

Rice and Koreans: Three Identities and Meanings

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(Abstract) 영어 단어 250 자 내외의 초록을 작성해 주시기 바랍니다.

Introduction

This study considers the distinctive Korean cultural concepts regarding rice. In the minds of Koreans, rice does not exist as a single object. There are at least three different identities within the single physical **conceptual category** of rice, such as *mo* and *byeo* (young plants),¹ *ssal* (hulled rice), and *bap* (cooked rice). Koreans are often confused by the English term “rice” since, by the use of such a word, rice is simplified into a single object through the Western classification. This linguistic difference between English and Korean is also directly related to the fact that each language speaker understands the object(s) in a different way. Unlike in English, the articulations of rice in Korean have been meticulously developed to describe rice in terms of growing, producing, and cooking, **a differentiation that grew naturally out of the fact that rice cultivation has long been the basis of the Korean livelihood.**

Nonetheless, the studies on rice in Korean scholarship have uncritically drawn upon the analytical framework developed by English speaking scholars who consider rice to be a singular entity. There are countless studies about rice but few have clearly reflected ordinary Koreans’ concepts of rice. Previous studies on rice have focused on the importance of rice to the politics, economy and culture at both national and local levels. Those who study agriculture, folklore, and social sciences have respectively developed their own research approaches to the subject of rice. For instance, in the

1 There are two different stages of young rice plants, *mo* and *byeo*. *Mo* is called a very young stage of the plant and it is also distinguished from *byeo*, the later stage of the rice plant.

study of agriculture, the focus is on the systems of rice production, such as land, labor, and other technical development.² In the social sciences, rice as a major staple food is studied as a part of the political economy. Class structures, tenant disputes, and agricultural policies have been exhaustively investigated by researchers engaged in an analysis of the political economy of rice (Jo D. 1983; Choe J. 1975; Kim B. 2004; Bak et al. 1984; Sin 1979; Yi H. 1991, 1998; Yi U. 1986; Yi Y. 1998).³ In the study of folklore, the focus has been rice's cultural aspects (Korean Folklore Society 1994). Rice in folklore is seen as either a symbol of wealth or as the heart of the Korean spirit (Jang 1975, 1989; In 1989; Yi H. 1991). In this paper, by delineating various forms attributed to rice, I will explore a unique connotation of each.

Rice: Why not National Food?

Although nowadays farmers consist of only approximately seven percent of the Korean population and the agricultural economy constitutes 4.3% of the nation's GDP,⁴ rice remains a special resource for Koreans. Since the beginning of industrialization in the 1960s, Korea has quickly lost its farming population.⁵ Because of the quick transformation of the nation's economy, rice farming has also decreased in significance in the nation's industry. However, Koreans still have special cultural attitudes and historical memories of rice that have contributed to its continued importance in Korea.

First, Koreans are proud of the history of rice planting in their country. Rice planting in Korea can be traced back to one thousand years B.C. Archeological evidence shows that people living on the Korean peninsula started to plant rice from the latter period of the Neolithic Age or the early Bronze Age in about 2,000 B.C. (National Museum of Korea 2000, 11). Having the benefit of such a long history has made it possible for Koreans to not only develop rice farming techniques, but also to embed the culture of rice farming into the daily life of Koreans (Choe H. 1997; Yi C. 1991). Because of its historical and cultural importance, Korean farmers have identified

2 In relations to the topics of rice and rice agriculture, many books, thesis, and reports have been published by Korean Rural Economic Institute.

3 Several references among many are selected here.

4 Korea National Statistical Office, March 2005. <http://kosis.nso.go.kr>.

5 Korean farm population was 14,400,000 in 1970 and has decreased into 3,400,000 in 2004. In about a thirty year period, farm populations have reduced to one fourth sizes. The statistics are from Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, March 2005.

themselves as superior agriculturalists among farmers from other rice farming countries. Farmers have been proud of the quality of Korean rice. Old retired farmers living in the Gimje plains, one of the largest rice farming areas in Korea, who I met during my fieldwork, told me that rice from Gimje used be the “best.” According to my informants, even the Japanese royal family preferred *damageum*, which was a special variety of rice produced in Korea, to the rice produced in Japan during the colonial era. The Gimje farmers are not unique in their attitude that the quality of their own variety is second to none; their counterparts in other rice farming areas have the same feeling about their own varieties.

