed Korea as it did on how Koreans comprehended their own country.²⁷ President Lee Myung-bak promoted “Brand Korea” to increase South Korean soft power in an era of globalization.²⁸ Here, soft power refers to a nation’s power that is

garnered through its culture as opposed to militaristic “hard” power.²⁹ A positive national image facilitates an increase in international demands for products produced by the country as well as bringing about an increase in the number of tourists to the nation. Since a nation’s image has such a profound impact on its international politics and economy, it is advantageous for nations to promote a positive image of itself around the world. Hence, “Korean-ness” evolved into a concept that could be used to globally re-brand Korea as cosmopolitan.

Alongside shifts in the discourses around “Korean-ness,” people affiliated with it also change based on the nation’s needs. Previously, those who did not hold South Korean citizenship were not considered to be one of “us” within a shared concept of “Korean-ness.” However, gradually echoing government efforts to re-brand Korea as a globally competitive cosmopolitan nation, various social institutions came to expand the boundaries of “Korean-ness” so as to include cosmopolitan foreigners.³⁰ For instance, the Korean media began referring to Korean Americans as “overseas Koreans” despite their foreign nationality.³¹ By including diasporic Koreans in the concept of “Korean-ness,” the country hoped that these wealthy diasporic Koreans would feel a sense of ethnic solidarity and invest in the Korean economy. More recently, in the 21st century, multiracial Koreans, who, throughout Korean history, were harshly marginalized due to their race, are now occasionally being hailed by the South Korean media as potential assets who can promote cosmopolitan images of “Korean-ness,” and, by extension, that of “Brand Korea.”³²

In the following sections, I analyze the Korean television program entitled *Mom’s Touch* and how it selectively includes foreign nationals within the boundaries of “Korean-ness” to promote cosmopolitan and aspirational images of Brand Korea. Instead of promoting a sense of multi-cultural and harmonious global community, the incorporation of resident aliens and foreign nationals into “Korean-ness” is mobilized to bolster its aspirational qualities and global appeal for ends that are in essence nationalist. In *Mom’s Touch*, “Korean-ness” is depicted as an aspirational cultural trait towards which cosmopolitan individuals are shown to gravitate. The television program provides us with a useful

point of departure in questioning the consequences and ethics of the nationalist appropriation of cosmopolitan discourses.

Mother's Dish and the Lineage of "Korean-ness" in *Mom's Touch*

The television program *Mom's Touch* is a cooking show that features actress Sumi Kim as the Korean "mother" who will teach viewers how to cook "Korean food." Although the program claims that it will teach recipes for "Korean food," it does not explicitly define what it means by "Korean food." It does not claim to demarcate the boundaries between Korean food and others. Instead, it depicts Sumi teaching "Koreanized" recipes for foreign cuisines such as mapo tofu and pork cutlets alongside recipes for dishes that are more popularly known as being of Korean origin.

The key features of the show are the three chefs and occasional guests who become Sumi's pupils. These male chefs are masters, respectively, in Chinese, Italian, and Bulgarian cuisine, and all of them own successful restaurants in Korea. As Sumi cooks her dish, the three chefs imitate her recipe and compete to see how similar they can make their dishes to Sumi's version. The television program had a significant impact on South Korean food culture. There are popular recipe websites filled with photos and reviews from viewers from around the world who claim to have tried her recipes and enjoyed them.

Through Sumi, the program gives mothers and grandmothers the power to police the boundaries of Korean-ness through food. In the first episode of the show, airing on June 6, 2018, Dong-Min, a comedian who serves as Sumi's assistant, asks Sumi, "Do you have a Korean culinary license? How are you qualified to teach these chefs about Korean food?"³³ Sumi angrily retorts, "Did your mother and grandmother cook for you and feed you because they had some cooking license?" She goes on to explain, "I want to show the chefs, who are masters in foreign cuisine, the methods of cooking Korean people's cuisine that our mothers and grandmothers cook at home." Here, Sumi argues that the Korean "mothers and grandmothers" who cook for their families have the authority of defining and sustaining Korean-ness. Although this may just sound like

an individual's (Sumi's) personal opinion, it echoes popular discourses in Korea that assign women with the task of sustaining Korean-ness, particularly through domestic labor.³⁴

The entwinement of food and Korean-ness is very much gendered. There are many ways to pass down Korean-ness from one generation to the next. Among them, cooking is seen as a means through which Korean-ness is transmitted along with the passing down of family recipes from mothers to daughters.³⁵ Hence, women who do not submit to the domestic "duties" that sustain Korean-ness are rebuked and attacked through patriarchal discourses as selfish opportunists who are forsaking their responsibilities to the nation.³⁶ In *Mom's Touch*, whenever guests and chefs praise her recipes, Sumi credits her mother and mother-in-law with giving them to her. Sumi talks about how she helped her mother cook when she was very young, and how, after marriage, she learned new recipes from her mother-in-law that she cooked for her husband and children. She describes at length about the ordeal of learning and perfecting the recipes she received from older women in her family and how she will pass down the recipes to her daughter. Hence, Sumi and the television program reiterates traditionalist discourses that task women with continuing Korean-ness through their cooking.

