

# Well-Being Discourse and Chinese Food in Korean Society

Young-Kyun YANG

## Abstract

In 21st-century Korean society, well-being has become a prominent topic in popular discourse. Even though well-being is a comprehensive concept that includes one's physical, mental, and financial state, in popular discourse "well-being food" receives the most attention. Accordingly, the pattern of food consumption began to shift in response to the new discourse. Chinese food, long popular in Korea, is also experiencing various adjustments. This paper intends to analyze people's perceptions and practices of well-being, as well as explore the image and consumption pattern of Chinese food in connection with well-being discourse. In Korea, Chinese food tends to be regarded as "unhealthy" and Chinese restaurants have a negative reputation for "uncleanliness." Thus, those who prioritize well-being are unlikely to eat Chinese food. However, as people eat Chinese food for diverse reasons, if some take well-being into consideration after deciding to eat Chinese food, they choose restaurants that exhibit efforts to follow the well-being trend. Some Koreans believe that in terms of true well-being, it is better to eat Chinese food, even if it is unhealthy, than to stress about not eating it.

**Keywords:** Chinese food, Chinese restaurants, well-being discourse, practices of well-being, food consumption pattern

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## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, a craze for “well-being” has spread throughout Korean society. We can find this phenomenon in various spheres of society. Such a keen interest in healthy living by the public is not a special characteristic unique to Korean society. Many societies, especially those with developed economies, exhibit high public interest in well-being. However, in the Korean case, public interest in well-being has grown very swiftly due to the Korean ability for collective effort, most notable in Korea’s rapid economic development and political democratization. The speed with which the concept has penetrated society is also closely related to the tendency of Korean people to be easily swept along by fads. Nevertheless, while the well-being phenomenon may have looked like a passing fad in the beginning, the fever has not abated. Indeed, the fever appears to be spreading to more people and more spheres of society.

The term “well-being” is used in a wide range of contexts with various meanings. The array of bestsellers with the keyword “well-being” shows how diverse its usages are. Nonetheless, most such books focus on health, broadly divided into two categories: dietary life (food, diet, nutrition, etc.); and physical fitness and healing (exercise, alternative medicine, massage, yoga, etc.). Another common book topic is leisure activities including travel, recreation, and hobbies. Also under the well-being label are books on subjective feelings or attitudes which include positivity, happiness, and humor, as well as books that relate well-being with real estate, marketing, business, jobs, prayer, and so on. Such a wide range of use clearly reflects the fact that Korean people are highly interested in well-being, and publishers and authors intend to take advantage of people’s interest for marketing purposes. The diversity of book topics can also be attributed to the fact that the concept of well-being has not been codified. I will delve into this point later.

In this paper, I focus on how food, especially Chinese food, has been seen within well-being discourse. In popular discourse, food is an important part of well-being. People have shown a great interest

in well-being or healthy food, which encompasses organic food, slow food, and Korean traditional food. As a result, people's perceptions and consumption of food began to change, including their perceptions of Chinese food, which has long been very popular in Korean society. This paper intends to collect and analyze data on people's perceptions of Chinese food, as well as consumption patterns of Chinese food in connection with well-being discourse. In particular, these questions seek to determine people's perceptions of well-being, their opinions of Chinese food when considering well-being, and occasions when they do (or do not) consume Chinese food. The other important topic this paper addresses is the responses of Chinese restaurants to these changing circumstances. Since Chinese food tends to be regarded as "unhealthy" and Chinese restaurants have a bad reputation for "uncleanliness" and "oldness," the inquiry into the restaurateurs' strategies for adapting to these changes has been very interesting. The responses include renovations, modifications in some ingredients and cooking methods, and the development of new dishes with healthy ingredients.

## Previous Studies on Chinese Food and Well-Being

Anthropologists have long been engaged in the study of food from a multiplicity of perspectives, as it is indispensable to human life. Those studies can be divided into two categories: research on human biology and food nutrition, and research on the sociocultural aspects of food and diet.<sup>1</sup> Anthropological works about Chinese food and cuisine belong to the latter category. Earlier works such as Chang (1977) and Anderson (1988) focus on the history of Chinese cuisine and foodways in Hong Kong. Later works address the impact of changes inside and outside Chinese society.

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1. Previous research on the sociocultural aspects of food and diet is very extensive. Well-known and influential studies include Lévi-Strauss (1970), Douglas (1971), Mintz (1985), Goody (1986), and Appadurai (1988).