In terms of consumption, Koreans are the most dependent on rice. Regardless of locality or social class, most Koreans prefer to eat rice during every meal. Even though the Westernized life styles of city dwellers have provided other options for breakfast, according to a recent survey, seventy-five to eighty percent of Koreans still eat rice for breakfast everyday (An M. 1992). Yet, Japanese and Chinese have shown a change of their eating habits in that they prefer bread or porridge to rice at breakfast for the sake of convenience. Koreans have not conceded their tradition and preferences in this way.

Given that rice has long been the major staple food and remains important to the everyday life of Koreans, it could be thought of as strange that rice is not identified as the most representative Korean food. In the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the Korean government chose *kimchi* (*gimchi*) and *bulgogi* (marinated beef) as the representative national food. Since then, the two dishes have been the most popular Korean food for foreigners. Some wonder why *kimchi* was chosen over rice as a symbol of Korean culture. Han Kyung-koo, a cultural anthropologist, speculates that rice may not be thought of as a distinctive food (Han 1994, 53). Many other countries also eat rice as their major staple food. Even the Japanese identify themselves with rice according to relevant studies (Ohunki-Tierney 1993). However, according to Han, *kimchi* is thought to be very unique and distinctive so that it can be more easily identified with Koreans. His argument is quite compelling, drawing upon Lévi-Strauss’s explanatory framework suggesting that food is selected for consumption not because it is “good to eat” but because it is “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

It is correct to say that *kimchi* is “good to think” because, historically, no countries other than Korea have eaten *kimchi*, not even her close neighbors, China and Japan. While *kimchi* is distinctive to Korea and Koreans, rice is not. According to this line of argument, rice is too well-known and too plain to stand for Korean identity. However, it is still insufficient an explanation as to why rice cannot be a representative

food for Koreans.

I would argue that rice is really difficult to think as the sole symbol of Korea or even one of the symbols of Korea not because rice is ordinary and indistinctive, but because for Koreans, rice has a variety of forms and each form has a distinctive implication in the Korean culture. In the notions of Koreans, rice does not exist as a single object in the way that it is simplified in the Western way of classification. In comparison to the Western conception of rice as a single entity, in Korean thought, there are three to four different identities within the single physical concept of rice and each identity delineates a different function and meaning for the general concept of rice. Koreans are confused by the idea of rice as a single [categoryconcept](#). Koreans have developed their own epistemological view of rice in the course of its long history as a part of its agricultural livelihood. It is thus necessary to understand the Koreans' own cultural concepts on rice in detail.

Byeo, Ssal, and Bap

As briefly noted above, the English term, rice, has three different terms and meanings in Korean; *byeo* means young plant; *ssal* means hulled grain; and *bap* means cooked rice.⁶ Farmers begin to prepare for rice farming in the early spring. They nurture sprouts from the seeds and plant them in the seedbed during April and early May. The sprouts are called *mo* and the seedbed is *mopan*. After waiting for about a month while *mo* grows in the seedbed, farmers transplant the baby *mo* to the rice fields in May and early June. Traditionally, transplanting was the most difficult farm job. It required intensive labor over a short period of time. Group work or cooperation among neighbors was indispensable, so before the mechanization of Korean agriculture industry, farmers established various forms of labor cooperatives such as communal work and labor exchange institutions in order to cope with the large amount of work necessary for transplanting (Ju 1995; Kim J. 1992; Bak S. 1991).

After transplanting, *mo* grows quickly in fields filled with water, and then grows into *byeo* under the summer heat. Once the plant grows large enough to cover the field, farmers call it *byeo*. In the early fall, *byeo* starts to ripen. In July *byeo* produces an ear of rice. At the end of the summer, *byeo*'s head bows as the ears of rice get heavier. An ear

6 Here I consider *mo* and *byeo* as the same analytical category even if farmers differentiate them in cultivation.

of rice is called *isak* and plants whose ears get heavier are called *isak paenda*. The ripeness of ears of rice alerts the farmers as to when the harvest time will be. Farmers are ready to harvest in the early fall.

