

Original Article

A Study on the Psychological Healing for Japanese Korean Learners through Korean Food

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ABSTRACT

Food is a fundamental aspect of human life, encompassing the cultural essentials of clothing, shelter, and sustenance. Experiencing the culture of individuals who speak the language one is learning through food has proven to be an effective means of enhancing learners' motivation. It can be presumed that direct exposure to Korean cuisine, either through consumption or preparation, will exert a profoundly positive psychological impact on Korean learners, contributing to psychological healing, indirectly evidenced by stress reduction. Therefore, this study conducted a survey among Korean learners in Japan to investigate the potential for psychological healing through engagement with Korean food.

Keywords Korean food, Psychological Healing, Japanese Korean Learners, Stress Reduction

INTRODUCTION

As the popularity of the Korean Wave continues to rise, an increasing number of foreigners are not only expressing a desire to try Korean food after encountering it in dramas, movies, and entertainment programs but are also inclined to take on the challenge of preparing it themselves. Food, being an integral component of human life and part of the cultural triad of clothing, shelter, and sustenance, plays a pivotal role in cultural experiences.

Language, as an integral component of culture, functions as a conduit for conveying various cultural aspects. Utilizing Korean food, an integral element of Korean culture, to access the Korean language presents a valuable opportunity to acquire not only the language itself but also insights into the associated food, culture, and language as an integrated entity.¹ This rationale is exemplified by the inclusion of cooking classes within cultural education in language programs. Therefore, direct experiences with Korean food, whether through consumption or preparation, exert a profoundly positive impact on the process of learning the Korean language.

The interplay of comfort and food is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Our emotional state is intricately linked to our food choices, impacting us both immediately through the pleasure derived from eating and in the long term, as the food we consume serves as the foundation for the production of various chemicals in the body. These chemicals include neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, as well as hormones like adrenaline and cortisol.²

In the context of this study, we posit that the act of consuming or preparing Korean food serves not only to satiate the curiosity and interest of learners in Korean culture but also offers a form of psychological healing effect. We aim to substantiate this hypothesis through a survey. To achieve this objective, we seek to investigate the potential for psychological healing through Korean cuisine by querying Korean learners in Japan about their experiences with consuming or preparing Korean food. Specifically, we aim to ascertain whether such experiences have elicited a psychological healing effect.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Survey Overview

This survey was undertaken as a preliminary investigation in the development of a *K-food Korean language textbook* (tentative title) catering to Korean learners in Japan.

2. Composition of Survey Questions

The survey questionnaire comprised fundamental inquiries aimed at identifying the respondent's gender, age, Korean language learning institution, and motivation for learning Korean. Additionally, seven detailed questions were included to assess their experiences with consuming Korean food, engaging in food preparation, and documenting any observed changes in stress levels.

3. Survey Execution

The survey was administered via Google Forms over a span of six days, from May 10th to 15th, 2023. A total of 152 individuals participated in the survey; however, the respondent count varied slightly depending on the specific questions posed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Basic information about respondents

1) Gender: Male (8) / Female (144)

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2) Age: Teenagers (62), 20s (27), 30s (6), 40s (17), 50s (18), Over 60s (22)

3) Korean language learning institutions

① University Korean major (31, 20.4%)

② University-affiliated Korean language education institution (2) 1.3%

③ High school elective (26, 17.3%)

④ Private academy (13, 8.6%)

⑤ Internet learning site (8, 5.3%)

⑥ Self-study (31, 20.4%)

⑦ Others (38, 25.5%)

4) Motivation for learning Korean

① Interest in Korean popular culture (movies, dramas, K-pop, etc.) (117, 77%)

② Interest in Korean daily culture (food, fashion, etc.) (12, 7.9%)

③ Interest in Korean traditional culture (Hanbok, Gogung, etc.) (8, 5.3%)

④ Interest in Korea while traveling (14, 9.2%)

⑤ To study in a Korean university (1, 0.7%)

⑥ To get a job in a Korean company

⑦ To become a Korean-related expert

The gender of the respondents was overwhelmingly female, with 94.7% of respondents being female and 5.3% being male. The age group was relatively diverse, with teenagers accounting for 40.8%, followed by 20s (17.8%), over 60s (14.5%), 50s (11.8%), and 40s (11.2%). The 30s accounted for the smallest percentage at 3.9%.

