

# Bibimbap: constructing its meaning as intangible cultural heritage in two communities, Jeonju and Jinju

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# Bibimbap: constructing its meaning as intangible cultural heritage in two communities, Jeonju and Jinju

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## ABSTRACT

This study undertakes an anthropological inquiry into how the traditional dish called bibimbap has changed and been practised amid Korea's historical transitions, focusing on the cases of Jeonju and Jinju communities. While taking the arguments of Mary Douglas and Eric Hobsbawm as the theoretical point of departure, the study goes further in exploring the process of *heritage-making* of bibimbap within the everyday practices of local communities, and in examining the institutionalisation that secures sustainability. The findings show that bibimbap is not merely a traditional dish but a form of living intangible heritage that is continually reconfigured and reinterpreted within local historical, ecological, economic and social networks. Jeonju bibimbap took root as a modern urban cuisine on the basis of royal-court and ritual food traditions, shaped by the flows of urbanisation and commercialisation. Jinju bibimbap was

formed against the backdrop of *gyobang* (*gisaeng* training and performing arts institution) culture, *jongga* (main lineage family) cuisine, and the development of cattle markets and butchery, reflecting the city's social networks and identity. Through these case analyses, the study moves beyond viewing the heritage-making of bibimbap as a mere typification or an 'invented tradition', and instead understands it as a process in which sustainable transmission is built through community practices and institutional efforts. In short, bibimbap is not a heritage item confined to the past; rather, it is a dynamic cultural heritage that is constantly reconstituted through community practice and institutional labour.

## Keywords

Bibimbap, Jeonju bibimbap, Jinju bibimbap, heritage-making, urbanisation, community practice

## Introduction

This study explores, from an anthropological perspective, how bibimbap has changed and been practised across historical turning points – from the premodern era through the Japanese colonial period, the Korean War, industrialisation and urbanisation, and into the present – focusing on its transmission in the case of two communities: Jeonju and Jinju.

Bibimbap is a representative Korean dish that has

been handed down under various names and forms over a long period. Already some 500 years ago, texts record terms such as *goldong* (骨董/汨董, mixing various things together), *goldongban* (骨董飯/汨董飯, rice with *goldong*), and *hondonban* (混沌飯, rice with various ingredients). Depending on pronunciation, it was also called *bubim-bab*, and Chinese-character renderings such as *bubiban* (揆排飯) appear. Since its appearance as *beubwi-eum* in the 1810 *Mongyupyeon* (夢諭篇), a variety of spellings – *beubwi-eum*, *bubimbab*, *bubeum-bab*, *beubwieom-bab*

– are found in sources such as *Sehaengnok* (西行錄), *Myeongmul giryak* (名物紀略) and *Siui jeonseo* (是議全書) before stabilising as today's *bibimbap*. This evolution of the name demonstrates that *bibimbap* is not a food fixed as a single recipe but one continually practised and reassembled within linguistic and cultural contexts (Chung 2015; Joo 2010; Lee 1985).

Multiple theories surround its origins: the 'court cuisine' theory (deriving from a royal lunch), the 'royal flight' theory (during wartime), the 'busy farming-season' theory (as a convenient labourers' meal), the 'post-ritual sharing' (*eumbok*) theory, the 'old-food mixing on the first full moon' theory, and explanations linked to historical events such as the Donghak Peasant Movement or the battles of Jinju Fortress. In particular, the Donghak theory narrates that Donghak troops, lacking tableware, mixed foods together in one bowl – now cited for Jeonju *bibimbap*; while the Jinju Fortress theory recounts that during the Imjin War, soldiers and commoners mixed rice, greens, meat and *jang* (fermented soybean paste) to share – linked to Jinju *bibimbap* today. These are not merely tales of origin they also function as narratives that legitimise the authenticity of Jeonju and Jinju *bibimbap*.

Mary Douglas, in her article 'Deciphering a meal' (1972), argued that food is not only for nutrition but acquires meaning within social order and symbolic systems. The structure and arrangement of dishes, she noted, communicate shared norms and symbolic order. In this sense, Jeonju and Jinju *bibimbap* reflect the historical and social contexts and norms of their communities through their ingredients and techniques, functioning as symbolic resources that display locality and communal distinctiveness. For instance, Jeonju *bibimbap*, with its *hwangpo-muk* (gardenia-dyed mung-bean jelly) and *kongnamul* (bean sprouts) among 'the ten delicacies of Jeonju', manifests local abundance and an aesthetic order; while Jinju *bibimbap*, with its beef sourced from cattle markets, *seonji-guk* (ox blood soup) and raw-beef garnish, reflects a social background of *gyobang* (music bureau of Joseon Dynasty) culture and market communities. *Bibimbap* goes beyond a mere combination of tastes; it is a case where a community's shared norms and identity are embodied in the structure of a meal.