Byeo seen as Heaven's Offering

It takes six to seven months for the sprouting *mo* to transform into the harvest *byeo*, depending upon the natural environment. *Mo* and *byeo* are different stages of the rice plant. They are natural resources that the farmers believe belong to nature, Heaven or an agricultural god, regardless of who actually owns the plants. According to farmers' understanding of cosmology, the farmers are responsible for the rice plant and must take care of them but the eventual success of a farming season and a good harvest is always in the hands of supernatural forces. The farmers must ask for help from these gods every step of the way. Every year, from the first day of New Year, farmers dedicate various religious rituals to the god(s) through elaborate food sacrifices.

Because of the farmers' beliefs that *mo* and *byeo* are **natural resources bestowed unto them by** the god(s), the farmers care for *mo* and *byeo* collectively. They share labor, tools, farming animals, and information. This system of cooperation for planting and growing *mo* and *byeo* is the traditional norm. The farmers who grow *mo* and *byeo* consider themselves to be legitimate cultivators acknowledged by Heaven.⁷ They are expected to cooperate with each other, be humble so as to hear the voice of nature, follow the rules of the agricultural god and wait until Heaven's orders. During the *mo* and *byeo* planting season, farming villages are filled with the spirit of cooperation, modest sense of living, and spirituality. In fact, at each stage of the rice season, farmers used to regularly engage in worship of Heaven and gods who were in charge of rain, land, agriculture, as well as to all the other gods related to farming. These religious rituals are accompanied by village festivals (Yi S. 1993).

In order to grow *mo* and *byeo*, farmers form various work units. The smallest work unit is a family and a larger unit is made up of neighbors. The largest team is the village communal work team that is set up for the transplanting season regularly each year and for the construction or repairs of reservoirs and water routes on special occasions. The village work team helps the poor families that do not have enough labor. The elderly, widows, and sick people also benefit from the village's cooperative work team. The following is a memoir of an old farmer in a rice farming village in Gimje,

⁷ Farmers are the foundation of the world, *Nongja cheonha ji daebon*

Jeollabuk-do province:

Dure was a kind of farming ritual in which we did communal work on the rice field together, playing drums and other musical instruments. After transplanting we usually practiced *dure* three times in a row during a busy summer season; *dure* for the first weeding, *chobeol maegi*, *jaebeol maegi* for the second, and for the third weeding, *sebeol maegi*. In our village, the 15th day of July by the lunar calendar, *baekjung*, is the last day of communal weeding and gardening. On the last day of a series of *dure*, villagers gathered to drink wine, play musical instruments, and dance. The *baekjung* festival called *sulmaegi*⁸ was the most fun time for us. ”

Throughout the farming season farmers usually carry out a series of communal work in order to best grow *mo* and *byeo*. They carry out weeding and trimming in the rice fields regularly. It is a painstaking job that is always followed by entertainment. Village women prepare food and wine for the *dure* workers. *Dure* is the multifunctional institution for farmers to enhance their community spirit through work, to help the poor and weak, and to enjoy themselves by playing musical instruments, singing, and dancing together (Jo 1987, 156).

Ssal as Commodity

In the fall, farmers are busy harvesting the *byeo* that are fully matured with heavy ears. When *byeo* turns into the color of gold and rice fields are covered with this fully grown *byeo*, Koreans call it a golden rice field. The term has a double meaning. The golden color implies a good harvest and farmers’ happiness that results. Gold also implies money and wealth. In the agricultural economy, rice was used as a monetary exchange unit. Once *byeo* turns gold, its character changes along with its color and shape. Unlike immature *byeo*, the golden *byeo* is ready to become a commodity. Matured *byeo* is thrashed and yields *ssal*, the husked rice. After *ssal* comes out of *byeo*, it no longer belongs to the realm of nature and Heaven but belongs to the owners of the rice field. It means that *ssal* becomes a commodity and then gets enmeshed in the Korean political economy.