Japanese Korean learners learn Korean at universities and self-study, with the same number of respondents (31, 20.4%), followed by high school electives (26, 17.3%), professional schools (14, 9.2%), and private academies (13, 8.6%).

The majority of respondents started learning Korean because they were interested in Korean popular culture (movies, dramas, K-pop, etc.) (77%). The next most common reasons were "interest in Korean travel" (9.2%), "interest in Korean daily culture (food, fashion, etc.)" (7.9%), and "interest in Korean traditional culture (Hanbok, Gogung, etc.)" (5.3%).

Based on the basic information of the respondents, it can be inferred that learners currently studying Korean in Japan are likely to be interested in Korean food portrayed in Korean popular culture. In addition, the percentage of respondents who have traveled to Korea is over 9%, indicating that they have experienced Korean food through their visits to Korea. They are also interested in Korean daily food culture.

2. Experience with Korean food and changes in stress

1) Have you ever thought about trying to eat a food you saw in a Korean drama or movie?

① Yes: 138 (90.8%) ② No: 14 (9.2%)

Out of the total of 152 respondents, 90.8% (138) said they have thought about trying to eat a food they saw in a Korean drama or movie. In the case of responding 'yes', they were asked to write the name of the food directly, and the results are as follows:

Chicken (10, 7.2%) > *Tteokbokki* (7, 5.1%) > *Samgyeopsal* (6, 4.3%), *Jajangmyeon* (6, 4.3%) > *Kimbab* (5, 3.6%), *Ramen* (5, 3.6%), *Samgyetang* (5, 3.6%)

Other food names were each answered by two people and one person, and the food names written by two people (1.3%) are as follows:

Ganjanggejang, *Gungjung* cuisine, Pancake (*Jijimi*, *Buchu-Jeon*), *Bibimbap*, *Jjapaguri*, Stew, *Kalguksu*, *Jeongshik*, *Hodduk*

The food names written by one person (0.7%) are as follows: Home-style meal, *Gopchang*, Noodle, From *Gungjung* cuisine to everyday dishes, *Nakgopse*, *Naengmyeon*, *Dalgal*, *Dakhanmari*, Pork skin, Neck meat, *Mulhoe*, Seaweed soup, *Seolleongtang*, *Sundae*, Soft tofu, *Jokbal*, *Chimac*, Bean noodles, Sweet and sour pork, Fish cake from a *pojangmacha* (Korean style cart bar).

In question 1), the most Korean food that respondents wanted to try was 'chicken' (7.2%). The next most popular were *Tteokbokki* (5.1%), *Samgyeopsal* and *Jajangmyeon* (4.3%), and *Kimbab*, *Ramen*, and *Samgyetang* (3.6%). Among the respondents who answered "*Samgyeopsal*", there were also respondents who wrote very specifically about "*Samgyeopsal* grilled in a drum". In addition, a variety of other foods were mentioned, indicating that Japanese learners of Korean are very interested in Korean food. In particular, "*Jjapaguri*" from the Korean movie *Parasite* and "*Chimac*", a new word that has been used since a drama appeared, reflect the interest of Japanese learners in relatively recent famous Korean foods rather than traditional Korean foods or representative Korean foods.

2) Have you ever eaten Korean food?