Although the program primarily focuses on Sumi's relationship with her mother and daughter, it also emphasizes the critical role that mothers at large play in sustaining Korean-ness. For instance, during some of the episodes that were filmed at army bases, instead of making Sumi do the cooking, the program holds a special event entitled "Find Mom's Dish" and secretly brings mothers of the soldiers to cook for the soldiers. These soldiers guess which dish was cooked by their mother.³⁷ When the soldiers guess correctly, the program plays Celine Dion's *The Power of Love* in the background and zooms in on the soldiers and their mothers, overcome with emotions, hugging each other. Here, the mothers and the sons are portrayed as being connected through the mothers' cooking and the sons' nostalgia for mothers' home-cooked meals. The mini-event ends with the soldiers carrying their mothers off the stage while everyone thanks the soldiers for their services and encourages them to protect and serve their country with devotion. The mothers' cooking is not only

used to sustain familial ties between mothers and sons but also used to encourage the soldiers to protect and serve the nation and its inhabitants.

Not all mothers are granted access to become representatives of Korean-ness. For example, Southeast Asian and Eastern European women who arrive in Korea as marriage migrants experience intense scrutiny as mothers. Their positions in Korea are dependent on their capacities to procreate for their Korean husbands and produce children who will successfully embody Korean-ness.³⁸ However, their status as mothers constantly comes under scrutiny as society casts doubts on their abilities to raise future generations of Koreans who will properly embody Korean-ness.³⁹ Most often, the problematic behavior and academic failures of their multi-ethnic or multiracial children are blamed on their lack of Korean-ness.⁴⁰ Discourses surrounding Korean-ness are thus rooted in complex intersections of nationality, race, class, and ethnicity.

Instead of being utilized to promote Brand Korea, marriage migrants are treated as subjects who need to be carefully surveilled because they are supposedly inadequately cosmopolitan, and hence, detrimental to promoting cosmopolitan images of Brand Korea. In other words, the boundaries of Korean-ness are not equally open or flexible for all, whether they are foreign nationals, resident aliens, or even naturalized citizens. As I will analyze later in this essay, it appears to be flexible and inclusive only for certain cosmopolitan foreigners. Ironically, the discourse of cosmopolitanism, by being co-opted into nationalism, becomes the language through which to exclude foreign nationals who are not cosmopolitan enough to benefit the brand of the nation.

Unlike the marriage migrants whose motherhood and abilities to pass down “Korean-ness” are constantly scrutinized by others, the cosmopolitan foreigners on *Mom’s Touch* are selectively included within the realm of Korean-ness because of their cosmopolitanism. According to mediated discourses, these cosmopolitan foreigners could have chosen any other country due to their cosmopolitanism, but, instead, chose to affiliate themselves with South Korea. Their decisions to reside in Korea, regularly consume “Korean food,” and appear on *Mom’s Touch* to learn Korean recipes are seen as indicators of their appreciation of Korean-ness and their potential to promote Brand Korea enthusiastically.

If Korean-ness is represented as something that can only really be passed down from Korean mothers to daughters, such a perception severely limits the appeal and accessibility of Korean-ness to cosmopolitan foreigners, thereby undermining the cosmopolitan image of Brand Korea. Hence, within *Mom's Touch*, some foreign guests are incorporated as new members into the confines of Korean-ness. The television program partially disrupts the notion of ethnocentric Korean-ness. The prioritization of ethnic purity and ethnicity-based lineage is disrupted by the need to promote Brand Korea as cosmopolitan. In the next section, I analyze specific scenes and episodes from *Mom's Touch* to examine how the program uses food to selectively include cosmopolitan foreigners within the boundaries of Korean-ness to promote cosmopolitan images of Brand Korea.