However, while we accept Douglas's insight that food reflects social norms, her approach leaves open the question of how, amid historical turning points, food is

transformed and generates new meanings. *Bibimbap* should therefore be understood not simply as a reflection of social norms but as a living cultural product continually reconstituted within historical contexts and communal practice. Jeonju and Jinju *bibimbap* are not fixed structures; they are outcomes formed through variations across events such as war, the rise of market economies, and urbanisation.

Hobsbawm's concept of 'invented tradition' is useful for explaining the typification processes through which regional identities like 'Jeonju' and 'Jinju' are asserted. Although these appear to continue naturally from the past, they are, in fact, constructed within present-day needs and contexts. Yet, Hobsbawm's framework, while clarifying how traditions are created, does not sufficiently account for how they survive and are transmitted to future generations through communal practice. In other words, it provides insights into tradition as a device of social cohesion but overlooks how it functions as 'living heritage' in communal experience.

Accordingly, this study takes Douglas and Hobsbawm as starting points and moves beyond their limits to focus on the *heritage-making* of *bibimbap*. Here, 'heritage-making' denotes that *bibimbap* may become typified or 'invented' at particular moments and yet is simultaneously varied and reconstituted within everyday life and practice, thereby building a basis for sustainability into the future. This is the analytical core of the study: by examining the cases of Jeonju and Jinju communities, this paper discusses how a food moves beyond recipe or invention to become living intangible heritage situated in communal life. In doing so, it demonstrates how local identity and cultural assets are represented and transmitted in sustainable ways.

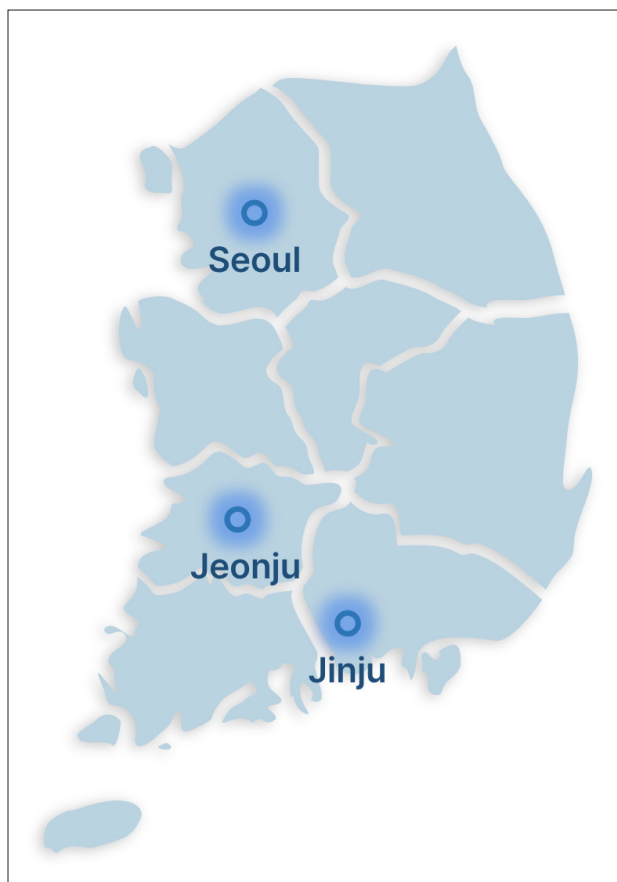
The study proceeds as follows. Taking restaurant owners and culinary experts in Jeonju and Jinju areas as analytical subjects, it examines the history and cultural contexts of each case, the characteristics of ingredients and techniques, and the modes of service. On this basis of concrete practices, it traces how *bibimbap* is constituted as intangible heritage and identifies values and meanings that emerge therein. Ultimately, the study argues that *heritage-making* – moving beyond mere recipes – reflects local identity and resources and constitutes a core pathway to securing the sustainability of food cultural heritage.