① Yes: 146 (96%) ② No: 6 (4%)

Out of the total of 152 respondents, 96% (146) said they have eaten Korean food. The results of asking them to write the names of the foods they have eaten are as follows:

Samgyeopsal (10, 6.8%) > *Tteokbokki* (9, 6.2%), *Bibimbap* (9, 6.2%) > Various (5, 3.4%) > *Ramen* (4, 2.7%), *Jijimi* (4, 2.7%) > *Kimchi* (3, 2.1%), *Dakhanmari* (3, 2.1%), *Samgyetang* (3, 2.1%), Spicy chicken (3, 2.1%), Chicken (3, 2.1%)

In addition to these, each of the other food names was answered by two people and one person, and the following food names were written by two people (1.4%):

Kimbab, *Dakgalbi*, *Tteok*, *Bossam*, *Buldak-bokkeum myeon*, Soft Tofu, Cup Noodle

The following food names were written by one person (0.7%):

Ganjanggejang, Seaweed, *Kimchi*, *Jjigae*, *Nakgop*, *Naengmyeon*, Pork Belly, *Budaejjigae*, *Bulgogi*, *Buldak*, *Bibimyeon*, *Agujjim*, *Yukhoe*, *Japchae*, *Jjigae*, Sweet and Sour Pork, *Hanjeongsik*, *Hotteok*

In question 2), the most commonly eaten Korean food among respondents was *Samgyeopsal* (6.8%). Following that were *Tteokbokki* and *Bibimbap*, each at 6.2%, and "Various" was also 3.4%. *Ramen* and *Jijimi* each accounted for 2.7%, with many respondents writing "*Jijimi*" as "チヂミ" in Japanese, which is an imported word meaning *Jeon* in Japan, and this includes Korean leek pancake and *Jeon*. In addition to these, a wide variety of foods were mentioned, indicating that Japanese

learners of Korean are interested in Korean everyday foods and have tried them themselves.

2-1) Have you experienced any psychological healing effects from eating Korean food? (Number of respondents: 146)

- ① Very much so: 31 (21.2%)
- ② Somewhat so: 46 (31.5%)
- ③ Neutral: 57 (39.0%)
- ④ Somewhat not so: 6 (4.1%)
- ⑤ Not at all: 6 (4.1%)

2-2) Indicate the change in stress after eating Korean food. (Number of respondents: 146)

- ① Stress decreased significantly: 26 (17.8%)
- ② Stress decreased slightly: 53 (36.3%)
- ③ No change in stress: 66 (45.2%)
- ④ Stress increased slightly: 1 (0.7%)
- ⑤ Stress increased significantly: 0 (0.0%)

As a subquestion of question 2), 2-1) asked whether experiencing Korean food had a psychological healing effect. The results showed that out of 146 respondents, 77 (52.7%: Very much so 21.2% + Somewhat so 31.5%) reported a psychological healing effect. The response for "Neutral" was 39.0%, and responses indicating no effect were 12 (8.2%: Somewhat not so 4.1% + Not at all 4.1%). The data indicates that the experience of consuming Korean food potentially contributed positively to the psychological well-being of Korean language learners.

2-2) is a question aimed at exploring the possibility that the experience of eating Korean food may bring positive changes in stress. Respondents were asked to indicate the change in stress after eating Korean food. The results showed that out of 146 respondents, 79 (54.1%: Stress decreased significantly 17.8% + Stress decreased slightly 36.3%) reported a decrease in stress. The response indicating no change in stress was 45.2%, and the response indicating an increase in stress was 0.7% (slightly increased). It can be confirmed that the experience of eating Korean food had a positive impact on reducing stress.

3) Have you ever tried cooking Korean food?

- ① Yes: 95 (62.5%)
- ② No: 56 (36.8%)

Out of the total respondents, 95 answered that they have tried cooking Korean food. For those who have experience in cooking Korean food, the names of the dishes they have cooked were as follows:

No response (34, 35.8%) > *Jjimi* (10, 10.5%) > *Gimbap*, *Tteokbokki* (8, 8.4%) > *Japchae*, *Stew* (4, 4.2%) > *Bibimbap*, *Samgyetang*, *Sundubu-jjigae*, *Jjimdak* (3, 3.2%) > *Naengmyeon*, *Ramyeon*, *Miyeokguk*, *Bossam*, *Samgyeopsal* (2, 2.1%) > *Kimchi-jjigae*, *Fried rice*, *Budae-Jjigae*, *Seasoned chicken*, *Chicken* (1, 1.1%).