The most remarkable feature of Chinese food since the eighteenth century is the global diffusion of Chinese food culture through the changes wrought by Western capitalism and colonialism. When hundreds of thousands of Chinese left southeast China, primarily Fujian and Guangdong, and arrived in Southeast Asia, Oceania, and North and South America, they brought with them not only Chinese ways of cooking but also new ingredients. In recent decades, Chinese restaurants have sprung up in countries that previously did not have substantial Chinese populations (Wu and Cheung 2002). The successful localization of Chinese food has brought about the global diffusion of Chinese food.

Recent works (e.g. Cheng 2002; Cheung 2001, 2002; Su 2001; Wu 2001, 2002b; Zhuang 2002) more or less examine changing foodways in China that are influenced by internal, regional, and global forces. Other research investigates the process of localization of Chinese food in other societies. Two subcategories appear in this research area: The localization of Chinese food by Chinese people who are ethnic minorities in larger non-Chinese societies, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia (e.g. Chua and Rajah 2001; C. Tan 2001, 2007; M. Tan 2002; Fernandez 2002); the other is the incorporation of Chinese food into foodways by non-Chinese, such as Chinese food in Korea, Japan, Hawaii, and Australia (e.g. Cheung 2002; K. Kim 2001; Tam 2002; Tamotsu 2001; Wu 2002a).

The list of anthropological studies of Chinese food in Korean society is relatively short. Park (1994) traces the shifting meanings of Chinese food in Korean society through the changes in Chinese restaurants owned by Chinese Koreans (*hwagyo*). Kim Kwang Ok (1998) examines the meanings of historical experiences of Koreans projected on Chinese food; and Ju (2000) tries to understand Chinese people and society through Chinese food in Korean society. These studies mainly address the meanings that are attached to Chinese food localized in Korean society. Meanwhile, Yang (2005) examines the changing position of Chinese restaurants as a favorite place to eat out, and the diversification of Chinese restaurants in response to the globalization of Korean society. Since the early 2000s, well-being has

become a key word in the dietary life of Korean society and no restaurants can avoid the effects of this trend. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore people's perceptions of the well-being trend and its relationship with the consumption and production of Chinese food.

Before reviewing research on well-being, let me start with an examination of the concept of well-being. The origin of well-being as an idea is closely related with the concept of health as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) established in 1948. According to the Constitution of WHO, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity." The concept of well-being includes mental health as well as physical health, and later became an even more comprehensive concept which encompasses true happiness of life. One standard dictionary definition of the term is "the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous." Well-being refers to any of these attributes, but the three are interconnected, and thus it includes the positive state of one's body, finances, and mind (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009, 2-3).

Though well-being is not as common a term as happiness, its usage has increased since the 1980s. Studies on well-being show a similar pattern of growth, with usage in the social sciences also increasing.<sup>2</sup> The academic fields which have produced more research in relative terms are economics, public health, and psychology. Economists realized that criteria such as income traditionally used to measure standards of living cannot fully tell us about the quality of life, and thus turned their attention to well-being. Medical professionals also came to realize that in order to talk about physical health, merely keeping people alive is insufficient, and rather, individuals' overall well-being must be considered. Psychologists have also recently

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2. Studies on well-being began to be published in 2003 in Korea. When I searched for studies on well-being in October 2009 through the Research Information Service System provided by the Korea Education and Research Information Service, I found 611 domestic journal articles, 652 doctorate and master theses, and 1,544 books, all of which were published since 2003.

moved from research solely on mental illness to research on mental health. In other words, their interests are shifting from “ill-being” to well-being (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009).

In the field of anthropology, well-being has not been a trendy topic. We can hardly find the term in popular anthropology textbooks and encyclopedias. This, however, does not mean that anthropologists have no interest in the concept. Even though research has not been systematic or continuous and the term well-being has not been used explicitly, there are studies that address the meanings of well-being. Naroll (1983) investigates cultural pathology and well-being, and the works of Oscar Lewis (1959, 1961, 1966), which delve into the culture of poverty, also are concerned with cultural well-being. In addition, Henry's research (1969) defined American culture as pathological, Bourgois's research (1995) on life in a New York City crack den, and Plath's (1980) account of the meaning of maturity in Japan, are also related to cultural well-being to a certain degree.

