

Becoming a Vegetarian in Korea: *The Sociocultural Implications of Vegetarian Diets in Korean Society**

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Abstract

This essay is a social psychological analysis of the meaning of and social pressures against vegetarianism in a highly collective cultural context. It postulates potential difficulties in social relationships as the real challenge in becoming a vegetarian in Korea. The research is based on data collected from participant observations and in-depth interviews conducted with 38 vegetarians in the Seoul metropolitan area in 2010–2011. Given the social importance placed on ordering and sharing similar meals together in order to foster intimate relationships and emotional bonds in Korea, vegetarianism can be considered deviant social behavior discordant with the nonvegetarian norm. In highly collective Korean society, it is regarded as a bad practice that disturbs harmony within the group, and vegetarians/vegans, especially those who are younger and occupy lower social positions, face enormous social pressures to yield to a conventional omnivorous diet, especially on occasions, such as a family gathering and a company dinner. While some people fail to maintain their vegetarian diet, many vegetarians/vegans try to cope with such social pressures by using various bargaining strategies, such as avoiding meal time, hiding their identity, giving an excuse, and doing routine chores for everyone else at the dinner table.

Keywords: Vegetarianism, food, Korean culture, collectivism, conformity, rankism

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Introduction

Public interest in vegetarianism has increased substantially in Korea since the early 2000s. This phenomenon can be seen to some extent as a reaction to or a rejection of sudden dietary changes that have occurred in the past few decades, which involved Western food styles, trans-local/trans-national food economies, and excessive meat consumption as a result (Cwiertka 2012; Han 2001; Jang et al. 2006; Lee 1998). In particular, today's globalized "food scares" (Wilson, Weatherall, and Butler 2004, 568) derived from infectious animal diseases and factory farming have aroused not only health concerns but also ethical issues regarding animal welfare. Therefore, the belief that vegetarianism offers a more ecologically as well as economically sound mode of nutrition, enabling efficient and equitable production and distribution of food resources provides additional incentives for consumers to adopt vegetarian diets (Hoek et al. 2004; M. Lappé and A. Lappé 2002). As in many Western societies where vegetarianism has already emerged as a significant dietary option, it has become an attractive food choice among Koreans for the sake of their own health, that of other people or the species as a whole. Using Lévi-Strauss's (1962) terms, a vegetarian diet constitutes what is *good to think*.

While changing one's diet radically is thought to be good, it can be more difficult than expected. As previous studies have repeatedly shown, becoming a vegetarian requires overcoming a variety of personal challenges, such as resisting the temptation to taste meat (Willett 1997), preparing vegetarian foods (Jabs, Devine, and Sobal 1998b), or alleviating concerns over lack of iron and protein (Lea and Worsley 2001). However, given that food and eating comprise a fundamentally important part of everyday life socially, as well as nutritionally and biologically, the vegetarian's attempt to avoid certain foods may have significant effects on social relationships with many people, especially with those who highly value and truly enjoy meat.

Accordingly, this essay focuses on the challenges in becoming a vegetarian in a highly collective cultural context like Korea due to potential difficulties in social relationships. Although various personal difficulties faced

by vegetarians have been extensively explored, difficulties from specific social contexts where vegetarianism is defined, experienced, and reinforced have not been thoroughly examined in previous literature (for some exceptions, see Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Roth 2005). Moreover, existing studies on such factors claim that in nearly every case, no one was greatly influenced by social pressures and was therefore determined to adhere to their own vegetarian diet (Hamilton 2006; Povey, Wellens, and Conner 2001; Roth 2005). These results, emphasizing the vegetarian's *inner-personal* difficulties rather than *interpersonal* ones, appear to reflect the Western view of the individual act in that most research has been carried out in Western Europe, North America, Scandinavia, and Oceania (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Klein 2008). In Korea, however, interpersonal difficulties have been the major obstacles to vegetarianism. Since ordering or sharing similar meals together is considered a common practice that brings intimate relationships as well as emotional bonds, eating vegetarian meals can be seen as a deviant behavior that causes discordance with other nonvegetarians. No matter how good a vegetarian diet may be for the individual, if it diverges sharply from the conventional way of eating, then it becomes a bad practice that *disturbs harmony* within the group. Without a doubt, such labeling by other people is the major impediment that frustrates the vegetarian's attempt to maintain such a diet in Korea.