## Research subjects

The author has participated in three phases of field research on bibimbap. The first was conducted in 2017 as part of a project on cultural heritage management and promotion in which the author was responsible for the Jeonju bibimbap element (Center for Intangible Culture Studies and Geunnam Information Technology Co., Ltd 2017). The second phase was carried out in 2022 under a research project of the Korean Food Promotion Institute aimed at developing inventories for finding out good practices of foodways nationwide (Center for Intangible Culture Studies 2022). The third phase, ongoing since June 2025, involves fieldwork and research for the Korean food cultural heritage focusing on bibimbap. This study organises and analyses the data collected through that fieldwork to examine the cultural significance of Korean bibimbap. The present study is grounded in the three aforementioned research projects, drawing upon the data and analytical insights derived from them for its conceptualisation and composition.

Among the many varieties of bibimbap, Jeonju and Jinju were selected for the following reasons: first, they are the only variants among numerous regional bibimbaps that are commonly prefixed by their locality, making them a starting point for analysis. This explicit foregrounding of local communality renders them apt cases for examining heritage-making. Second, although formed and developed in different contexts, the two have long been discussed as the two pillars representing Korean bibimbap, inviting comparative analysis.<sup>1</sup> Third, both cities are historic urban centres that have represented regional identity and food cultures since the Joseon dynasty, and thus are well suited for comparing culinary change through urbanisation and modernisation. Fourth, in each region, elite court/*yangban* cuisine intersects with popular and urban practices, enabling a simultaneous view of classed and regional diversity.

In this context, Jeonju and Jinju are representative research subjects for examining change and continuity, and they have consistently served as comparators within Korean bibimbap discourse. More specifically, this study attends to restaurateurs and culinary researchers in both cities not merely as providers of food or transmitters of knowledge but as agents who perform cultural representation and convey identity. It focuses on the histories and characteristics of bibimbap restaurants in each city and on the practices they display. It examines



**Figure 1**  
Geographical locations of Jeonju and Jinju.  
Source: Illustrated by the author.

how particular establishments have maintained or modified ingredients and techniques, and what values and meanings they convey to locals and outsiders. In so doing, it demonstrates how bibimbap goes beyond food sales to represent local identity and cultural assets that can be transmitted sustainably.

## Jeonju bibimbap and Jinju bibimbap

### *Jeonju bibimbap*

Jeonju, capital of North Jeolla province and site of the Jeolla Provincial Office, has long been a political and cultural centre. Rice and vegetables from the Honam Plain, wild greens and mushrooms from the nearby mountains, and various marine products from the West Sea have underpinned its cuisine. Together with these geographical and social conditions, Jeonju has long been renowned for gastronomy and the high quality of its culinary skills. Its taste for style and *pungnyu* (refined conviviality with

music, dance and many art forms) led to the development of a regional food culture. This background laid crucial foundations for Jeonju bibimbap to become a national emblematic dish.

Originally, Jeonju bibimbap was an everyday home food. Side dishes were made from easily obtainable greens and vegetables, and leftover *banchan* (side dishes) were gathered and mixed with *jang* (*gochujang*, *doenjang*, *ganjang*, fermented sauces) and sesame oil. There are no fixed ingredients; one can freely use whatever *banchan* is available or whichever seasonal produce at hand. Bibimbap is particularly suitable when many must share a meal; by mixing a little of many dishes in one bowl, all share the same taste, embodying a wise use of limited resources.

As bibimbap became commodified, it intersected with a strand of local urban history. It seems to have entered restaurant menus in around the 1930s, paralleling the emergence of modern dining. According to Joo (2010), elderly long-time residents interviewed in 2008 recalled that even before liberation, makeshift eateries near Nammun Market (now Nambu Market, South-gate Market) sold bibimbap, and that, following the Korean War, a specialist restaurant, Ompangjip, served it. In the 1960s, Hangukgwon began serving bibimbap in heated brassware used by *yangban* (the noble class) in premodern times, and in 1969 Jungang Hoegwan began serving bibimbap in *gopdol* (hot stone bowls). Both vessels retain heat, ensuring the dish retains its heat throughout the meal – an index of the host's care. Yet, they carry different symbolic meanings: brassware connotes noble refinement, while stoneware, adapting the physical properties of stone to tableware, connotes a scientific and healthy image.