Anthropologists' passive approach to the research of well-being can be attributed in part to cultural relativism and field research methods that are greatly stressed in the discipline. Anthropologists have been negative towards the idea that a society or culture can be evaluated in terms of well-being because they believe such a stance is at odds with cultural relativism. It is also difficult for anthropologists who lay great stress on indigenous viewpoints to use the term well-being in their research because it is not actually used by indigenous people (Colby 2009). However, some scholars, including anthropologists, have incorporated well-being into their work as a major topic since the 2000s.

Research on well-being, as I indicated earlier, used to be centered on cultural pathology, and thus was mainly based on the concept of well-being defined as the state of being normal; in other words, not unhappy. In contrast, well-being has been recently redefined as a more positive state (Tin 2009). Well-being, however, has various meanings in various contexts. Especially in anthropological studies of well-being, it is apparent that its meanings are closely intertwined with each culture in which the concept is employed.

Some case studies demonstrate the culture-dependent meanings of well-being, such as Izquierdo's (2009) analysis of well-being among the Matsigenka Indians of the Peruvian Amazon, who struggle to maintain well-being in opposition to outside forces, especially the Peruvian state and multinational oil companies. Even though their physical health is improving, their sense of well-being is declining, as evidenced by an upturn in accusations of sorcery. Heil (2009) reveals that Australian Aborigines' relational concept of well-being stresses relationships with kin and absorption in a tight network of social obligations and responsibilities, unlike the Australian government's individual concept of well-being. These two papers describe how the well-being of small-scale societies is being threatened by encroachment by the state and outside world and how such communities struggle to maintain their own well-being.

At the level of nation-states, much research has been conducted on well-being in China and India. Jankowiak (2009) finds that well-being in Chinese society is rapidly rising due to the increase in individual free choice in the post-Mao era. In contrast to such individualism, according to Derné (2009), young, middle-class Indian men prefer following parental guidance in choosing marriage partners, rather than making such choices on their own. In China, although the cultural orientation has shifted from state-centric into individual-centric, India still remains socio-centric, at least among middle-class young men. In other words, the meanings of well-being are different and somewhat contrary when comparing China and India. Clark (2009) examines physical pleasure in the context of well-being by looking at bathing in Japanese culture. Weisner (2009) investigates well-being and family routines among American families with children with disabilities, and regards the idea of sustainability as key to well-being.

It is evident that the meanings of well-being are culturally particular; in other words, people from different cultures define well-being differently. Furthermore, the scope of well-being is quite broad, ranging from physical pleasure to familial routines and from individual freedom to social relatedness. In this paper, well-being also has meaning particular to contemporary Korean culture, whose character-

istics can be summarized as globalized, urban, and trend-sensitive.<sup>3</sup>

## Practices of Well-Being

Since the concept of well-being possesses diverse meanings, it can be and is realized in various forms. We can find several lifestyles that fit the meanings of well-being, some of which existed well before the popularization of well-being discourse, while others can be seen as the realization of recent discourse. These well-being lifestyles include vegetarianism, the “Slow City, Slow Food Movement,” and LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability). Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, vegetarianism<sup>4</sup> values health, love for animals, and environment protection. Therefore, even if vegetarianism is not directly associated with well-being today, the basic ideas are very similar. The Slow City, Slow Food Movement, which started in Italy in the mid-1980s, aims for a life in harmony with nature and values traditional foods and cooking methods over fast food. This movement is closely related to recent well-being discourse in that it values a quiet and relaxed life over a busy and tension-filled life. Popularized in the 1990s, LOHAS stresses health, environment, and sustainable development of society and is directly related to the current discourse on well-being (Kim and Kim 2005).

Well-being has become a part of alternative social movements that consider people’s health and environmentally-friendly development. In this context, well-being has slowly taken root in Europe and the United States. In Korean society, however, the well-being trend began rather abruptly, thanks to the active role of mass media in introducing and spreading the well-being concept of Western societies. Enterprises that actively use well-being in marketing have also

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3. The data for this research were gathered in the Seoul area.

4. Vegetarian ideas and lifestyles have a long history of hundreds years. But vegetarianism here is directly related to the vegetarian movement that started in earnest by the formation of The Vegetarian Society in Britain in 1847.

played a major role in the rapid spread of well-being discourse in Korea.

The spirit or discourse of well-being can be falsely represented when it is combined with marketing or consumer culture in general. This sort of phenomenon can be easily found in Korean society. Just as well-being is actively used in promoting books, it is also used to market many other commodities. For instance, clothing companies advertise their products as well-being clothes that are made with natural materials, fabrics that contain vitamins, or silver-nano textiles, all of which are claimed to be good for the body. Vacuum cleaners, washing machines, dishwashers, air conditioners, bidets, water purifiers, and many other appliances with additional functions are advertised as well-being items. Using the concept of well-being, services such as foot massage, lower-body bathing,<sup>5</sup> aromatherapy, yoga, and meditation are also promoted.