By examining empirically what it means to become a vegetarian in Korean culture and what kinds of obstacles such people face, we try to demonstrate that social relationships and an emphasis on group harmony discourage Korean vegetarians in attempting to maintain their vegetarian diets. Thus, our research is not a study of vegetarianism per se, but a social psychological analysis of the characteristics of Korean culture that differentiate and complicate the experience of vegetarianism from cases observed in highly individualistic countries.

Literature Review

Maintaining an Individual Identity versus Maintaining a Social Relationship

Contemporary vegetarianism is more than just a dietary practice of eliminating meat from one's diet. It is a symbolic and expressive means to link one's everyday food choice with particular beliefs, values, or lifestyles. For example, vegetarians are more likely to pay attention to the factors that affect their health than are nonvegetarians (Larsson et al. 2002). Because a vegetarian diet represents a rejection of certain aspects of conventional hierarchy of foods, which has red meat at its pinnacle (Kwan and Neal 2005; Twigg 1979), this dietary practice is directly or indirectly related to a myriad of counter-hegemonic ideologies, including universalism, ecological welfare, and naturalism (Allen et al. 2000; Lindeman and Sirelius 2001).

However, in a real world setting, mealtime often functions as a central place where various relationships are established, fostered, and maintained. Factors such as choosing what or how quickly to eat as well as which seat to sit on substantially affect and are influenced by other participants at the dinner table. Therefore, vegetarianism, which is by definition a conscious decision to eliminate all or part of meat and animal-based products (Jabs, Devine, and Sobal 1998a; 1998b), requires an individual to constantly consider how these newly adopted dietary practices are presented to significant others, such as relatives, friends, and colleagues (Beardsworth and Keil 1992). Besides, meat has traditionally held the central and dominant position among every dish on the table in both Western and East Asian cultures (e.g. Fiddes 1991; Harris 1985; Twigg 1983). As it is well illustrated by a pork dumpling on New Year's Day in China or a turkey on Thanksgiving Day in the United States, eating meat together is often associated with an important festival where solidarity with significant others is reaffirmed. If so, a vegetarian diet can be seen as a rejection of a longstanding tradition or a threat to the *homeostasis* of the group (Roth 2005, 183).

In sum, contemporary vegetarianism has two very distinct characteristics. On the one hand, a vegetarian diet is a way of asserting one's identity;

with everyday food choices, today's vegetarian communicates what is good and what is not good, what is desirable and what is condemnable, and how life ought to be lived (Amato and Partridge 1989; Hoek et al. 2004; Lindeman and Sirelius 2001). On the other hand, a vegetarian diet can be a potential source of acute tension between vegetarians and non-vegetarians that places various social relationships at risk. In conclusion, vegetarians are forced to weigh carefully which option is more relevant in a given social dynamic and juggle skillfully between conflicting objectives—namely maintaining an individual identity versus maintaining a social relationship.

Choosing What to Eat in Different Cultural Contexts

Which of these two sides of vegetarianism to emphasize may vary greatly from person to person (McAuliffe et al. 2003). Nevertheless, depending on an individual's cultural context, a certain standard to determine behavior seems to be clearly delineated, repeatedly emphasized, and greatly exaggerated. Nearly every aspect of the self, including attitude, cognition, emotion, intention, norm, and practice is shaped, enabled, fostered, and constrained by the cultural system.

For example, in North American and Western European culture, an individual is construed as an autonomous entity who is independent from others, and whose behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's own internal attributes, rather than by reference to those of others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In turn, discovering and expressing one's uniqueness in public is particularly emphasized, and such activity is alleged to be closely associated with a high level of self-esteem (Kitayama et al. 1997). Conformity, however, is often seen somewhat derogatorily as passive coping or secondary control (Kim and Markus 1999), and thus maintaining one's internal attributes uninfluenced by others becomes a moral as well as a practical imperative for individuals. As a result, making a choice occupies a special position in this cultural context; an individual choice serves to express one's internal attributes, assert one's autonomy, and fulfill the goal of being unique (Iyengar and Lepper 1999;

Kim and Drolet 2003).