Expanding the Boundaries of “Korean-ness” to “Foreigner Koreans”

Mihal Ashminov, a Bulgarian chef, is one of the regular guests on the program. He has lived and worked in Korea for nearly twenty years as of 2020. He is a celebrity chef who is fluent in Korean and appears on numerous television programs. The program constantly reminds the viewers of his position within Korean-ness by naming him “Foreigner Korean” [대한외국인] and highlighting his affection for Korean food. The term Foreigner Korean does not mean that he is recognized as Korean in terms of his legal citizenship status; being included within the cultural boundaries of Korean-ness so that he may promote Brand Korea and being given full recognition as a “Korean” is different. “Korean-ness” and “Korean” are intersecting categories in that one may become “Korean” through “Korean-ness” and vice versa, but the two categories are not always interconnected. The program’s subtitle nicknames Mihal “Bulgarian Korean” [대한불가리아인], which is a spin-off of the concept of “Foreigner Korean.” Here, the “Korean” in the “Bulgarian Korean” does not denote the citizenship status of Mihal, unlike how “American” in the term “Korean American” refers to the citizenship status of individuals. Instead, the “Korean” in “Foreigner Korean” and “Bulgarian Korean”

refers to the cultural Korean-ness of Mihal and other people of foreign citizenship and ethnicity who show appreciation for Korean culture, including food.

Occasionally, Mihal's Korean-ness is portrayed as more legitimate in relation to that of the ethnic Korean chefs. For instance, when the chefs are making kimchi under Sumi's guidance, Mihal gets Sumi's approval on his first attempt at making the dish. The other chefs are shown struggling at making Kimchi. The guests on the show praise Mihal by declaring that his success at making kimchi must be due to his love for "Korean food." His success at imitation is not used to boost his status as a chef, but instead, is used to provide proof that Korean-ness is accessible to cosmopolitan foreigners.

Apart from *Mom's Touch*, other Korean television programs also portray "Foreigner Koreans" in order to promote a cosmopolitan image of Brand Korea. Some of these Foreigner Koreans are hired by the Korean government and private firms to serve as Korean cultural ambassadors. For instance, Wolf Schroder, a white American man, became popular in Korea because of his Instagram posts where he praised Korean food and expressed his craving for it when he was away from Korea. Due to his popularity, he has appeared in Korean food-related commercials and television programs where he eats Korean food and expresses his enjoyment of it. These commercials and television programs utilize his image as a "Foreigner Korean" to brand Korea as cosmopolitan and aspirational.

Laurel Kendall claims that Korean-ness is formulated in relation to an influential "other."⁴¹ Such an "other" would include those like Mihal and other "Foreigner Koreans" because they are neither ethnically nor legally Korean. However, in recent Korean television programs, they are not presented as the other. Instead, "Foreigner Koreans" are included within the reconceptualized boundaries of Korean-ness because they can help reformulate the image of the nation.

Research on Korean media suggests that they depict foreign cosmopolitans as aspirational ideals for South Koreans to emulate.⁴² However, in *Mom's Touch*, the cosmopolitanism of these Foreigner Koreans is pressed into the service of championing Brand Korea. The

South Korean media seeks to emphasize the embrace of Korean-ness by these cosmopolitan subjects to bolster the image of South Korea as a country that is capable not only of competing with other affluent and developed countries, but also of winning this contest. The value of these cosmopolitan Foreigner Koreans for Brand Korea arises from their dual positionality: they have the elite cultural and economic status that makes them cosmopolitan, yet they *chose* to affiliate with Korean-ness. The combination of their status and their choices attest to the cosmopolitan appeal of Brand Korea and the cultural superiority of Korean-ness. Korean-ness has thus become an aspirational ideal for foreign others.

The selective inclusion of cosmopolitan foreigners who can promote “Brand Korea” raises the question of how Korean television programs depict foreigners who are unable to contribute to the promotion of Brand Korea. Even if Korean-ness has become more flexible because of the need to make Brand Korea more appealing to the global market, that does not mean that it grants membership to just anyone. Those who do not show their appreciation or preference for Korean-ness—especially in regards to Korean food—immediately have their position within Korean-ness revoked. For example, Eric Nam is a Korean American singer who was born and raised in the United States. During his appearance on *Mom’s Touch*, Sumi asks him whether he cooks at home.⁴³ Eric says that he cooks Western dishes because he is more familiar with them than Korean food. Upon hearing this, Dong-Min exclaims, “Oh, you are such a foreigner.” Eric Nam’s Korean-ness is scrutinized by others on the television program because of his seeming lack of enthusiasm for Korean cuisine. When he makes appearances on other food-related television programs, his lack of Korean-ness becomes a major topic of discussion. For example, during his appearance as a guest judge on another cooking competition show, Eric declares that he is unable to understand the nuanced flavors of acorn pudding [도토리묵], a popular side dish. He says, “It does not taste like anything to me.”⁴⁴ Other guest judges ask him how long he has lived in Korea. When Eric responds that it has been seven years, they tell him that he is still too “foreign” to understand the nuanced flavors of the Korean cuisine. Unlike Mihal, who praises Korean food in ways that promote aspirational and cosmopolitan images of Brand Korea,

Eric Nam failed to show an “adequate” amount of reverence for “Korean food” that could be used to support Brand Korea.