Nonetheless, it is food that receives the most attention in well-being discourse. The most representative case is environmentally-friendly agricultural products including organic, transitional organic, pesticide-free, and low pesticide agricultural products classified according to the amount and application of pesticides and chemical fertilizers.<sup>6</sup> The popularity of environmentally-friendly agricultural products can be ascertained in various ways. One method is to look at the output. The volume of environmentally-friendly agricultural products (except for livestock products) certified by the government amounted to 87,279 metric tons in 2001, but jumped to 2,188,311 tons in 2008, nearly a 28-fold increase. In the case of livestock products, the volume of environmentally-friendly products increased from 256 metric tons in 2005 to 137,079 tons in 2008 for a 535-fold

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5. For lower-body bathing one soaks lower-body (under the navel) in the warm water for around 20 minutes. It is said to promote the circulation of the blood and help excrete waste from the body.
  6. Korean government certifies environment-friendly agricultural products based on inspections by special certification institutions which include the National Agricultural Products Quality Management Service (NAQS) and some 50 private institutions designated by NAQS.

increase.<sup>7</sup> Specialty stores and departments that stock environmentally-friendly agricultural products and food, especially organic food, have substantially increased their numbers. We can find such sections in almost every large supermarket and department store, conglomerate-run chain stores that sell organic food and products, smaller-scale shops, and internet-based stores.

Another remarkable phenomenon is the flood of functional foods for health that are advertised to contain such ingredients as glucosamine, omega-3 fatty acids, gamma linolenic acid, spirulina, ginseng, and similar substances. Various foods made of beans, such as soybean milk, bean curd, and simulated meat made of textured soybean protein, have also been popularized. Green tea is also widely known to contain ingredients good for health and the range of uses has grown astronomically in recent years. The uses of green tea are not limited only to foods such as beverages, ice cream, various sweets, noodles, and other foodstuffs, but extend also to skin and hair care products, detergent, underwear, and other myriad items. The rapid growth of wine consumption is also linked with well-being discourse (Bak 1993; J. Kim 2008; Ko 2007; Yang 2005).

In many cases, well-being is combined with marketing and used to nudge consumers into opening their wallets. However, the effects of these so-called “well-being products” are mostly unproven and are significantly more expensive than similar non-well-being products. Furthermore, this phenomenon has been criticized for aggravating the evils of an industrial society that people try to overcome through well-being (Seo 2005; Yun 2006). The wide dissemination of well-being discourse in Korean society exerts considerable influence upon the consumption patterns of people. Some of my interviewees clearly and critically recognized that the virtue of well-being and the effect of well-being products were sometimes exaggerated. Nevertheless, they confessed that they were affected by well-being discourse and advertisements and so often ended up buying well-being products.

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7. The environment-friendly product certification system began to apply to livestock products in 2005.

Interviewees' perceptions of well-being show the inclusiveness of the concept. One said, "Well-being is the combination of physical health and mental health. The important things in physical health are exercise and a balanced diet. The important things in mental health are to not get stressed and to be optimistic." Another stated, "The important things in well-being are healthy food, clothing, and shelter and to not get stressed." However, their practices of well-being concentrated on physical health, especially on food and exercise. They try to use less MSG and buy environmentally-friendly products, however, such products are usually too expensive. One buys organic vegetables and fruit, but not organic rice or milk. Another interviewee buys products made from locally-produced wheat and organic vegetables, but not organic eggs. Yet another respondent said that she used to buy organic food for her kids when they were babies, but after they became three years old, she rarely bought organic food because she could not afford to do so. Interviewees also engaged in exercise, such as hiking, swimming, *gi*-training, and working out at fitness centers.

## **Well-Being and Chinese Food**

Dietary life is affected by well-being discourse, and dining out is no exception. As the economic and social conditions for Korea's food industry improves, specifically through rising incomes, increase in leisure time, increase in double-income families, and other changes in lifestyle, domestic and foreign food service enterprises are actively entering the Korean market. The food service sector is growing very rapidly, with an annual growth rate of approximately 10 percent. The percentage of family income spent on dining out more than doubled and the number of restaurants more than tripled over the past decade (Kang 2007; Kim et al. 2003). However, the importance of Chinese food in Korean dietary life has declined since the 1970s.