Conversely, in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean culture, an individual is construed as a relational being who is interdependent with others, and whose behavior is determined, contingent on, and organized by the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Rather than realizing, displaying, or asserting one's internal attributes, the individual is obliged to constantly control and regulate such qualities so that one can read and meet the expectations of others, adjust to and fit in with them, and finally belong to a relevant social relation (Fiske et al. 1998). Consequently, it seems natural and proper for the individual to yield, reserve, or change one's opinions, emotions, and behavior somewhat flexibly according to those of significant others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama 1997). In addition, maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict are strongly emphasized even when doing so comes at considerable personal cost (Hornsey et al. 2006). In this sense, conformity is seen more positively as an individual's willingness to accommodate oneself to a greater whole and create a sense of being connected to others. In this cultural context, making a choice tends to be defined in a radically different way from doing so in a highly individualistic cultural context; individual choice serves more to express one's belongingness to the group and promote harmony with others (Heine and Lehman 1997; Iyengar and Lepper 1999; Markus and Kitayama 2010).

Specifically, "eating together" with someone has particular significance in Korea, because it signifies belonging to political and social communities by exchanging food (K. Kim 1994, 17). Eating together is an important medium of circulating information, promoting solidarity and sharing values within a group (C. Kim 2007; Pettid 2008). Therefore, research on food in the everyday life of Korea by Park (2009) illustrates that avoiding meat is interpreted as an act of refuting rituals and procedures of forming intimate relations and thereby becoming members of a family by sharing food. Although most earlier literature on vegetarianism/veganism in Korea has been conducted under the discipline of philosophy or gender studies (Choi 2011; Jun 2014; H. Kim 2015; Maeng 2009), a few suggest that Korea's unique culture prevents vegetarians and vegans from

maintaining their diets.¹ In his analysis of the ways Koreans think and behave, the renowned Korean sociologist, Chung Soo-Bok, claimed that nowhere else can one find collectivism more prominently than at dinner, where Korean cultural characteristics come into light (Chung 2007).

Furthermore, previous research on Korean culture point equally toward a strong collectivism that affects individual behavior in group settings. Such characterizations of Korean culture as “obsession with unity” (K. Kim 2006, 123), a “deindividualized principle of unity” (Park 2004, 61), and a “uniform and monolithic behavior pattern” (Y. Kim 2005, 94) illustrate strong social pressures individuals feel to conform to conventional and standardized social norms. Accordingly, that vegetarians face enormous obstacles in their pursuit of an unconventional lifestyle in a highly collective cultural context that does not tolerate differences is not difficult to imagine.

We postulate that the preceding characteristics of Korean culture create conditions that differentiate and complicate the process of becoming a vegetarian in Korea compared to those observed in a highly individualistic society like the United States. Because vegetarianism is conceived as an individual act of believing and practicing, research on vegetarians in Western societies tends to pay more attention to the problem of decision at the initial stage than to difficulties vegetarians face afterward when they try to maintain their diet (Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Hamilton 2006; Roth 2005). In Korea, however, strong social pressure for conformity to group norms is a decisive factor, and thus we need to pay attention to how social psychological forces of collectivism and rankism affect the attempt to maintain the belief and practice and what strategies are used to cope with such social pressures.

1. “Chaesik gwansim nopajyeotjiman pyeongyeon-eun yeojeon” (Prevalent Stereotypes about Vegetarianism despite Current Interest), *Yonhap News*, January 24, 2011, <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=001&aid=0004880672>.

Method

Participants

A preliminary study was initially conducted to examine relevant subjects and variables. The principal investigator of this research joined four online vegetarian clubs and collected data through 65 participant observations at formal and informal meetings, parties, and campaigns by those clubs, which were held in Seoul, Korea between March 2010 and February 2011.

Next, 38 research participants living in the Seoul metropolitan area were sampled in the main study by using purposeful and snowball sampling techniques in nine online vegetarian communities. With the help of the network obtained from the preliminary study, the 38 participants, who represented the age and gender distribution of the total population and seemed to provide candid and detailed information about their ideas and practices, were selected for in-depth interviews.

Procedure and Analysis

The in-depth interviews followed a semistructured interview guide (Spradley 1979). The participants were asked when and why they had decided to become a vegetarian, how they had been changed mentally or physically after adopting a vegetarian diet, the factors that had helped or hindered becoming a vegetarian, and the personal strategies to handle various challenges.

Each interview averaged 85.7 minutes long and was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was guided by the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985), which involved identifying central themes and classifying extracts from transcripts under thematic headings.