Jungang Hoegwan's location within Jeonju's central commercial district was significant. Situated near provincial and municipal government offices and courts, it served politicians, officials and celebrities, and provided private rooms for receiving guests of the provincial and municipal governments. In addition, several wedding halls were located near Jungang Hoegwan. At that time, wedding halls did not have their own dining facilities, so wedding guests often shared reception meals at nearby restaurants. In this context, bibimbap was served as a reception food for wedding guests. This location provided an important basis for Jungang Hoegwan to become a space of hospitality and social exchange, welcoming local figures, visitors from

outside the region, and important guests.

When Gu Tae-seo, nephew of the founding owner, acquired the restaurant in the early 1980s – having served previously as its manager – the restaurant entered a heyday. Gu's passion was decisive. He introduced custom-made *gopdol* from Jangsu, a remote mountainous region, to replace stainless bowls, maintaining heat to the last bite. He sourced high-quality rice (*Akibare* variety) directly from the nearby Gimje–Mangyeong plain, milling it for service, and cooked rice in bone stock rather than water for a nutty, glossy taste. Greens were dressed with five-year aged soy sauce, deepening their flavour; Jeonju specialties such as bean sprouts and *hwangpo-muk* (a yellow mung-bean jelly coloured with gardenia) were central. Ingredients varied seasonally so that regulars would not tire of the same limited variety. His dual role as chef and restaurateur enabled him to integrate Jeonju's gastronomic heritage with modern discourses on dietary health, thereby establishing his bibimbap as an emblematic dish of Jeonju's local food culture.

The 1980s saw a nationwide surge of interest in local cuisines. The opening of the Honam Expressway improved access to Jeonju, which saw the demand for Jeonju bibimbap grow so that it gained a national reputation. In 1981, Jungang Hoegwan opened in Myeong-dong, Seoul, bringing Jeonju bibimbap to a metropolitan audience. Hangukgwon also opened a branch at Lotte Department Store in 1980. This trajectory shows how Jeonju bibimbap moved beyond everyday household practice, gradually becoming associated with hospitality, ceremonial occasions and urban identity, and coming to be recognised as a representative urban cuisine.

Kim Nyeon-im, born in 1938 in Chopo-myeon, Wanjugun, inherited her culinary skills from her mother, who was skilled in making *jang*, *jeotgal* (fermented fish sauce), kimchi and *gayangju* (home-brewed liquor) and was in charge of official banquets for the provincial and city governments. Kim absorbed from her mother a culinary ethic of sincerity, cleanliness and regard for guests. Village experiences of sharing beef bibimbap at feasts and communal rites imprinted in her memory the idea that 'bibimbap is food of community'. As an adult, Kim ran a classical music café; she served bibimbap to patrons who might otherwise skip meals because they were absorbed in listening. This example illustrates bibimbap's character as a shared dish providing care and



**Figure 2**  
Jeonju-style bibimbap served at Gajok Hoegwan, a Jeonju restaurant.  
Source: Photo by the author.



**Figure 3**  
Jeonju bibimbap is served with a full table of side dishes (*banchan*).  
Source: Photo by the author.

social connection, and confirms that it could be a medium of exchange, consolation and sharing, rather than merely a meal. She adapted the *obangsaek* (five directional colours) garnishing of *sinseollo* (royal casserole) to decorate bibimbap in rainbow colours and cut ingredients to bite-size, enhancing both the dish's aesthetic appeal and practicality. The café bustled with customers coming for the bibimbap; encouraged by others, Kim eventually opened the restaurant Gajok Hoegwan, where she served bibimbap with generous seasonal side dishes.

Designated in 2008 as a Jeonju bibimbap intangible-heritage holder, Kim's lineage has continued through her first daughter, Yang Mi, the first transmission scholarship holder, and now to a granddaughter. This case shows how Jeonju bibimbap is passed down through generations within a family. Each year, the family lead large-scale mixing performances at Jeonju's Bibimbap and Fermentation Festivals, disseminating the values of harmony and concord.