3-1) Did the experience of cooking Korean food have a psychological healing effect? (Responses: 104)

- ① Very much so: 19 (18.3%)
- ② Somewhat so: 28 (26.9%)
- ③ Neutral: 49 (47.1%)
- ④ Somewhat not so: 6 (5.8%)
- ⑤ Not at all: 2 (1.9%)

3-2) Please indicate the change in stress after cooking Korean food. (Responses: 103)

- ① Stress decreased significantly: 12 (11.7%)

- ② Stress decreased slightly: 35 (34.0%)
- ③ No change in stress: 55 (53.4%)
- ④ Stress increased slightly: 1 (1.0%)
- ⑤ Stress increased significantly: 0 (0.0%)

As a subquestion of question 3), question 3-1) asked whether making Korean food directly had a psychological healing effect. The number of respondents to this question was 104 (the number of respondents to question 3-1 should be 95, as 95 respondents said they have made Korean food themselves, but 104 respondents responded because Google Forms did not control this part in advance), and 47 respondents (45.2%: very much so 18.3% + somewhat 26.9%) reported that it had a psychological healing effect. The response "average" was 47.1%, and the response that there was no healing effect was relatively very low at 7.7% (not very much 5.8% + not at all 1.9%). It can be seen that making Korean food has had a positive effect on the psychological healing of Korean learners. It also shows that the healing effect of making Korean food (45.7%) is lower than that of eating Korean food (52.7%). It may be related to the fact that the proportion of female respondents in their teens was the highest among the respondents, which may be related to the relatively low healing effect of cooking directly.

3-2) is a question designed to explore the healing effect of the experience of cooking Korean food, asking respondents to indicate the change in stress after cooking Korean food. Out of the total 103 respondents, 45.7% (Stress decreased significantly 11.7% + Stress decreased slightly 34%) reported a decrease in stress. The response indicating no change in stress was 53.4%, and the response indicating an increase in stress was 1% (slightly increased). It can be confirmed that the experience of cooking Korean food had a positive impact on reducing stress. Moreover, it was found that experiencing Korean food (45.7%) had a more positive impact on stress reduction compared to cooking (52.7%).

3. Implications

The results of the survey above show that learners of Korean language in Japan are currently very interested in Korean contemporary everyday culture, and among them, they want to try various Korean foods that they encountered in Korean movies, dramas, and entertainment programs.

Furthermore, there were many learners who have experienced Korean food and made it themselves, and the Korean food they experienced included not only traditional and representative Korean food but also everyday home-cooked meals such as Kimchi Jjigae and a wide variety of foods such as Ramen.

Experiencing the culture of the language you are learning through food can not only have a positive effect on language learning but also help heal the learner's psychology.

The psychological healing effect of learning Korean has also been confirmed in Geon-su Im, Hyun-Yong Cho (2023).³ This study showed that learning Korean can alleviate various psychological problems experienced by middle-aged and elderly learners and contribute to improving their quality of life.

In Bong-woon Song (2023), a survey was conducted on 37 Korean language majors at a local foreign language university in Myanmar who participated in a disobedience movement to resist the military regime that seized power through a coup, and the results showed that students responded that they receive psychological healing through learning Korean.⁴ Learning Korean has a psychological healing effect.

In this study, both the experience of eating Korean food and making it yourself were found to have psychological healing

effects, and they had a positive effect on reducing stress. In addition, eating Korean food was more effective in reducing stress and had a higher healing effect than making it yourself.

In addition, there are learners who feel fun and experience psychological healing just by watching cooking videos, even if they do not cook or eat them themselves. This is a limitation of this study that could not be investigated.

If further research is conducted on which Korean foods are most effective in healing the psychology of Korean learners and helping them reduce stress, it will be able to provide practical help in developing Korean language textbooks and cultural experience programs for learners in that country.

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Not applicable

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicting financial interests.

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