Participant Characteristics

The majority of the participants were female (71%), unmarried (84%), and

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants ($n = 38$)

Characteristic	Number	Percentage (%)
<i>Sex</i>		
Female	27	71
Male	11	29
<i>Age (year)</i>		
20-24	2	5
25-29	9	24
30-34	13	34
35-39	5	13
40-44	4	11
45-49	4	11
50	1	3
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Never married	32	84
Married	6	16
<i>Education</i>		
Middle school	1	3
High school	4	11
2-year college	3	8
4-year college	24	63
Master's degree	6	16
<i>Occupation</i>		
Office worker	10	26
Professional worker	9	24
Student	7	18
Self-employed	5	13
Housewife	3	8
Temporary employee	2	5
Unemployed	2	5

well-educated (87% tertiary educated) adults. As previous research has demonstrated (Allen et al. 2000; Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Hoek et al. 2004), more female vegetarians participate in online communities than male ones, and therefore, more female samples were collected. Their ages

ranged from 21 to 50 years, with the median age being 33 years. A variety of dietary practices were represented: a vegetarian diet (in which dairy products, eggs, and sometimes fish, but neither meat nor poultry were consumed: 47%) was the most common dietary pattern, followed by a vegan diet (in which no animal-derived food was consumed: 37%) and a semivegetarian diet (in which meat or poultry were consumed in certain circumstances: 16%). The duration of the vegetarian diet varied dramatically with a range of 0.8 to 33 years, with an average of six years. About half of the participants adopted vegetarian diets for health (55%) or ethical reasons (47%), and about a quarter (24%) for ecological reasons.

Table 2. Dietary Characteristics of Participants ($n = 38$)

Type of Vegetarian Diet	Number	Percentage (%)
Vegan	14	37
Vegetarian	18	47
Semivegetarian	6	16
<i>Duration of Vegetarian Diet (year)</i>		
< 1 year	2	5
1 ≤ n < 3	14	37
3 ≤ n < 5	11	29
5 ≤ n < 7	2	5
7 ≤ n < 9	3	8
9 ≤ n < 15	2	5
16 < n	4	10
<i>Initial Motive of Vegetarian Diet (multiple choices were allowed)</i>		
Health reason	21	55
Ethical reason (animals)	18	47
Ecological reason	9	24
Political reason	5	13
Spiritual reason	3	8

Note: There were four participants who adopted a vegetarian diet as children, and the duration of their vegetarian diet lasted for 21, 25, 28, 33 years, respectively. The rest had adopted a vegetarian diet as adults.

Results

Social Reactions to Eating Differently

In Korea where various kinds of meat have been highly valued in terms of both fitness and nutrition, the rejection of eating meat causes other people to worry about a vegetarian's health. Especially, vegans, defined as people who never consume any animal derived food, are often scolded for damaging their health. In interviews, some vegan and vegetarian participants complained that their parents were always looking for something to cavil at because they were concerned about their children's health. Their parents persuaded and even intimidated their children to stop the seemingly unwise practice.

In addition, the rational and emotional bases for vegetarian diets are subjected to explicit or implicit criticism. Certain goals and objectives that vegetarians are trying to achieve by changing their diets, such as preserving the lives of animals or protecting the natural environment, are liable to be attacked for their virtual impossibility and logical contradiction. Many participants said that they were tired of hearing cynical remarks, such as, "Even if you adopt vegetarian diets for the love of animals, you can never change this harsh reality, where hundreds of thousands of animals are slaughtered each day" (VeganM33H)² or "What's gonna be so different by one person? . . . Anyway, such a feeble effort wouldn't make our planet any cleaner" (VegeF45H). Sometimes, they are censured for wasting time and energy on less important issues, while conveniently ignoring other more important ones. One participant quoted such an admonition: "Don't you feel pity for [poor] people with such a heartfelt sympathy for mere ani-

2. Each participant has a unique letter and number identifier followed by type of diet, gender, age, and initial motive code, which are recognized as important factors differentiating social experiences of vegetarians in Korea. The type of diet code includes Vegan, Vege (vegetarian), and Semi (semivegetarian). The sex code includes F (female) and M (Male). The age code indicates the participant's age. Lastly, the initial motive code is comprised of one main motive or several important motives, which include H (health), A (animal), E (Environment), P (political), and S (spiritual).

mals?” (VegeF27H). Notably, many people commonly criticize vegetarians for being self-contradictory by saying “Don’t plants have life, too?” (VegeF32A) or “Eat only fruits! No. Because fruits have life as well, eat just air!” (VeganM33A).