Chinese food was introduced to Korean society through the formation of an overseas Chinese community which began in the late

nineteenth century. Since the vast majority of early Chinese residents in Korea were male, Chinese restaurants catered to this single male population with simple food. As the number of Chinese residents in Korea grew, Chinese restaurants increased and diversified.<sup>8</sup> In 1922, there were about 650 Chinese restaurants in 11 cities and around 30 percent of Chinese Koreans were engaged in the restaurant business, where most customers were also Chinese Korean. With the end of Japanese colonial rule and the establishment of a post-liberation Korean government, the Chinese in Korean society, whom mostly came from Shandong province, were severed from their homeland. Furthermore, their economic activities came to be concentrated in the restaurant sector because the Korean government restricted foreigners' engaging in trade. Even though the number of Korean Chinese decreased after independence, the number of Chinese restaurants greatly increased, as the market expanded to include Koreans as consumers. In the 1950s and 1960s, although Chinese restaurants were mostly owned by Chinese, the majority of customers were Koreans,<sup>9</sup> for whom Chinese food became a favorite treat. In the 1970s, Koreans began to participate in the cooking of Chinese food and management of Chinese restaurants. Around 65 percent of Chinese restaurants were managed by Korean Chinese in the mid-1970s, but the percentage declined to 6 percent by 1993.

Over the past few decades, Chinese food has so successfully been localized that Chinese restaurants became a very familiar place for ordinary Koreans, and almost the only place for Koreans to enjoy exotic food in the 1970s. Meanwhile the high-end, large-scale Chinese restaurants provided a location for business meetings, family dining for the upper classes, or banquets for Korean Chinese.

However, the popularity of Chinese food has declined since the 1990s. While the market share of Korean restaurants increased from

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8. In the 1910s, there were several high-end Chinese restaurants in Seoul and Incheon.

9. In the late 1950s, the population of Chinese in Korea was around 20,000 and there were about 1,700 Chinese restaurants. The population increased to around 30,000 in the early 1970s, with around 2,500 Chinese restaurants.

56.7 percent in 1983 to 75.7 percent in 2003, that of Chinese restaurants decreased from 20.4 percent to 8.4 percent during the same period. The percentage of Korean restaurants in the food service sector soared to 83.9 by June 2009. This increase can be explained by several factors, one being spread of well-being discourse. As the importance of slow food is increasingly emphasized, Korean food is perceived to be healthier than fast food. It has also been said that Korean traditional food is much better than foreign food because of an abundance of vegetables, little meat, and many fermented ingredients.<sup>10</sup> Research indicates that the consumers who seriously take well-being into account tend to prefer Korean restaurants.<sup>11</sup>

Interest in well-being can be found in consumers' choice of dishes and restaurant preferences. As customers increasingly order based on health considerations, this facilitates the development of new menu items (Ahn and Cho 2006; T. Kim 2002). Many kinds of restaurants are developing new menus in order to keep up with the craze for well-being. Fast food restaurants, although far from the embodiment of well-being, are no exception and have developed so-called "well-being" menus which can be characterized as low-cholesterol, low-fat, low-sodium, and incorporating vegetables and cereals.

Chinese restaurants also give the impression that they do not fit the well-being trend in many aspects. One source of such impressions is the mass media, which generated an onslaught of negative news reports about Chinese food and restaurants. Some representative headlines include "Pickled Radish in *Gimbap* and *Jajangmyeon* . . . Lots of Industrial Additives?" (*Medical Today*, April 16, 2009); "Chinese Food Contains Lots of MSG; Two Times as Much as Food in Korean Restaurants" (*Munhwa Ilbo*, October 16, 2007); "National

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10. In the 1990s, in response to expanding imports of foreign food items, especially agricultural products from China, the discourse of "body and soil are one" (*sinto buri*) became widespread in Korean society, with an undertone of nationalism, asserting that agricultural products from Korea are better for Koreans than foreign products. I assumed that this trend negatively influenced the popularity of Chinese food and positively influenced that of Korean food.

11. Refer to Jeon (2005).

Teams in Olympic Games, ‘We Don’t Trust Chinese Food’” (*Maeil Business Newspaper*, June 27, 2008); “Chinese Food Syndrome” (*Busan Ilbo*, October 18, 2006); “Detecting Lead Eight Times the Safety Level in Chinese Preserved Eggs” (*Yonhap News*, November 3, 2005); “Terrible Sanitary Condition of Chinese Restaurants, ‘You Can’t Eat Food if You Know the Cooking Conditions’” (*Newsis*, March 24, 2009); “Chinese Restaurants, Lacking Sterilization” (*Yonhap News*, February 16, 2005); “Wondering If There Are Cockroaches in Chinese Food” (*Newsis*, January 8, 2009).