From these cases it is clear that the roles of culinary experts and entrepreneurs were crucial in the development of a household dish into a regional emblem. They captured Jeonju's culinary characteristics in bibimbap, achieving localisation and commercialisation. Jeonju has long enumerated local specialties as the 'Ten Delicacies of Jeonju', of which eight to nine – such as bean sprouts, water celery, *nokdu-muk* (mung-bean jelly), young radish, radish, zucchini – are used in bibimbap. Bean sprouts and *hwangpo-muk* are indispensable. Core ingredients include rice, bean sprouts, *hwangpo-muk*, beef, raw beef, gochujang, sesame oil and egg; supporting ingredients include radish salad, sautéed zucchini, julienned cucumber and carrot, spinach, lettuce, crown daisy,

chives, ginkgo nuts and pine nuts. Ingredients vary by season, reinforcing Jeonju bibimbap's image as healthful. Cooking methods are also distinctive. Rice is cooked from Gimje plain grain not in water but in bone broth, yielding glossy, separate grains that integrate well when mixed. Instead of clear *cheongpo-muk*, gardenia-dyed *hwangpo-muk* is used, strengthening the dish's visual and gustatory distinctiveness. Jeonju bibimbap seeks harmony of the five colours and five flavours, reflecting yin-yang and the five-phases culinary philosophy. Serving vessels – brassware or hot stone – help to sustain warmth and optimise the integration of the rice and greens.

In sum, Jeonju bibimbap is a local cuisine in which abundant ingredients, specialties, culinary tradition, refined technique, a healthful image and traditional aesthetics converge – now established as the standard bearer of Korean bibimbap. In the process, the strategies of chefs and restaurateurs played a significant role. These strategies were effective precisely because they reflected Jeonju's culinary traditions, while also gaining recognition from local consumers and favourable reception from outsiders and tourists.

### ***Jinju bibimbap***

Jinju is located in the southwest of Gyeongsangnam-do. The place name 'Jinju' was fixed in early Goryeo (11th century). With the establishment of Jinju-mok in Joseon (14th century), it developed into a political and cultural centre of Gyeongsang province. During the Imjin War (1592–1598), it won victory in the first siege of Jinju Fortress but suffered a tragic fall in the second; through these events, the spirit of Jinju – symbolised by the sacrifice of Nongae, a woman of Jinju who threw herself into the Nam River with a Japanese general – was formed. In the 20th century,

as the provincial capital, Jinju grew as an administrative and cultural hub, assuming its modern urban form.

Jinju bibimbap emerged within this historical and cultural context as a representative local cuisine. Praised as being as beautiful as a flower, it has been called *kkotbap* or *hwaban* (flower rice) and, with the place name attached, *Jinju hwaban*. With mountains, river and sea nearby, the region is rich in produce, and *jongga* ritual tables developed to include diverse greens, meats and seafood. As noted earlier, origin narratives resemble other theories but are linked to Jinju's particular identity – hypothesised to date to the Imjin War, when women in the fortress prepared speedy meals for soldiers by placing beef and greens over rice in a single bowl.

Representative Jinju local lineages include the Jinju Gang, Jinyang Ha, Gimhae Heo and Gyeongju Kim; in these houses the tradition of sharing bibimbap after ancestral rites persisted. In particular, raw-beef bibimbap is narrated as deriving from a ritual practice of the Jinju Gang lineage, where raw beef was offered at rites and shared afterwards by those called *hyeol-sik gunja* (gentlemen who partake of the blooded meat). This lineage practice diffused as *heat-jesat-bap* (pseudo-ritual meal) and eventually stabilised as contemporary Jinju bibimbap.

Jinju bibimbap is also deeply connected with *Gyobang* cuisine (refined banquet cuisine associated with *gyobang*, characterised by elaborate presentation and hospitality practices). As an administrative and military centre, Jinju often hosted banquets for officials sent from the capital; banquet cuisine developed accordingly. The delicate knife work of slicing raw fish or meat, and the elaborate table settings, became customary practices of considerate hosting.

Jinju bibimbap further bears a close relation to the formation of the cattle market. *Dongguk munheon bigo* (1770) records a cattle market in Jinju in the 18th century. During the colonial period, cattle improvement projects were promoted by the Japanese Government-General of Korea as part of broader policies aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and managing livestock resources. At the same time, changes in livestock circulation, cattle markets and slaughtering facilities gradually created conditions in which beef could be more widely incorporated into local food practices. Around 1909, facilities capable of slaughtering 500–700 cattle annually

were installed; despite limited refrigeration, conditions for using raw beef in bibimbap were created. In 1915, Samdo Butcher Shop, located near the cattle market and equipped with modernised facilities, opened; in the 1920s, the cattle market was officially organised, with butcher shops in the central market and bibimbap restaurants using beef supplied from it. In this context, Jinju bibimbap can be understood as a local culinary adaptation shaped by changes in market infrastructure and urban dining practices.