Among other considerations, the very fact that *vegetarians eat differently* may be one of the main reasons in Korea motivating criticism of their diets. In general, from the time when vegetarians reveal their identity, people immediately try to determine who they are and how they are different from others. Indeed, most participants stated that they faced inquisitive eyes watching them as well as a barrage of questions. One vegan participant explained that she felt embarrassed at being the center of attention:

I said that I was a vegetarian when I first met them. . . . After that, I had to hear all sorts of things. (*laugh*) . . . Someone told me that he’d never seen a vegetarian in his whole life. Also, I was asked whether I was a Buddhist nun or something. And many people asked me which food I could ever eat. Like that, almost everyone dumped on me with never-ending questions. So I really regretted saying that. (VeganF21H)

Even with a total stranger, a vegetarian easily becomes a target for disclosures. A vegetarian’s unusual diet usually becomes a good topic for conversation, attracts attention, and arouses curiosity from other people at the dinner table. As a result, some participants said that they felt uncomfortable, abashed, and offended by the way they had been treated. Sometimes, vegetarians look as if they were potential suspects to be interrogated by an investigator. As one participant voiced her complaints about another person’s attitude:

I confessed that I didn’t, no I couldn’t eat meat. . . . Then, the main topic of our conversation became the reason I started vegetarianism, and things like if I would maintain current diets later, or “What are you eating?” “Can you eat this? Or that?” So, it was rather (*break*) unpleasant. . . . I think that a blind date should include the same amount of attention to each other. . . . But, it was simply not the case. He investigated me one-sidedly, looking me up and down, perhaps thinking to himself, ‘what on earth is she to do such a . . .’ (SemiF31H)

More importantly, the flood of questions often has nothing to do with a pure desire to know about the vegetarians' eating habits. Few serious questions are asked for the purpose of understanding how and why they have adopted vegetarianism, what the advantages or disadvantages are, and if there are any issues of concern when becoming a vegetarian. Instead, most questions tend to be raised to confirm differences and to draw a solid line between vegetarians and nonvegetarians.

These questions seem to function like a magnifying glass, rendering differences in diets to appear much larger. At the same time, other possible similarities become deliberately obscured, erased, and veiled. By asking multiple questions, the assumption that a vegetarian is someone entirely different from others is repeatedly expressed, confirmed and reinforced. The term "vegetarian," in particular, commonly leaves an immediate impression that they are too meticulous about their own health or too obsessed with some religious beliefs. For example, questions such as, "Why do you do such a thing? For how many centuries do you want to survive?" (VegeF45H) or "By any chance, which religion are you into?" (SemiF32H) were frequently asked.

This supposed difference has a negative connotation by itself in Korea. Like the Japanese saying, "the nail that stands out gets pounded down" (Markus and Kitayama 1991, 224), the saying "a cornered stone meets the mason's chisel" is commonly used in Korean culture. In other words, an individual with substantially different attributes (e.g. personality, philosophy, preference, lifestyle, and habits) from those of many others is subjected to relentless pressure to abandon the former and to follow the latter. Likewise, what ordinary people usually do is usually considered good and right. Thus, any preference that seems a sharp departure from such a norm is often labeled "bad" or "wrong" (Kim and Markus 1999, 785). In this sense, a vegetarian who chooses to eat "bad" or "wrong" food will likely leave a negative impression. Some participants claimed that they had been unjustly criticized for "having such picky taste, you wouldn't be able to do well in your company" (VeganM27H) or for "acting unsociably like a single-minded person (while ignoring the thoughts of others)" (VeganF-46HPE).

The Accusation of Disturbing Group Harmony

In particular, vegetarians are accused of *disturbing harmony* at the dinner table. Eating and sharing similar meals together is generally considered an ideal opportunity for people to stick with the group, to belong to a relation, and to feel connected to others. Therefore, individuals are encouraged to respect and follow group norms and decisions, to yield their own wishes, and reserve their feelings and opinions even at the dinner table. Though they may not think that choices by others are best for them, subordinating their personal preferences, beliefs and values to those of other people is not only a practical recommendation but also a moral duty. In contrast, strict sanctions are likely to be imposed on people who try to hold fast to their own preferences and stand out alone within a group, as one vegetarian participant clearly showed:

(at a steak house) I had to eat bean paste stew or rice wrapped in lettuce by myself, or just side dishes on the table. But my director absolutely hated that. . . . She scolded me severely for this, for not eating dinner together and not sharing meals with teammates, and for being alone at the table, separated from others. . . . She always threw it up to me. So she hated, just hated my vegetarian diet. (VegeF32A)

Pressures are increasing to conform to the conventional diet, especially on occasions such as a family gathering, a company dinner, or a formal banquet. These events often act as a place where a sense of affiliation, unity, kinship, and solidarity with other group members is fostered. Thus, an individual is regarded as a relational part of a large and complex social organism, and one's behavior is constantly controlled and regulated so as to maintain group harmony. Under these circumstances, the vegetarian's attempt to assert one's individuality is easily regarded as deviant behavior that runs against tradition, authority, or identity of the group. Several participants illustrated that they had been criticized for being "fussy," "strange," "peculiar," or "abnormal":

At the company dinner, where all the board members will be present,

I can never say “I am a vegetarian.” And then I would become a real freak! (*laugh*) Everyone will be there, from the chairman to the representatives of each department, and they’re gonna sit at the table one by one in front of me. . . . I can’t hold my head up and speak up, “I can’t eat meat, because I can only eat vegetarian diets.” (*laugh*) That would be very awkward. (VegeM38HAE)

In this respect, the aforementioned attacks on the rational and emotional bases for vegetarianism may actually be more of an ostensible reason than a bona fide one. There may not be many who really care about the health conditions of vegetarians, the lives of dying animals, or environmental disasters. Rather, such criticisms appear to reflect the core cultural value in Korea, that *maintaining harmony within the group* is most important. Even though a vegetarian diet may be good in some respects, spoiling the harmony of the group can never be convincingly justified, which is why various motives, beliefs, or values of vegetarians are continually disparaged as trivial and of no importance:

One day, I went down to the cafeteria in my company building at lunch. . . . I brought my own lunch box. . . . A man, who’s older than I am, talked to me. When I was eating brown rice with a kind of salad, he talked in a negative way, and certainly it never sounded good. Slightly accusingly, “You look unduly worried about your health. For such a young person like you, it’s not worth doing.” . . . I was shocked to hear that It actually means that “Though much older than you are, I am eating the same food together in harmony with others, without any problems. But you’re eating by yourself, not mixed with other people on the pretext of such a trivial health matter.” (SemiF31H)

Consequently, that a great deal of pressure on *how* rather than *what* vegetarians eat is readily apparent and certainly no exaggeration. Issues like which food they can or cannot eat or whether they eat meat or not are as problematic as some people may guess. The real problem lies in their peculiar way of choosing, ordering, or eating food at the dinner table. Because they eat differently from other people and are thereby viewed as disturbing group harmony, their dietary practices are easily subject to a variety of

social pressures.

Dispersion of Social Pressure by an Individual's Social Rank

Social pressure against vegetarianism is not equally applied to all people but is dispersed through the prism of rankism and has differential influence on people of different social ranks. People who occupy higher social positions can absorb the force of collectivism while people at the bottom of the hierarchy in terms of age, gender, and rank bear the double burden of collectivism and rankism.

Vegetarians who are older and occupy higher positions seem to face less resistance than their counterparts when they announce they are vegetarians and choose a particular menu at the dinner table. In particular, when the oldest member of a group is a vegetarian, others tend to give special consideration for this diet. Nevertheless, one's gender does not seem to affect the amount of social pressure. In addition, professional workers and high-ranking administrators are likely to enjoy greater freedom and even receive more preferential treatment in their choice of menu than people of lower rank. One such person noted:

When eating at cafeteria in my hospital, when there's few edible choices, some chefs give me special treatment. Unlike other people, they serve me some greens, dried laver, or bean sprouts. Sometimes, they tell and warn me that I shouldn't eat today's soup, because it is made from anchovy stock. So, I think it's not that difficult for me to be a vegan at work. (VeganF36H)

By contrast, people who occupy lower ranks and who are younger are seldom respectfully acknowledged by others as vegetarians and are often forced to follow majority decisions. They are not given a chance to defend themselves and refute unjust charges against them. To witness their ideas, values, and eating habits disregarded by their superiors is never a pleasant experience and usually involves mental conflict. Still, they choose to endure humiliation rather than to express their true feelings in order not to worsen situations.