According to my field research, the most mentioned off-putting characteristic was that Chinese food was too greasy.<sup>12</sup> In another study, the most popular answers by college students about the image of Chinese food were that it is high in calories and greasy (Min and Oh 2002). It is clear that Chinese food is perceived as being distant from well-being food.

The representative image of Chinese restaurants was also negative. Chinese restaurants were said to be dark, crowded, dirty, and overall unattractive. One interviewee told me that Chinese restaurants were associated with cockroaches, but she also confessed that she had never seen one in a Chinese restaurant. However, interviewees did not perceive Chinese restaurants to be homogeneous. They broadly classified Chinese restaurants into two types: small, dirty, and cheap, or big, clean, and expensive. The examples of the latter include Chinese restaurants in luxury hotels, usually in city centers and used for business meetings, banquets, and dining with coworkers and friends. However, a majority of Chinese restaurants are located in residential areas or the outskirts of towns, and depend largely upon delivery and casual dining for their sales. The negative image of Chinese restaurants has been formed based on this type.

The pervasiveness of well-Being discourse is an important factor causing a crisis for Chinese restaurants and Chinese food. Chinese

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12. The merits of Chinese food were that it can be cooked quickly; it has diverse flavors and ingredients; nutritional loss is minimal because it is mostly quick-cooked in high heat; and it stimulates the appetite with unique flavors.

restaurants, however, are attempting to emerge from this predicament and take advantage of the well-being trend. This paper will examine several different cases.

M restaurant was a fusion Chinese restaurant whose menu included a considerable number of fusion dishes as well as traditional Chinese dishes. During my research in 2003, when the well-being trend was first taking root, the restaurant tried to distinguish itself from other Chinese restaurants by placing great emphasis on health. It tried to minimize the use of MSG and lowered calories by eliminating the use of batter when deep frying prawns. In addition, it encouraged customers to consume wine through a large selection of wines which were widely considered to be good for health. They also enclosed the kitchen with glass to allow customers to see the sanitary conditions of the kitchen for themselves. In this way, M restaurant addressed almost all the perceived weaknesses of Chinese restaurants from the standpoint of well-being.

U restaurant claims to be a well-being Chinese restaurant, as indicated by the signboard in front of the store. It specializes in seafood such as sea cucumber, abalone, adductor muscle of shellfish, and vegetables, instead of meat. For example, the Congxiang Sea Cucumber Dish is prepared very similarly to Congxiang Beef, and chicken is replaced with adductor muscle in Fried Adductor Muscle. The menu also includes Well-Being Chicken in Lettuce and Chinese-style Well-Being Soybean Paste Noodle (*welbing jajangmyeon*). Most dishes taste very light, and are prepared with a minimum of MSG and fresh oil. According to the manager, when the restaurant first opened, the dishes were blander and lighter, but more seasonings have been incorporated in response to customers' requests. However, the dishes still did not suit the tastes of young people, or those who expected or preferred ordinary Chinese food. The menu items appealed instead to middle-aged people who preferred light flavors and those who cared greatly about health. The manager also informed me that they changed the oil for deep frying every day, unlike other Chinese restaurants which are often criticized for reusing oil over and over again. The other thing he emphasized was that they cleaned the

kitchen two or three times a week. In conclusion, U restaurant is making an effort to overcome negative images such as “Chinese food is too oily, high in calories and MSG” and “Chinese restaurants are dirty.” This is unmistakably an effort to take advantage of the well-being trend.

C restaurant also claims to be a well-being fusion Chinese restaurant and was advertised as “a restaurant for those who look for well-being Chinese food with light and intense flavors, using healthy oil (high-grade canola oil).” The manager was very proud of the fact that they discarded such expensive oil on a daily basis to keep the food light and clean. He was also proud that they cleaned the kitchen with chemical disinfectants every two days, in contrast to ordinary Chinese restaurants which, he asserted, cleaned their kitchens in such a fashion only once a year. According to the manager, the clean, hygienic environment and the healthy menu and cooking style have made the restaurant so popular among young mothers that the restaurant provides a “first birthday celebration” special menu.