Jeil Restaurant is a representative specialist of Jinju bibimbap within this historical context. Operating for over 60 years in the heart of the central market, it began as a hangover-soup stall, where the first proprietor, the late Yun Su-yeon, boiled gleaned leaves and radish tops after early-morning auctions to feed merchants. Though inexpensive, it was filling, and the stall became a venerable market eatery. Later, using fresh beef supplied by the market, Jeil added bibimbap, gaining popularity among busy traders for its nourishment, generous portions and speed of preparation.

Jeil's bibimbap is characterised by vegetables kneaded with *Joseon ganjang* (traditional soy-sauce) and sesame oil to yield a soft texture that aids digestion, a virtue for merchants and contemporary diners alike. *Potang* – a seafood-based broth made from dried mussels and octopus, seasoned with Joseon ganjang – is ladled over the vegetables to add savouriness. *Ssokdaegi* (crumbled roasted seaweed) is added as garnish; raw beef is mixed once more with gochujang and sesame oil; and *seonji-guk* accompanies the set, completing a plentiful table. Today, Jeil is in its third generation; knowledge accumulated in the market setting has been absorbed into the dish, demonstrating that Jinju bibimbap is a living heritage encapsulating communal life, sharing and *jeong* (affectionate ties).

The institutional base of Jinju bibimbap was consolidated through the work of the late master Jeong Gye-im, designated as a Korean Food Master by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs in 2013. Born in Jinju in 1957, Jeong earned a doctorate in food and nutrition and directed the Ilsin Culinary Academy for over 30 years, dedicating her life to the study of Jinju bibimbap. In 1996, she became the first *jo-ri gineung-jang* (cooking technician master) in the province and thereafter she focused on excavating and systematising traditional procedures. As



**Figure 4**  
Jinju-style bibimbap served at Jeil Restaurant, a longstanding eatery in Jinju's central market.  
Source: Photo by the author.



**Figure 5**  
Jinju bibimbap is served with *seonji-guk*, reflecting the region's distinctive food environment and culinary culture.  
Source: Photo by the author.

head of the Jinju Local Food Research Institute and the Jinju *Gyobang* Food Research Institute, she underpinned research and transmission institutionally, engaging with Jinju sword-dance holder the late Seong Gye-ok to explore the connections of *gyobang* culture and traditional cuisine. In 2005, Jeong attempted to standardise Jinju bibimbap, summarising its differentiating procedures as follows: rice is cooked in shank stock so that the grains are separate; vegetables such as zucchini, radish, mung bean sprouts, spinach and bellflower root are finely cut, briefly blanched, and dressed with *Joseon ganjang*, sesame oil and crushed sesame; *hwangpo-muk*, *potang* and seasoned raw beef complete the unique taste and abundant setting. In 2011, Jeong published *The Story of Jinju Bibimbap Chilbo Hwaban*.

Park Mi-young, chair of the Korea Food Culture Foundation, was born into a lineage of *gwabangjigi* (women artisans in charge of confectionery in royal and noble households) in Jinju and inherited *gyobang* cuisine. She has sought to restore bibimbap as transmitted in notable Jinju lineages to its original form. Park traces the origin of *gyobang* bibimbap back to the Goryeo period, linking it to the Jinju Gang lineage of local aristocracy. She argues that the raw-beef bibimbap originated in the ancestral ritual of General Gang Min-cheom (d. 1021), who repelled a Khitan army with General Gang Gam-chan. As part of the ritual, the descendants of General Gang would be offered a large (A4size), thick (4–5 cm) slab of raw beef; after performing the rites, they would then finely slice the meat and eat it over rice. This transmission, Park claims, has continued for a millennium and has settled as

modern Jinju bibimbap, particularly the raw-beef variant. After decades of research, Park restored *Jinju hwaban* by arranging 18 meticulously prepared ingredients to achieve harmony of colour and taste. She promotes Jinju bibimbap through large-scale festivals and training academies. *Jinju hwaban* has recently been recognised as a national 'future intangible heritage'.

From these practices, the author delineated several aspects of the taste and ingredients of Jinju bibimbap as compared to Jeonju bibimbap. First, *potang* – a special broth – is spooned over the rice before other toppings. *Potang* is made by simmering dried mussels and dried octopus to produce a deep stock; the octopus is then removed, the mussels are finely chopped and returned, lean beef is minced and added, and the seasoning is adjusted with *Joseon ganjang*. *Potang* functions as a natural flavour base and is pivotal to the dish's savouriness.