The Consequences of Social Pressure

The various pressures on vegetarians do not simply come down to a single consequence in Korea. Instead, many vegetarians always strive to judge shrewdly about what is best and where priorities should lie in the future. It may be wise for them to weigh *the importance of relationships* against *maintaining a strict vegetarian diet* in each difficulty.

Above all, if vegetarians are having meals with acquaintances, then they may not be too concerned about social pressures. Typically, they try to maintain their own diets while intentionally ignoring other's negative attitudes towards their way of eating.

Once, there was a dinner with other students after a class. . . . We went to a restaurant specializing in *sundaeguk* (pork sausage potage in Korean style), and everyone loved to eat that except me. Then, one student much older than I was kept asking me to taste some. I was little flustered, and said, "I can't eat meat, because it will make my skin so itchy." . . . I endured to the end without eating anything because it was just a onetime gathering. And I thought it wouldn't be a big problem even if I was on his blacklist. (VeganM27H)

Similarly, if at all possible, many vegetarians try not to attend dinners, parties, or social gatherings that are relatively less important. Given the outright hostility toward vegetarians, just imagining themselves being at these events can be pretty stressful. Yet, avoiding such events prevents vegetarians from facing various pressures. By telling a lie, such as "I'm afraid I can't go tonight. I'm in bad shape today" (VegeF27AE) or "Sorry I can't go with you. Something has suddenly come up" (VegeM46P), many vegetarians attempt to leave no room for someone's disapproval. Generally speaking, such avoidance is a very useful strategy for maintaining a vegetarian diet without feeling offended.

However, crucial relationships remain that should not be potentially endangered. Sometimes, maintaining good relations and daily contact with someone is paramount. In order to prevent a potential conflict and to achieve harmony, vegetarians are usually encouraged to sacrifice their own

preferences, beliefs or values as well as diets and follow those of others. Several participants said that once or twice they had given up being a vegetarian and conformed themselves to an omnivorous diet in spite of their repulsion toward meat:

Once, I forced myself to swallow meat in order to fit in with my teammates. I just tried to hypnotize myself “It’s delicious, it’s delicious,” because I thought I had to get along with other members. . . . When I was in that company, almost every dinner menu was roast pork. So I had to eat that. . . . Even though I really hated to do so, I had no choice but to eat while hypnotizing myself. (VegeF34A)

Nevertheless, not every vegetarian abandons their diet and reverts to the old habit of eating meat due to potential conflicts with in-group members. A *viable alternative* exists to immediately giving up a vegetarian diet. In order to offset social pressures regarding their diets, many vegetarians very willingly provide helpful services to everyone else. Specifically, they spare no effort to convey a favorable impression toward other people by doing routine chores at the dinner table in Korea, such as asking for a waiter, giving out food to each person, or bringing others glasses of water. Carrying out such chores can be seen as a *bargaining strategy* between maintaining their own diets and following group consensus, preventing them from attracting any admonishment from other people:

I tried to grill meat for other people. If everybody else had been enjoying eating meat except me, then they would have become aware of my diet. Thus, I tried to grill meat, to distribute meat, and to talk a lot so that they couldn’t pay attention to me. (SemiF31H)

Even though vegetarians may consider it unjust and discriminatory to have a social gathering or company dinner at a restaurant that serves few edible foods, for them not to complain but follow the decision of the group is wise. Likewise, even if they may think of eating meat as disgusting, immoral, or filthy, they are required to reserve their own opinions or feelings in front of other people. By putting up with minor inconveniences, by

accommodating themselves to other's preferences, and by gladly sacrificing themselves through service to others, vegetarians are able to manage conflicts with in-group members and restore harmony at the dinner table without giving up their own diets, beliefs, or values:

Once, I took a trip to Jeju Island with my best friends for three days. . . . And I really ate only rice with some sauce for most of the three days. . . . I assured them "Don't care about me. Just help yourselves!" . . . I can gladly endure such a mere inconvenience. If I want to travel with my nonvegetarian friends, I should endure that. It's not really a big deal. (VeganF34A)

Notably, under some circumstances, vegetarians need to make an *inevitable compromise* regarding their diets. Rather than a total failure to maintain a vegetarian diet, they commit more of a momentary and voluntary lapse. Some vegetarian and even a few vegan participants said they had allowed a slight departure from their dietary principles when necessary and unavoidable although they were never supposed to eat some foods, such as beef, pork, lamb, chicken, and fish. One participant noted:

As time went by, it became more and more uncomfortable, not only for me but also for my colleagues. They seemed to feel uncomfortable when choosing their favorite dishes. They sometimes tried to read my face to see if I was angry. I felt so sorry for them. So I made a mental note, 'Although strictly maintaining my vegetarian diet may be good for me, I need to make some compromises, because no one can live alone in this world!' (VegeF27AE)

More importantly, a vegetarian's compromise is usually described using the terms, "flexible," "adaptable," "unavoidable," or even "indispensable." This attitude gives vegetarians sufficient ground for an occasional lapse in their diets, and performs a crucial role in preventing guilty feelings. Therefore, a minor violation of eating regulations by vegetarians can be commonly accepted both by vegetarians and in-group members. Sometimes, demonstrating a little flexibility is therefore recommended. In one such instance, a participant stated:

I allow myself to taste some meat broth if I have to go to a shabu-shabu restaurant with my friends. I think it's OK to pick some vegetables of that soup and leave the liquid. In such cases, I'd like to show some flexibility. . . . I sometimes make a compromise about some food that may contain some animal material. Because it's essential for me to meet other people, I can't say 'I'm the perfect vegan, so I must not eat this!' It is necessary to apply the rule flexibly in social life. (VegeF26H)

Interestingly, this particular emphasis on adaptability among Korean vegetarians does not seem to be a commonly reported phenomenon in previous research on Western vegetarians (e.g. Hamilton 2006; McDonald 2000; Povey, Wellens, and Conner 2001; Roth 2005). Rather, previous studies have found that vegetarians are likely to stick to their own dietary practices even when suffering considerable social pressures to reverse their decision. This clear contrast shows that the priority in choosing what to eat at dinner with other nonvegetarians varied according to the cultural context. In Korea, maintaining social relationships far outweighs maintaining vegetarian diets, which is a salient feature of vegetarianism in Korea.

Conclusion

The main argument of this essay is that Korean vegetarians face great difficulties maintaining vegetarian diets due to strong social pressures to conform to conventional omnivorous diets. While in societies where individualism is strong and respected, an individual's personal attributes are key determinants in maintaining vegetarian diets. By contrast, in societies like Korea where collectivism, especially vertical collectivism, is strong, interpersonal relationships have far greater importance in maintaining a vegetarian eating style. Because eating differently is considered a deviant behavior that disturbs group harmony, social pressures to conform to a conventional diet is the major challenge that Korean vegetarians have to cope with.

Based on qualitative interviews with 38 vegetarians, the complex pro-

cesses of living a vegetarian life in Korea have been delineated extensively. The study results revealed that an individual act of choosing what to eat at a dinner table is defined, constructed, and experienced in relation to other nonvegetarians. The beliefs, values, or motives of vegetarians in adopting their diets are often completely disregarded, and they are repeatedly urged to follow the typical diet that ordinary people usually do. Their unusual way of eating is likely to come under criticism, such as outright hostility, public ridicule, and even total exclusion from a certain group. As a result, many vegetarians in Korea tend to feel shame about drawing people's attention, feel guilty about causing discordance with other members, and feel isolated within the group.

Notably, the accusation of disturbing group harmony at the dinner table is central to such social pressures. On certain occasions, in particular, where almost every member of the group is present, vegetarian preferences can easily become the focus of public censure. These results reveal the special significance of eating and sharing the same meals together. Rather than satisfying one's hunger or tasting delicious foods, having dinner with other people is an integral part of forming, maintaining, and improving relationships with them, and thus is sometimes an end in itself. Thus, in Korea to feel a sense of shared commitment and belonging to each other by conforming oneself to the preferences, beliefs, and values of the majority is essential.

Obviously, "a simple act is rarely a simple act" (Kim and Drolet 2003, 380). Therefore, a dinner table in which choosing, ordering, and eating food is happening routinely and without much consideration can be a suitable place for detecting and identifying core beliefs or values within a certain cultural context. Similarly, the mere presence of a vegetarian appears to have an immediate impact on underlying principles at the Korean dinner table, which is closely associated with eating and sharing the same meals together. Furthermore, the unique experiences of vegetarians in the research presented in this essay, including how they are considered, treated, and placed, can provide invaluable insights for improving understanding of such cultural structures and dynamics in Korea, which strongly emphasizes the maintenance of social relationships and group harmony.

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