Y restaurant is another fusion Chinese restaurant that emphasizes well-being. This is evident in the menu, which features several steamed dishes such as Steamed Eggplant Stuffed Shrimp Paste with Chili Sauce, Steamed Tofu & Scallops with Crab Meat Sauce, and Steamed Grouper with Y Soy Sauce. Dishes such as Fried Minced Shrimp Ball (*saeu nanja wanseu*) and Deep Fried Minced Beef Ball (*soegogi nanja wanseu*) are usually first deep fried and then stir fried, but the owner said that Y restaurant lowers the greasiness by only deep frying to maintain the ball shape and then steaming.<sup>13</sup> There are also some dishes that are transformed to fit the well-being concept; for instance, Seafood & Vegetable with Sesame Sauce, Spicy Chicken in Endive, Fresh Yam with Oyster Sauce, Asparagus with Pine Mushroom, Braised Puffer Fish with Garlic Sauce (*kkanpung bogeo*), and Noodles with Grape Seed Oil Soy Bean Sauce (*podossiyu jajangmyeon*). In order to lower calories, the restaurant actively makes use

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13. The owner informed me that he was planning to add more steamed dishes and to gather them together in a new category on the menu.

of steaming, rather than deep frying, and increases the use of vegetables and seafood instead of meat.

In particular, the restaurateur at Y restaurant is very proud of the ingredients. Only fresh ingredients are used, and dishes are flavored only with salt or soy sauce, never with MSG.<sup>14</sup> This method best brings out the flavors of ingredients. According to the owner, Y restaurant does not use industrially produced sauces, unlike most Chinese restaurants, even high-end ones. He buys black bean sauce fermented in a traditional method in Beijing. Furthermore, he asserts that special ingredients, such as black moss, bamboo fungus, and fresh yam, all good for health, are used in Y's dishes.

An increasing number of Chinese restaurants are trying to keep up with the prevailing trend toward well-being in Korean society. They make efforts to lessen the use of MSG, to replace lard with vegetable oil and to change cooking oils often so that the dishes are light and not greasy tasting, to use vegetables or seafood instead of meat,<sup>15</sup> and to use fruit instead of sugar and vinegar to make sauces sweet and sour. Such restaurants are also attempting to wipe out customers' fears of unsanitary cooking environments. For example, they clean the kitchen frequently and open the kitchen to public view by partitioning the kitchen away from the dining area with glass or by installing a closed circuit TV.

In spite of all this, their efforts do not quite result in the hoped-for outcomes. According to interviews with restaurant managers and owners, their customers do not often know or care about the healthiness of the dishes. The majority of customers do care about flavor, however. The restaurants where I conducted my interviews all emphasize their light flavors achieved through minimal use of MSG, which appeals to the customers. The results of customer interviews

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14. The restaurateur said that they kept the ingredients in refrigerator for no more than three days.

15. For example, some restaurants sell sweet and sour snapper, puffer fish, or shiitake mushrooms cooked in the same preparation as sweet and sour pork or beef (*tangsuyuk*), one of the most popular Chinese dishes in Korea.

also indicate that they do not seriously consider the healthiness of dishes when eating Chinese food. Therefore, it can be said that people who are focused on well-being tend to not choose to dine at Chinese restaurants, primarily due to the strong perception that Chinese food is not aligned with the well-being trend.

If this is the case, why do people go to Chinese restaurants and eat Chinese food? The first reason is simply that they like Chinese food. One interviewee said, “I like Chinese food, especially Chinese Cold Noodles (*jungguk naengmyeon*), Noodle Soup with Seafood (*jjamppong*), and Braised Sea Cucumber, Shrimp, and Beef (*ryusanseul*). I stayed in Beijing for six months and I liked the food there, which was quite different from Chinese food in Korea. And back in Korea, I often go to Chinese restaurants with friends.” Another interviewee stated, “I go to Chinese restaurant from time to time. It’s not because I particularly like Chinese food, but because my roommate likes it. We like to eat Deep Fried Chicken with Soy Sauce (*yuringi*) and Stir Fried Seafood over Crispy Rice (*haemul nurungjitang*).” Both respondents think that Chinese food is not exactly healthy, but they choose to eat it rather than become unhappy by not eating it.

People choose Chinese food when they want to have a cheap and simple meal, with Chinese-style noodles being a very typical choice. Even though many different varieties of food can be delivered nowadays, for years Chinese food was the only kind of food that could be delivered. When people want to have a quick and simple meal, they often order Chinese noodle dishes for delivery at their homes, schools, offices, or wherever they happened to be.