Granted, Eric Nam is of Korean heritage, which means his Korean-ness is a given as opposed to Mihal, who has to earn his position within the confines of Korean-ness through overt appraisal of Korean food. However, that does not mean that the Korean-ness of individuals with Korean heritage, such as Eric Nam, is something permanent and irrevocable. While foreign nationals such as Mihal have to earn their ways into “Korean-ness,” those like Eric Nam might lose their position within “Korean-ness” depending on their value to Brand Korea. For example, Daniel Henney, a biracial actor, garnered much popularity in Korea at first because he appeared to represent the ideal cosmopolitan figure. However, his inability to speak Korean after years of working in Korea and his seeming lack of interest in promoting his Korean-ness held back his career.⁴⁵ Korean Americans such as Eric Nam or Daniel Henney are portrayed as aspirational in Korean media, but they cannot sustain their places within Korean-ness solely through their aspirational qualities. If they cannot be mobilized to globally promote the cosmopolitan and aspirational images of Brand Korea, they are portrayed as perpetual outsiders.

Mom’s Touch ends each episode with all the guests seated around the table and eating the dishes they cooked together. Through such mise-en-scène, the program highlights the supposedly familial qualities of everyone—including foreign nationals—gathering around the table and sharing Korean food. *Mom’s Touch* reserves these cosmopolitan foreigners’ places at the Korean dinner table because they embody the dual positionality as successful cosmopolitans who, at the same time, choose to affirm and support Korean-ness. In the remaining sections of this essay, I analyze the ethics and consequences of using discourses of cosmopolitanism for nation-branding.

Ethics of Inclusion and Exclusion within “Korean-ness”

The themes that I examined concerning *Mom’s Touch* resonate with other food-related television programs in South Korea. For example, the

television program *Youn's Kitchen* [윤식당] (tvN, 2017-) depicts Korean celebrities operating restaurants in various countries around the world and serving Korean cuisine to the people living in those countries. The program highlights the popularity of the Korean food served in these restaurants. When foreign guests on the program compliment the food, the program repeatedly shows these scenes in multiple angles as if to engrave these compliments into the viewers' brains through repetition. Similarly, a television program entitled *Welcome, First Time to Korea?* [어서와 한국은 처음이지?] (MBC Every1, 2017-) pays for the flights and accommodations of foreign nationals from all over the world to visit Korea and experience Korean-ness that is contained not only in food but also in miscellaneous everyday objects and services. The program also exaggerates the compliments or the reactions of awe from these tourists through repetition or other means of editing and visual or auditory effects. In these television programs, the foreign nationals are recruited into Korean-ness, and their reactions serve as affirmations of the aspirational and cosmopolitan qualities of Brand Korea.

What are the consequences of such selective inclusion of foreign nationals in media for the purposes of promoting Brand Korea? Somewhat paradoxically, the foreign guests on *Mom's Touch* as well as other television programs I mentioned above, while being seen as assets due to their cosmopolitan backgrounds, are portrayed as solely being loyal to Korean-ness. Their diverse cultural backgrounds are only acknowledged to highlight that they *voluntarily chose* Korean-ness (whatever that may mean in different instances) despite having multiple options by virtue of their cosmopolitanism. Meanwhile, in a slightly different way, migrants with lower economic status, such as marriage migrants, are also utilized to bolster the view that Korean-ness is aspirational: their migration to Korea is described through discourses of escape from poverty and hardship.⁴⁶ However, their "escape" to Korea is perceived as less significant compared to the "choices" of their cosmopolitan counterparts to reside in Korea.

According to David Oh, "Superficial cosmopolitanism ... reflects the nation's goal of promoting instrumental global citizenship that does not create a multi-cultural challenge to national identification

and belonging.”⁴⁷ Television programs present cosmopolitanism and depict cosmopolitan individuals in ways that do not challenge Korean nationalism. My intention is not to critique the progress that Korea has made in recent years regarding its policy-related attempts to become a more inclusive society. Neither am I implying that pluralistic nations are more egalitarian than the current Korean model; pluralistic societies have their own limitations and hierarchies that prevent an equitable sense of belonging. However, I do question the ethics of conflating someone’s right to belong within Korean-ness with their worth and potential contribution to the transnational image of Korea.