Second, seven vegetables are cut to finger-length and arrayed in order. Standard ingredients include bean sprouts, mung bean sprouts, cabbage, radish, bracken, baby cabbage and *ssokdaegi* (crumbled roasted seaweed; also called *doljaban* or *dolgim*). Seasonally, baby cabbage may be replaced by spinach; water celery appears in spring and autumn and zucchini in summer. *Ssokdaegi* is made by crumbling dried seaweed and mixing it with chives or scallions, and seasoning the mixture with sesame oil, sesame and soy sauce for aroma. Over the vegetables, raw beef is arranged and circles of gochujang are trailed, then a spoon of sesame oil finishes the assembly. With seven vegetables and varied garnishes, the dish resembles a

flower in full bloom and is therefore called *chilbo hwaban* ('seven treasures flower tray').

Third, Jinju bibimbap is distinctly served with *seonji-guk* (ox-blood soup). Tripe, omasum, lung and liver are washed with salt and simmered to make a base; diced congealed blood, radish, bean sprouts and green onion are then added and simmered again. Paired with bibimbap, this supplements protein and nutrition, completing a generous setting that is prized in Jinju's food culture.

In this way, Jinju bibimbap took shape through a combination of historical experience, *jongga* ritual and *gyobang* traditions, and abundant local ingredients. Especially distinctive are *potang* (made from seafoods obtained from nearby Tongyeong and Sacheon) and *seonji-guk* (made from offal supplied by Jinju's cattle market) – features rarely found in other regions' bibimbap and transmitted to the present as a signature local cuisine.

## Intangible-heritage values and meanings of bibimbap as seen through Jeonju and Jinju

The values revealed in bibimbap's constitution as intangible heritage are not confined to gustatory dimensions. They can be identified across multiple layers – historical context, use of local resources, everyday practices and communal meanings – within which bibimbap is understood as living heritage. Based on the representative cases of Jeonju and Jinju, this section outlines key values.

First, bibimbap is a product of food culture closely linked to urban development. In Jeonju, after liberation Ompangjip appeared downtown; in the 1960s Hangukgwan, and in the 1970s Jungang Hoegwan, opened, consolidating specialist restaurants. Located within dense clusters of administrative institutions – the provincial office complex, city hall and other offices – these establishments grew within the currents of administrative, political and economic activity. With wedding banquets, electioneering and tourism in the modern urban society, bibimbap was firmly established as Jeonju's representative cuisine. Jinju, as the provincial capital and centre of *gyobang* culture, developed bibimbap within traditions of banqueting and hospitality. The establishment of the cattle market in the 18th century provided a stable supply of fresh beef; colonial cattle improvement projects and the emergence

of butchers in the early 20th century further normalised beef consumption. Through these socio-economic changes, a beef-centred bibimbap took hold; venerable eateries such as Jeil and Cheonhwang became pillars of local food culture. Bibimbap thus embeds specific social contexts and historical transitions and develops alongside urban growth.

Second, bibimbap makes visible the local environment and its products. Jeonju bibimbap integrates rice from the Gimje plain, *jang* from Sunchang and the 'ten delicacies of Jeonju' into a single bowl, materialising regional abundance. *Hwangpo-muk* and Jeonju bean sprouts symbolise the dish; seasonal combinations of greens complete the harmony of *yin* and *yang* (*obangsaek*). Jinju bibimbap similarly sources vegetables locally, embodying both seasonality and locality. With fresh beef from the cattle market and *seonji-guk* as accompaniment, it differentiates itself from other regional variants. In this respect, bibimbap functions not as a mere meal but as a 'showcase' of a region's agricultural, livestock and fermented products.

Third, bibimbap functions as a food of hospitality. Hosts laboured without stint to procure ingredients and exerted care in cooking. In Jeonju, rice cooked in bone broth and served in heat-retaining vessels expresses depth and warmth to the last bite. In Jinju, finely cut meat and softened vegetables aid digestion; market-based restaurants continuously refined techniques so that busy merchants could eat quickly without discomfort. In both cities, meticulous kneading of greens with *Joseon ganjang* and generous side-dish arrays transformed a meal into an enactment of respect for guests. Bibimbap was served at wedding banquets and to visiting industrial inspection teams and tourists, straddling both the everyday and the ceremonial and becoming an emblematic food of hospitality. Even today, when receiving visitors from outside, both regions commonly serve bibimbap.