As indicated above, English speakers do not differentiate between *ssal* from

8 *Sulmaegi* means “drinking festival.”

byeo, which are two very different objects for Koreans. Koreans are aware of the differences in the rice plant in each growing period. The rice plant has a different identity, as well as a different name, for each period of its development. There are three distinctive stages of growth: *mo*, *byeo*, and *ssal*. I analyzed the stages of *mo* and *byeo* together because the two stages have common cultural meanings. However, *ssal*, unlike *byeo* and *mo*, raises issues of rent payment, tenancy contracts, ownership of land, state taxes, market prices etc. Landowners always tried to get more *ssal* out of the land and the government found ways to collect more taxes on the *ssal*. Historically, *ssal* was an object that was firmly controlled by the wealthy and powerful in Korea (An B. 1995, Hahm 1992).

As long as *ssal* remained a valuable economic item, people competed with one another for limited ownership rights. The ruthless competition over this valuable resource created clashes between the haves and the have-nots. During the Joseon dynasty, class conflicts between the *yangban* (noblemen) landlords and the peasant cultivators were significant (Ko 1998; Bak M. 1997). The angry peasants who were often stripped of their legitimate share of yields fought against exploitation by the *yangban* landlords. Many of the poor peasants at the time did not possess enough land for subsistence so they were forced to rent agricultural land from rich landlords and paid annual rent to the landlords. From the Joseon period to the colonial period, rent for agricultural land in Korea was 50% to 60% of the total yield. The tenants paid rent with rice, usually in the husked form of *ssal*. Agents of the landlords collected rent on the spot at the harvest (Hahm 1992).

An old retired farmer from Seosan, Chungcheongnam-do, told a story of how he and other tenants survived in the midst of economic hardship when Korean agricultural communities were very poor.⁹ Until the 1960s, many rich people in Korea held agricultural land as the major source of income. The farmer in Seosan was a tenant of a major landlord who resided in his village. In general, village-resident landlords, who were called *jaechon jiju*, were more generous with their tenants in collecting rent and with respect to other matters than the other type of landlords, called *bujae jiju*, who did not live in the villages. These nonresident landlords did not have any relationships with their tenants on a daily basis and were not aware of how difficult it was for the tenant cultivators to grow rice in the unfriendly natural environment.

There were many difficult situations faced by tenants in order to produce a

9 For more details, see my paper (Hahm 2000) addressing the farmers' stories of the socioeconomic changes in the Seosan area during the 20th century.

good harvest. No matter how difficult their situations were, tenants were supposed to pay rent on 50% of the annual yields in addition to paying management fees, such as extra expenditures for fertilizers or a water tax, and even had to use their own farm tools. In a year when there was drought, flood or any other unexpected disaster, the tenants' hardship was worse. Resident landlords, *jaechon jiju*, would be generous with their tenants, while nonresident landlords tended to be unforgiving with their tenants. It is not difficult to see why most tenancy disputes broke out on farms owned by non-resident landlords (Hahm 1999, 2-4).

When the old, retired Seosan farmer was still working, he cultivated ten *majigi* (about 0.7ha) rice fields under a lifetime contract with his resident landlord. Their tenancy contract was never put down in writing but the parties had a customary relationship that worked out well for each party. He knew that the condition of his tenancy was rather relaxed compared with those tenancies with nonresident landlords in Korea at the time. Other than the rented land, he also owned a dry field of two *majigi*, but his family of ten was comprised of six children, two elderly parents, his wife and himself, who all lived in dire hardship. He recollected his memories on the day of harvest.

Before the harvest, we the tenants had a meeting in one of the tenant's house to organize a work team and decide the order of harvesting. On the day of the harvest, the work team collectively cut matured *byeo* from the field, moved them to the tenant's front yard and started to thrash in front of the agent of the landlord. When we thrashed the *byeo*, we tried to husk them loosely and leave more grains in the *byeo*.¹⁰

Then the tenant would re-thrash the leftover grains from the *byeo* after the agent left. The grain retained by doing this was small but not insignificant for the tenants. If a tenant took some of *ssal* from the landlord's portion, he was considered to be a thief. However, rice cultivators did not think it wrong or immoral to husk *byeo* loosely in front of the agent. To the tenant farmers, rice in the form of *byeo* was not considered to be a commodity yet. Therefore, the tenants did not feel that they were doing anything wrong when they took leftover grain from *byeo*. The unhusked *byeo* was something in transition from nature to culture. They had been cut from the ground but were still awaiting transformation from an object controlled by the gods to an object owned by the landlord.