Both the successful cosmopolitans and the migrant laborers are impacted by mediated discourses that conflate their utility in promoting Brand Korea and their rights to belong within the category of Korean-ness. However, educated, cosmopolitan men, such as those who appear on *Mom’s Touch*, are easily mobile: if they are not accepted as bearers of Korean-ness, they have the economic and social capital to move to other countries that might prove more accepting of them. The conflation of one’s contribution to Brand Korea with one’s rights to be included into Korean-ness has more troublesome repercussions for marriage migrants, migrant laborers, and others like them who are less transnationally mobile. Practical reasons may provide more legitimacy to the rights of migrants to reside within the boundaries of Korea and Korean-ness than ethical concerns. However, practical justifications do not eradicate xenophobia. Although xenophobia can target all foreign nationals, including highly successful cosmopolitan ones, the situation is especially dire for the working-class migrants.

If the place of migrants within South Korean society and the recognition of their Korean-ness is premised on their worth to Brand Korea, should they then be treated like defective products and deported back to their countries of origin if they fail to contribute adequately? Such problematic logic contributes to xenophobia and suspicion towards people who are in the direst need for inclusion, such as refugees fleeing from war and poverty. I pose such a question to argue that, even though practical reasons for the inclusion of foreign nationals into Korean-ness may provide them with chances to step within the boundaries of Korea

(literally through migration or figuratively through cultural affiliation), they do not grant these people unconditional acceptance in accordance with the ideal of cosmopolitanism. They have to prove their worth constantly. The co-optation of cosmopolitanism into nationalism is not a problem just with Korea; it is an issue that most nations—including the supposedly global and multi-cultural Western nations—face.

When nationalism adapts cosmopolitan discourses, ironically, cosmopolitanism becomes the language through which to reject immigrants who are judged to be inadequately cosmopolitan.⁴⁸ Here, cosmopolitanism is no longer about forming global communities where all cultures and people cohabit peacefully. It becomes a concept through which only certain cultures and individuals are accepted while others are disregarded because they fail to embody cosmopolitan values sufficiently.

Scholars have contended that cosmopolitanism has never been as egalitarian as it claimed. Craig Calhoun argues that cosmopolitanism is a culture of the elites who can afford to deracinate themselves.⁴⁹ Scholarly research has repeatedly pressed the question: who is cosmopolitan? This question reveals how race, gender, and cultural backgrounds of individuals influence whether they are identified as cosmopolitan. With few exceptions, most Foreigner Koreans who appear on *Mom's Touch* and other Korean television programs as cosmopolitans are white men. Notably missing are the representations of Chinese and Southeast Asian laborers as well as the marriage migrants from Southeast Asian countries who comprise the majority of foreign nationals in Korea. Although these individuals' lives may be as transnational as those who are normatively considered cosmopolitan, they are not recognized as cosmopolitan in Korean mediated discourses because of a combination of their ethnicity, race, and class. Cosmopolitanism has already been selective before it was incorporated into nation-branding strategies. Such selectiveness is exacerbated when cosmopolitanism is co-opted into the nationalistic desires to brand South Korea in a positive light.

Conclusion

Soft power is becoming increasingly integral to a nation's prospects in the areas of global trade, tourism, and international politics. The national image or brand sways whether tourists feel comfortable visiting the nation and whether there are high demands for the items that the country exports overseas. Hence, the South Korean government and media put effort and money into increasing the country's soft power. Brand Korea is a reflection of these efforts to promote cosmopolitan and aspirational images of Korea. In this essay, I examined how the popular television program *Mom's Touch* uses food as a means to promote cosmopolitan images of Brand Korea and to include certain cosmopolitan foreigners within the boundaries of Korean-ness based on their utility in promoting it.

Cosmopolitanism, which is often perceived as an antithesis of nationalism, becomes co-opted in the national agenda to promote a cosmopolitan image of the nation and its cultures. Through this essay, I raise questions about whether cosmopolitanism is feasible on a national scale. Could such large-scale cosmopolitanism successfully create borderless global communities? Or does the concept inevitably (and ironically) devolve into a discourse through which nations police their boundaries against foreign nationals who are not cosmopolitan enough to benefit the brand of the nation? Through further research on the use of cosmopolitanism in nation-branding, we will be able to expand our understanding of the discourses and praxis of cosmopolitanism on a global scale.

Notes

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¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

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¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁰ See Hasia R Diner, *Hungering for America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University

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