Fourth, bibimbap embodies the value of harmony, 'diversity brought together in one bowl', conveying meanings of concord and coexistence. The process by which different tastes, colours and textures are mixed into a new flavour constitutes a symbolic expression of communal life beyond cooking. In Jeonju, large-scale events enact collective mixing for hundreds, dramatising solidarity and concord. In Jinju, the sharing of ritual meat after ancestral rites continued as raw-beef bibimbap; on

cattle-market days, merchants and visitors sat together to share bibimbap and build *jeong* (affectional ties). In venerable eateries near the market, busy merchants and customers gathered around a single bowl to reaffirm bonds. Thus, bibimbap came to transmit values of harmony and coexistence across regions and classes.

Finally, institutional recognition – such as designation as municipal intangible heritage or as ‘future intangible heritage’ – has provided a basis for sustainability into the future. In Jeonju, holders designated under local systems and food-master programmes transmit techniques, while festivals and tourism expand venues of transmission. In Jinju, recognition of *Jinju hwaban* as future intangible heritage has enabled full research and transmission projects under the National Intangible Heritage Center. Through heritage-making, both cases secure frameworks for protection, research and education, strengthening local identity and ensuring cultural sustainability across generations.

These features confirm that bibimbap’s intangible-heritage value does not reside in reproducing a static past. Codified as a type or framed as an invention at particular moments, it is nonetheless continually varied and reassembled within everyday communal practice. In this process, bibimbap not only embodies the cultural identity of communities today but also builds a basis for sustainability as a living food heritage for the future.

## Conclusion

Food and food culture not only embody regional and national identity but also provide outsiders with direct experience of a country’s culture. International interest in food culture rose with the 2010 inscriptions of the ‘Gastronomic meal of the French’ and ‘Traditional Mexican cuisine – Michoacán paradigm’ on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Korea likewise inscribed *Gimjang* culture in 2013 and *Jang* culture in 2024; identifying potential candidate elements in the food domain has become a national priority. In this process, bibimbap has recently drawn attention as a potential Korean food cultural heritage case.

Yet, current bibimbap discourse tends to stabilise into emphasising particular types, notably Jeonju and Jinju, thereby shrinking the historical and folkloric diversity of

bibimbap culture and failing to reflect the multilayered practices of actual communities. Fieldwork for this study confirmed bibimbap’s multilayered, composite character. Depending on period, class, region and space, practices differ: originating as an everyday meal using seasonal ingredients, bibimbap expanded into food served at family and village events, and in urbanisation became an emblematic dish for dining-out and for political and social gatherings. Today, it is seen as a representative traditional food and as intangible heritage. To properly understand its intangible-heritage value, we must look not only at present forms but also historically at how it has been practised and changed within communities. Only by tracing the accumulation and transformation of practice can the cultural meaning and value of bibimbap be fully revealed.

On this basis, the present study has understood the heritage-making of bibimbap not as a typification or invented tradition alone, but as a process continually varied and reconstituted within everyday life and communal practice. Through the cases of Jeonju and Jinju, it has traced how a food becomes living intangible heritage rather than remaining a recipe or an invention. Jeonju’s case shows the tight linkage with urban development as specialist restaurants took root in changing downtown spaces; Jinju’s shows how *gyobang* culture, the cattle market and butchery expanded to form a distinct beef-centred tradition. Both cases encapsulate local environments and products, function as hospitality food and symbolise communal concord. With recognition as municipal intangible heritage or as future intangible heritage, they also display efforts to secure sustainability for future generations. Bibimbap thus emerges not as a mere traditional dish but as a living cultural product reflecting historical change and ways of life.

Beyond everyday food discourse, this analysis clarifies what it means for bibimbap to be intangible heritage. It understands heritage-making as a process of continual change within communities, and shows that this is the key pathway for securing sustainability into the future. Future tasks include moving beyond Jeonju and Jinju to closely examine diverse bibimbap communities across the country and to bring to light the cultural values and layers of transmission embedded therein. Through such work, bibimbap can be positioned not as a ‘typical dish’ but as living heritage that holds the accumulated wisdom and sentiments of Korean lives and communities. 🍜

## ENDNOTES

1. Dong-A Ilbo, 1 October 1993, 'Nutritious and delicious: bibimbap tastes exceptional'.

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