10 The interview was held in the village of Gangdang, Seosan in February 28, 1996 (from my field note).

Once *byeo* was cut and thrashed, husked or unhusked rice becomes a commodity and is a unit of exchange, rent, and tax. During the period of cultivation, tenants were in charge of *mo* and *byeo*, but after the harvest, they hardly received enough *ssal* to sustain themselves because the landlords took most of the harvested *ssal*. In Korea, the class chasm between landlords and tenants was not new in the new wave of specific commercial agriculture or the capitalist economy in general. The antagonism between the classes always existed throughout the history of rice cultivation in Korea, contrary to some scholars' argument that capitalism and commercialism introduced class conflicts and profit chasing into a good, traditional farming society whose innocent members were united in community spirit and morality (An B. 1995, Choe J. 1975, Bak H. et al. 1985, Scott 1976). I do not believe that a moral economy disappeared or collapsed in the midst of commercial cropping and capitalist agriculture. Rice, in its *mo* and *byeo* stages, instigated a *moral* economy based on a community spirit and awareness of the supernatural. On the other hand, rice, in its *ssal* stage, is a commodity that establishes a political economy in which people compete. This is the reason why even in the traditional period, *ssal* was a source of class conflict between those who had it and those who did not.

Bap as Meal of Family

In Korean, *sikgu* means family. Its literal translation is “eating mouths.” The unique expression of family establishes that a Korean family is expected to eat together. Another way to think about family is a group of people who eat rice from the same rice cooker. The rice in this case means *bap*, cooked rice. *Bap* is cooked with *ssal*, the raw rice. **English plainly distinguishes between cooked rice and its raw, uncooked, rice form by the degree of to which food processing it has been cooked or processed.** In Korean, however, there are differences in social functions and symbolic meanings between the cooked rice, *bap* and the raw rice, *ssal*.¹¹ Koreans do not see *bap* as a mere cooked product out of the raw *ssal*. *Bap* has a special identity of its own.¹²

While *ssal* is a commodity connected to the political economy of the country,

11 Here I do not use the same explanatory framework of Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangular diagram for the cook and the raw.

12 *Bap* means cooked rice and yet, other grains such as barley and beans can be used for mixed rice, *japgok bap*.

bap is the meal that is directly linked to the realm of family and ancestors. Families and ancestors are fed with various types of *bap*. Korean farmers used to dedicate the cooked rice from the very first yield or *haep ssal ba* to their ancestors, who the farmers believed brought good fortune. Even poor families that did not have enough *ssal* to eat prepared *ssal bap* (rice only) to dedicate to their ancestors. Rice serves as a metaphor of purity and sacredness. The *bap* cooked with mere rice is called *huin ssal bap* or white cooked rice. To Koreans the whiteness of *bap* symbolizes superiority; whiter *bap* is more superior. A family that needed to eat mixed grain *bap*, which is not pure white, would be ashamed because they could not afford to have enough rice.¹³

The color of mixed grain *bap* was not white, so it was considered unclean. People never used mixed grain *bap* for the sacrifice to ancestors. Koreans traditionally have a hierarchical understanding of *bap* (cooked rice) from *ssal* down to *bap* without *ssal*. Between the two extremes, the level of rice can be more or less distinguished. The hierarchical order of *bap* is congruent to that of status and authority in the family.¹⁴ Age and sex are two elements measuring authority. The authority privileges the old over the young and the male over the female. It is both the structural principle of the family and an ethical code as well, a way of life described by the teachings of Confucius. Older family members and male family members would be served *bap* with more *ssal* than other grains. There are, however, some exceptions. When a female family member gets old enough to have a daughter-in-law, the older female becomes a more respected figure and is entitled to receive a bowl filled with *bap* with only *ssal* or *bap* with more *ssal* than other grains, if the family can afford it.