Another reason is that children ask adults to buy Chinese food. When begged by kids to buy Chinese food, especially *jajangmyeon* and *tangsuyuk*, representative favorite treats for kids, adults sometimes meet these demands. An interviewee said, “Sometimes my kids pester me to buy *jajangmyeon*. I try not to buy my kids Chinese food because it’s not good for one’s health. But when they bother me so much, I can’t help buying *jajangmyeon* from time to time.”

People also go to Chinese restaurants for meetings. The high-end Chinese restaurants are perceived as a good location for meetings

because they are quiet, clean, and relatively cheap. When a venue is chosen for a banquet or meeting, the menu is not seriously considered. The place itself is the most important deciding factor. An interviewee stated, "When I dine with friends, alumni, and co-workers, or have a meeting with colleagues, I sometimes go to Chinese restaurants. Year-end parties especially are mostly held at Chinese restaurants."

There are also various reasons why people chose not to eat Chinese food or dine at Chinese restaurants. Interviewees in their 40s told me they frequently ate Chinese food when they were young. In the 1970s and 1980s, Chinese food was one of their favorite meals. However, some said that they seldom ate Chinese food nowadays because they thought it was unhealthy, and rarely went to Chinese restaurants because they were unclean. They confessed that they had been influenced by the negative representation of Chinese food and Chinese restaurants in the mass media.

Some people do not go to Chinese restaurants often because their dining companion does not want to. An interviewee said, "Our family seldom goes to Chinese restaurants because my husband doesn't want to go there. He frequently eats Chinese food outside the home, so we avoid going to Chinese restaurants when eating out as a family." Another interviewee said, "We, our family, don't go to Chinese restaurants often because my elderly parents-in-law don't like Chinese food. They say that Chinese food is too greasy and hard to digest."

All in all, people usually tend to choose Chinese restaurants as places to eat out because they or their companions like Chinese food. They also select Chinese restaurants for banquets or meetings. When well-being is their primary consideration, they rarely appear to choose Chinese restaurants. If health or environment is to be considered when selecting Chinese food, they choose a well-being Chinese restaurant or a well-being menu item.

## Conclusion

Well-being is a comprehensive and complex term. It includes the positive state of one's body, mind, and finances. Well-being discourse in Korean society began abruptly and spread rapidly thanks to the active intervention of mass media and the business sector. Though well-being is linked to social movements that offer alternatives to the lifestyle of industrialized societies, it has lost some of this meaning in Korean society. Well-being discourse in Korea often focuses on aspects of health and body, and it is extensively commercialized. As far as diet is concerned, well-being tends to emphasize low calories, low cholesterol, reduced MSG, and environmentally-friendly food.

This trend has had a negative impact on Chinese food and restaurants. While Chinese food has been successfully localized and is much loved, the preference for Chinese food and restaurants began to decrease beginning in the 1980s and has accelerated through the spread of well-being discourse for being regarded as being incompatible with well-being. Some Chinese restaurants are making efforts to overcome this negative image and trying to take advantage of the well-being trend. They reduce their use of MSG, use vegetable oil instead of lard, replace pork or beef with vegetables or seafood in certain dishes, change the frying oil frequently, and clean the kitchen often in order to combat prevailing perceptions.

The strength of the well-being trend and the negative image of Chinese food and restaurants seem to have exerted an influence upon the consumption pattern of Chinese food in Korean society. Those who consider well-being first tend to not eat Chinese food. However, many still eat Chinese food because they enjoy it. For decades, Korean people have enjoyed and loved Chinese food and continue to eat it despite concerns about well-being. Some also think that if they want to eat Chinese food, eating it, rather than stressing about not eating it, is the correct way to practice well-being. However, such Korean consumers appreciate the efforts of Chinese restaurants to adapt to the well-being trend.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>haemul nurungjitang</i>	해물누룽지탕	<i>ryusanseul</i>	류산슬
<i>hwagyo</i>	華僑	<i>saeu nanja wanseu</i>	새우난자완스
<i>jajangmyeon</i>	자장면	<i>soegogi nanja wanseu</i>	쇠고기난자완스
<i>jjamppong</i>	짬뽕	<i>tangsuyuk</i>	糖水肉
<i>jungguk naengmyeon</i>	中國冷麵	<i>welbing jajangmyeon</i>	웰빙자장면
<i>kkanpong bogeo</i>	깐풍복여	<i>yuringi</i>	유린기
<i>podossiyu jajangmyeon</i>	포도씨유 자장면		