

Cultural Identity: Kimchi

My daughter-in-law was craving kimchi when she was expecting her first baby. I didn't realize it was so serious until her husband called me at night asking where they could get some kimchi immediately. Since then, kimchi has won our attention. It even steals our taste buds whenever we have Korean food. I would say that kimchi is Korean and vice versa.

As a traditional fermented Korean side dish, kimchi is more than just vegetables prepared with a variety of seasonings. It embodied the identity of a nation. Kimchi has become a symbolic resource for all Korean people.

It's a feature that makes Korean cuisine unique. In other words, it is *sui generis*, despite the fact that people outside Korea try to imitate it. It has never been the same because it constitutes a class alone. It is Korean only. No other cuisine can borrow it.

Besides solidifying the community together, kimchi also has abundant nutritional content that can help us get the healthy benefits. As it's fermented, kimchi is full of good bacteria. According to some nutritional therapists, when our stomach has a well-balanced input of good and bad bacteria, our body will shape a good round of healthy well-being. Along with that, there is the wise saying that “we cannot build a nation by keeping the people hungry and unhealthy.” So, I cannot imagine that the Korean people would have had the knowledge to build the foundation of a great nation if they did not have any kimchi so many years ago. Thus, making kimchi doesn't only mean to fulfill the need for a prepared vegetable during the winter, but also shows the endeavor to make the people strong physically, mentally and emotionally. When the people are healthy, they create a healthy nation. Of what is a country more proud, than having established a vigorous nation?

In addition to making the country stable, through kimchi the Korean people give meaning to their world and shape their identity. Although some cultural experts say that identity is simply defined by others, in this case, I would say that it's an inclusive process within the Korean people themselves. The fact that Korean cultural identity has been internalized by the Korean people is proven by the habit of making kimchi and serving it at every meal. They say that no meal is complete without a dish of kimchi!

Different from electronic devices and gadgets, which we can exchange for new ones when newer and trendier gadgets are introduced, the value of kimchi will remain unchanged. The fact that a certain trademark of well-known Korean gadgets, such as Samsung or LG, has been identified as Korean technological icons and that the influence of these gadgets are tremendous, especially among young people, the trademark cannot beat the continual existence of kimchi. Samsung and LG may be exchanged for new ones when a new series hits the market, but not kimchi.

So the question whether the Korean people can serve their meals without kimchi will be answered with a big no, because kimchi is inherent to all Koreans. This cultural identity has created continuity, and is a trait of a monocultural country. It has the capacity of uniting people from generation to generation and it will continue through its social and historical framework.

It's true that identity is fluid and changing from time to time. Yet with its authenticity, kimchi will prevent the Korean people from losing their identity.

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