The ancestors, who are the highest in the hierarchical order of the family, are served *bap* with pure *ssal*, which is the whitest and the most superior form of *bap*. Grandparents are the second highest figures in the family and thus entitled to have *bap* with more *ssal*. After the grandparents are the parents and between the parents, the father would have more rice than the mother. But in most cases, when a Korean family does not have enough *ssal* for everyone at a meal, the mother does not take her share of the *ssal bap* but reserves it for other members of the family. When the mother is in charge of distributing *bap*, she always takes the worst part of *bap*. The grandmother

¹³ Recently Koreans have begun to prefer mixed-grain *bap* to pure *ssal bap* because the former is has been found to be healthier food than the latter. Nevertheless, Koreans do not put mixed grain *bap* on any ritual tables. This means that mixed-grain *bap* is still considered to be 'not-pure' and inappropriate for the ritual use.

¹⁴ Mary Douglas studied the close relationship between food and culture (Douglas 1966, 1984).

would also quietly pass over her ~~good~~ portion of good *bap* to her son or the grandchildren.

We can see through this analysis that the hierarchical order by age and sex is not the singular and determining principle of family structure. Emotional aspects also encourage the development of other sides of morality. Devotion, affection, and selflessness are expected from those who have more status and authority to those who have less within the patriarchal family structure. This kind of moral code based on advanced human emotions ~~dovetails~~ with the strict norms of Confucian teachings. For instance, the grandparents' bowl of *bap* comprised of only *ssal*, which symbolizes authority and superiority, is discreetly given up to their sons and grandchildren. Even in-laws who have authority and power over a daughter-in-law would express their affection toward her by saving their share of better *bap* with her.

Through the distribution of *bap*, a normative moral code teaches Koreans to give more rice to the older and male members and thus, patriarchy **becomes an outward and obvious display of** ~~patriarchy—male superiority superficially—expressed through the everyday meal table~~. However, when families start to eat *bap*, the patriarchy and hierarchical order can also be turned upside down. We often neglect to think about how family relationships really work because we do not pay attention to the other side of morality, which, in this case, delivers affection and caring through *bap* within the family.

Table 1. Three Identities and Meanings of Rice

Rice			
	<i>Byeo</i>	<i>Ssal</i>	<i>Bap</i>
Entities	Nature	culture	culture
Realms	natural resource	commodity	subsistence
Characters	heaven, land, & agricultural gods	landlords, state	patriarchs / ancestors
Control power	community spirit	wealth, power, & exploitation	authority, devotion, & familial love
Metaphors	moral economy	political economy	social structure
Products			

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I presented the way Koreans have distinctively conceptualized rice

throughout its history of agriculture. The three different identities of rice are *byeo*, *ssal*, and *bap* and each has its own **cultural** realm, function, and meaning (see Table 1). *Byeo* is a young plant that is considered to exist in the world of nature controlled by Heaven and the gods. Like human children, *byeo* must be taken care of by cultivators in a collective effort; it encourages a spirit of cooperation and communal way of living. On the other hand, immediately after harvest, *ssal*, the grain from ears of *byeo*, becomes a commodity. Over *ssal*, farmers no longer think of cooperation but think of rent payments, taxes, and market prices. *Ssal* has generated tension and conflict between the wealthy landlords and poor tenant cultivators throughout the history of Korean rice farming.

Another form of rice is *bap*. *Bap* exists within the realm of the family. The quality of *bap* is measured by the amount of *ssal* in the *bap*, which corresponds with the structure of patriarchal family. The ancestors receive the best quality *bap*, which is the whitest, while the young and women eat a lower quality of *bap* mixed with other grains. The color of mixed grain *bap* is not white and is also seen as being unclean. However, this normative structure can be turned upside down by other aspects of the moral code in the Korean family. Devotion, affection, and selflessness expressed through the delivery of good quality of *bap* from those of higher status to those of lower status in the patriarchal family. This kind of moral code based on advanced human emotions fits within the strict norms of Confucian teachings in the relations of family.

Even though Korea has lost a significant part of its farming population and finds its agricultural economy rapidly shrinking, the foundation of the morality of the Koreans, their worldviews, and values are embedded in the culture of rice farming. However, modern-day Koreans continue to struggle with the threats to its culture of rice farming imposed by the aggressive industrialization of its nation and the world, including the growing difficulty of holding onto the traditional identities and meanings contained within various forms of rice.

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